DIVINE INSCRUTABLITY IN WISDOM LITERATURE

IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND MESOPOTAMIA

By

Ryan Conrad Davis

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Religion

May, 2010

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Professor Annalisa Azzoni

Professor Jack M. Sasson

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will look at the theme of divine inscrutability within Wisdom

Literature of the Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamia. In biblical studies, a notion connected

to inscrutability is sometimes referred to by the phrase "*Deus absconditus*" which comes

from the Latin translation of Isaiah 45:15, corresponding to the Hebrew phrase אל מסתתר.[1]

The verse reads,

<div dir="rtl" align="center">אָכֵן אַתָּה אֵל מִסְתַּתֵּר אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מוֹשִׁיעַ:</div>
Surely, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel who saves.[2]

Samuel Balentine has offered a systematic look into this idea through his study

published in1983, titled *The Hidden God*.[3] Balentine uses the phrase "to hide the face"

(סתר + פנים) as the means to conduct his study of divine hiddenness in the Hebrew Bible.

He points out that this phrase is paralleled in the wider ancient Near East, and was no

invention of the ancient Hebrews.[4] He finds a similar phrase used in Akkadian prayers to

indicate the turning away of the face of the deity, as well as at a national level where "the

deity's aloofness may be perceived as a manifestation of divine wrath operating as

---

[1] Magne Sæbø, "Yahweh as *Deus absconditus*: Some Remarks on a Dictum by Gerhard von Rad," in *Shall Not The Judge of All the Earth Do What is Right?: Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw* (ed. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 45.

[2] All translations from the Hebrew are my own.

[3] Samuel E. Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[4] Ibid., 22-44.

punishment for sin."[5] He finds that the Hebrew phrase is almost exclusively used within the Prophets and the Psalms. Balentine argues that prophetic literature always regards God's hiding of the face as a consequence of sin. In the Psalms, however, Balentine finds no explicit connection between sin and the hiding of God's face. He uses this lack of correlation between sin and God's hiddenness within the Psalms to argue that divine hiddenness was an important part of God's nature in Old Testament theology.

Balentine, in speaking of the questions that often express divine hiddenness within laments, states that "to the extent that these questions are prompted by inability to perceive God at work, they reflect concerns similar to those which are articulated in the more formal expression of skepticism in Koheleth."[6] Balentine argues that the lament is directed towards God and the answers to the questions can only be answered by God, through a relationship to him. He finds this contrasting with Qohelet where failure to observe God is not a result of God having become more remote, but a failure in human faculty and perception. The former is God's responsibility and the latter is humanity's failure.

Although Balentine focuses upon the hiding of the face as an expression, Jean-Georges Heintz is correct to emphasize the absence of the cultic statue as being important to the notion of the hidden God in Isa 45:15.[7] Since the expression is placed in the mouth of foreign captives who come to Israel (Isa 45:14), Heintz sees Isa 45:15 as a prophetic

---

[5] Ibid., 44.

[6] Ibid., 168.

[7] Jean-Georges Heintz, "De l'Absence de la Statue Divine au «Dieu qui se Cache» (Esaïe, 45/15): Aux Origines d'un Thème Biblique," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 59 (1979): 427-437.

polemic which alludes to the notion that the disappearance or capture of divine statues preceded misfortune and destruction. Heintz states that,

> Aux dieux étrangers, fabriqués de main d'homme…le prophète oppose la libre souveraineté de son Dieu, unique et invisible, celui dont l'absence ne met pas en doute l'existence car elle est aussi l'une des manifestations, à travers le temps et l'histoire, de la totalité de son être et de son action.[8]

In Isaiah, the hiddenness of God, which is "volontairement et momentanément" used, demonstrates superiority over other gods whose divine statues may be stolen.

Although the theme of divine hiddenness is related to divine inscrutability in some ways, these notions are fundamentally different. Whereas divine hiddenness refers to a deity deliberately distancing himself or herself from humanity, divine inscrutability is the inability of humanity to understand the mind or will of the gods. The notion of inscrutability, by definition, looks at things through the human lenses that Balentine attributes to Qohelet. Divine inscrutability may have nothing to do with God being near or far, but has much to do with determining divine will and behavior. The notion of divine inscrutability, similar to divine hiddenness, often occurs in the context of lamentations and in compositions related to this genre. Qohelet, although not related to the lament genre, is a well-known example that trumpets the notion of the inscrutability of God's work, and thus God himself. Unlike Balentine, who sought to understand the hiddenness of God within the context of Old Testament theology, I am interested in exploring how inscrutability is relayed and the purpose it plays in the texts in which it is found.

I have chosen Wisdom Literature as the specific corpus on which to focus this study. This will be beneficial for a number of reasons. First, the compositions included in

---

[8] Ibid., 437.

Wisdom Literature are a diverse group of texts that incorporate several genres. Differing genres allow inscrutability to be expressed in various ways. Additionally, since Wisdom Literature, as I define it, advocates a certain way of living life, the use and mention of divine inscrutability also assists in the purpose. Even if the way or form that it is expressed within a composition is a borrowing from non-instructional genre, it takes on a new purpose as it is incorporated into the composition. And lastly, the books identified as Wisdom Literature in the Hebrew Bible have very clear parallels in Mesopotamian culture that allow us to see and compare the instances of divine inscrutability against those of a similar culture. Cuneiform compositions present a clearer picture concerning the history, purpose, and use of individual texts.

In Chapter I, I will discuss the definition of and my approach to Wisdom literature, followed by a look into the worldview of what is known as "traditional wisdom." In Chapter II, I will turn to a discussion of Wisdom Literature that is more critical towards established thought. Within Chapter III, I will examine specific compositions within the "critical" wisdom category and look at instances where divine inscrutability is mentioned. I will confine myself to explicit references to ignorance and inability to understand God as they are expressed by the writer. And lastly, in Chapter IV, I will analyze these instances of divine inscrutability and propose some conclusions concerning the form in which they expressed, and the function that they serve within the texts themselves.

I hope that this small look into the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Mesopotamia will provide some insight into the form and function of divine inscrutability within ancient thought.

CHAPTER I

TRADITIONAL WISDOM

Before instances of divine inscrutability within Wisdom Literature (WL) can be

fully understood, it is important to examine the intellectual landscape of the ancient

authors as much as possible. To begin this excursion into antiquity I will first discuss the

definition of WL, followed by a discussion of the use of the term "wisdom" within

biblical and Mesopotamian sources. Next I will discuss some general characteristics of

traditional WL, followed by a look into its explicit and implicit assumptions. Lastly, I

will look at some discrepancies within traditional wisdom that should caution against

being overly dogmatic in our analytical assertions.

Considerations of Genre and Categorization

Definition of Wisdom Literature

The term WL finds use in modern Biblical studies as a term to refer to a category

of books that frequently mention the Hebrew term חכמה, commonly translated as

"wisdom." Even though the Hebrew word was never used anciently to describe a

category of texts, WL has become a modern category of which the books of Proverbs,

Ecclesiastes, and Job form the foundation. Those who have observed the themes and

worldview of these texts among other parts of the Hebrew Bible have included other

books with the category of WL such as Esther, the Joseph narrative, Song of Songs,

certain psalms.[9] This has highlighted the need for proper distinction and definition of wisdom.[10] James L. Crenshaw makes the distinction between wisdom thinking, wisdom tradition, and WL.[11] However, as pointed out by Raymond Van Leeuwen, one of the weaknesses in Crenshaw's argument comes in the fact that he relies upon the existence of a "movement" that is separate and autonomous.[12] In Crenshaw's view, determining wisdom influence "implies the exclusion of common cultural stock much of which is environmental or derives from the period of the family/clan before the separation into distinct compartments of prophet, priest, and sage."[13] This presents the danger of a circular argument. If one discounts commonalities between WL and other parts of the canon, it comes as no surprise that one would find them quite different.

---

[9] Gerhard von Rad was the first to advocate wisdom's influence upon the Joseph story ("The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* [ed. James L. Crenshaw; Library of Biblical Studies; New York: Ktav, 1976], 439-447; repr., *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, 292-300). See James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Westminster John Knox, 1998), 29-30 with accompanying bibliography for a an overview.

[10] James L. Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon "Historical" Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 129-142; Michael V. Fox, "Wisdom in the Joseph Story," *Vetus Testamentum* 51 (2001): 26-41.

[11] Crenshaw, "Method," 130.

[12] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "The Sage in Prophetic Literature," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John G Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 297.

[13] Crenshaw, "Method," 132.

R. N. Whybray has argued that there is no indication of a separate class of "sages" that existed in ancient Israel.[14] Van Leeuwen, however, finds his "reluctance to admit a technical usage of ḥkm to refer to a professional class [to be] beside the point: courtiers and counselors are expected to be wise."[15] Very little is known about those who wrote the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible, and all that can be suggested can only come out of inference. Therefore, before one begins constructing possibilities about who composed Israel's WL, it is important to place some external controls on speculation by analyzing related literature in a parallel culture. Fortunately, Mesopotamia provides this control with its vast corpus of written compositions, and greater transparency in its scribal culture.

The texts we label as WL in modern biblical studies find clear parallels to certain texts in Mesopotamian tradition. The category of WL has been appropriated into cuneiform studies, but not without cautionary statements. The use of the term WL in Mesopotamia has been called a "misnomer" by Wilfred G. Lambert.[16] Although functional equivalents exist in Sumerian and Akkadian, Lambert argues that the semantic range of the Hebrew חכמה is not present in any one word in Mesopotamia.[17] Lambert retains the category of WL for "a convenient short description," while admitting that

---

[14] R. N. Whybray, "The Sage in the Israelite Royal Court," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John G Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 133-139.

[15] Van Leeuwen, "The Sage in Prophetic Literature," 306.

[16] Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 1.

[17] To be discussed below in "Terminology of Wisdom."

similarity with the Hebrew Bible's wisdom books was an important criterion.[18] Using this

criterion, one is taken through a number of genres including instructions, proverbs, fables,

and folklore. For Lambert, these texts exemplify "philosophy," but he rejects the

inclusion of Babylonian epics because they do not possess an "openly rational attitude."[19]

In *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, Bendt Alster rejects WL as a genre classification, but takes

wisdom "as an existential attitude permeating certain texts."[20] In response to Lambert's

exclusion of Gilgamesh from the category of WL, Alster contends that "the fact that

Giglameš learned by practical experience, and not by intellectual insight, would be a

good point rather than a relevant objection."[21] I agree that, although the format of

Gilgamesh and Qohelet may be different, the underlying messages and how they are

argued is quite close. I also follow Alster's classification of "wisdom as a means with

which to make the best out of life, from the point of view presented in the texts

themselves."[22]

Within cuneiform studies much more is known concerning the scribal background

of these text types. The scribes who composed and transmitted these texts were formally

educated, but these scribes do not represent a "movement" separate from the rest of

society. They were employed in the palace, in the cult, and were even contracted

---

[18] Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 1.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Bendt Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005), 24.

[21] Ibid., 20

[22] Ibid., 24

privately.[23] The scribes that received more advanced training were involved in the composition, compilation, and performance of hymns, prayers, incantations, and lamentations.[24] That wisdom is not a valid label for a genre or a tradition within Mesopotamia should have greater weight in the analysis of biblical texts. The absence of any concrete evidence of a group of autonomous sages who composed WL in the Hebrew Bible should stop us from speculating too far without taking into account the evidence from a parallel society. One should not overemphasize the exclusivity of wisdom books and the viewpoints they espouse since it is likely that those who composed these books were not far different from those who composed the varying parts of the Hebrew canon. This makes the observation of a "wisdom movement" less likely.

If one defines wisdom as the collection of themes which manifest themselves in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, one cannot help but see these similar themes across the genres of the Hebrew canon. This should also reinforce the notion that WL as a movement or genre is artificial. These themes are ones that could be accessed by many others within the biblical world. Thus Murphy rightly says,

> Instead of considering "wisdom influence" as an outside factor impinging
> on priest or prophet, one should perhaps regard it as reflecting the outlook
> of any human being who tries to draw a lesson from human experience.

---

[23] Laurie E. Pearce, "The Scribes and Scholars of Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (ed. Jack M. Sasson; 4 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 3:2272-2278.

[24] Pearce, "The Scribes and Scholars of Ancient Mesopotamia," 2274-2275; Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "The Social and Intellectual Setting of Babylonian Wisdom Literature," in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (ed. Richard J. Clifford; Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 36; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 17.

From this point of view, the "influence" comes not from without but from within.[25]

Thus, I agree with scholars who define wisdom as a specific approach to looking at life, and not necessarily a movement or a group of scholars. I am partial to Alster's emphasis on compositions that focus on finding the "best in life" as a functioning criterion of wisdom. This captures wisdom's purpose and instructional emphasis. I define WL as those texts or parts of texts that advocate a certain way to live or approach life. It is then an acceptable enterprise to analyze these themes within other books and genres, but its relation should be understood as the mark of a common avenue of thinking that existed in the ancient world as opposed to a specific class or tradition that is manifesting its influence.

Before moving on, it is important to notice that WL is most naturally divided between those compositions that seek to pass on traditional values and perspectives on life, and those that are critical or questioning of them.[26] The genre that best represents this traditional designation is the genre of "Instructions," of which Proverbs stands as a wonderful illustration.[27] Job and Ecclesiastes are examples of the more critical attitude, and these are sometimes called "speculative" or "critical" wisdom.[28] These opposing forces within WL exemplify the conflict of competing principles, one that emphasizes the

---

[25] Roland Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002), 101.

[26] Following Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 25.

[27] Discussed below.

[28] Kenton Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005), 57.

power of choice to improve life, and the other that emphasizes the ultimate futility of human efforts and human knowledge. This chapter will focus upon WL that looks to pass on traditional values.

<center>Worldview and Values of Traditional Wisdom</center>

Terminology of Wisdom

As mentioned above, one of the great unifiers to the books of Job, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs is the use of the term חכמה.[29] This Hebrew word חכמה has a much broader definition than suggested by the English translation "wisdom." Wisdom is associated with ruling (Deut 1:13), judging (1 Kgs 3:28), craftsmanship (Ex 28:3), temple building (Exod 35:10, 1 Kgs 7:4), and personnel in the king's court (Gen 41:8, 1 Chr 27:32). This Hebrew term and its adjective apply to those who do their trade or skill well, and it is the means by which these skills are able to be preformed.[30] Wisdom is most often considered an endowment from heaven. Concerning those commissioned to make clothes for the priests in Exodus, we are told that the Lord "filled them with the spirit of wisdom (חכמה)"

---

[29] The root חכם occurs 319 times in the Hebrew Bible, including the verb חכם (Qal: to be wise), חכמה (Noun: wisdom), and חכם (Adj: wise). Of these occurrences, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes occupy 144 of the total, almost half of the total occurrences. If these words were expected to occur with regular frequency in proportion to the word count of each book in the Hebrew Bible, we should expect them 6.6 times in Proverbs (actual: 103), 8.4 times in Job (actual: 28), and 3 times in Ecclesiastes (actual: 53). The next book with the most occurrences is 1 Kings with an expected 13.7 occurrences (actual: 21). This is unsurprising given its emphasis on Solomon and temple building. For this information I used Emanuel Tov, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library* (rev. ed.; Leiden: Brill, 2006).

[30] This idea is evidenced by the use of *ḥkm* in Mari with the meaning of "experienced." See ARM 14:3. I thank Dr. Jack Sasson for pointing this out.

(Exod 28:3). Wisdom is effective in accomplishing its goals, but it is not necessarily always a positive thing. Even Jonadab, who assisted Amnon in his rape of Tamar is said to be חכם (2 Sam 13:3).[31] This adjectival form of חכמה lies outside of the semantic range of the English "wise" and is often substituted for adjectives like "subtle" (ASV), "shrewd" (NIV), or "crafty" (NRSV). These considerations have caused Michael V. Fox to call wisdom "ethically neutral."[32] This may seem to be the case when looking at the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Within WL, however, חכמה has a very strong positive connotation, and one that is certainly not ethically neutral. The book of Proverbs, which occupies around one-third of the occurrences of the root חכם, is very explicit in its view that wisdom is something that is only given to the righteous, and those who are wicked are devoid of it. The reader is told "do not be wise in your own eyes" (Prov 3:7), demonstrating that those who are wise in their own eyes are possessors of a counterfeit version of God-given wisdom. Wisdom in Proverbs becomes the skill and art of living life so that one may "find grace and good sense in the eyes of God and humanity" (Prov 3:4). However, one must also keep in mind that חכמה is often synonymous with instruction, discernment, and knowledge.[33]

---

[31] For the intriguing proposal that Tamar may have been Absalom's daughter, and Jonadab's advice may not have been given with evil intentions, see Jack M. Sasson, "Absalom's Daughter: An Essay in Vestige Historiography," in *The Land That I Will Show You: Essays on the History and Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honor of J. Maxwell Miller* (ed. J. Andrew Dearman and M. Patrick Graham; Sheffield: Sheffield, 2001), 179-196.

[32] Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 72.

[33] See such passages as Prov 1:2, 1:7, 2:6, and 3:13.

The Akkadian word *nēmequ* has been most frequently associated with חכמה. This word covers a similar range of meanings and applies to the "cabinet-maker and goldsmith, and to the intellectual talent of temple scribes."[34] Marduk is known as the "lord of wisdom" primarily through his knowledge of exorcism and healing. In fact all the lore associated with the scribal occupations of exorcist, lamentation-singer, and diviner is considered wisdom.[35] However, it has been noted many times that this word and its synonyms occur infrequently in texts that parallel the WL of the Hebrew Bible. Lambert also feels that the association of *nēmequ* with righteous living is almost entirely absent from Mesopotamia.[36]

The Genre of Instructions

As previously mentioned, traditional wisdom in the Hebrew Bible finds its greatest exemplar in the book of Proverbs. The approach espoused by this book differs from many other books of the Hebrew Bible, since the advice on how to live a good and prosperous life is said to come from fellow human beings. Unlike the prophetic books, this is not conveyed as Yahweh's word to his people. WL is considered to be instructional in nature, and this is evidenced by use of a parental motif in which a father

---

[34] Wilfred G. Lambert, "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel* (ed. J. Day, R. P. Gordon, and H. G.M Williamson; Cambridge University Press, 1997), 30.

[35] Beaulieu, "Intellectual Setting," 11-12.

[36] Lambert, "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature," 30-31. He cites as his only exception the encounter between Gilgamesh and Shiduri in the OB version of the "Epic of Gilgamesh."

teaches his son (Prov 1:8, 19:7, etc.).[37] This is not a story in which the reader passively

witnesses events, but the reader becomes the son, and must receive instruction from the

father figure in the text. The value of the instruction is reinforced in the father-son

relationship. It is a relationship of trust, it is implied that this knowledge is born of

experience, and its results have been seen and tested.

Proverbs 4:1-4 reads,

<div dir="rtl">

1 שִׁמְעוּ בָנִים מוּסַר אָב וְהַקְשִׁיבוּ לָדַעַת בִּינָה׃

2 כִּי לֶקַח טוֹב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם תּוֹרָתִי אַל־תַּעֲזֹבוּ׃

3 כִּי־בֵן הָיִיתִי לְאָבִי רַךְ וְיָחִיד לִפְנֵי אִמִּי׃

4 וַיֹּרֵנִי וַיֹּאמֶר לִי יִתְמָךְ־דְּבָרַי לִבֶּךָ שְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתַי וֶחְיֵה׃

</div>

Hear, O sons, discipline from a father and give attention to know
understanding. For the instruction is good that I am giving you, do not
forsake my law. For I was a son to my father, a tender one, and an only
son before my mother. He taught me and said may your heart grasp my
words. Keep my commandments and live.[38]

This advice is not coming from a divine mouthpiece nor is it occurring in a psalm

or prayer to God, but it is set up like a fireside chat between a father and a son. This is

knowledge and "commandments" that have been passed down through generations and

now is being taught to the next.

Both Sumerian and Akkadian compositions adopt the father-son perspective in a

type of literature often called "Instructions." The "Instructions of Shuruppak" also

highlight the importance of parental guidance, "A mother is (like) Utu who gives birth

---

[37] It is worth noting the possibility that this may be a teacher-pupil relationship as well.
This may be implied in Prov 5:13, "I did not listen to the voice of my teachers and to my
instructors I did not include my ear."

[38] It should be noted that the translating בנים as "O children" is also a possibility.
However, given that Proverbs is mostly geared towards a male audience, this seems to
best capture the ancient author's intent.

(i.e. life) to man(kind)…A father is like a (personal) god; his words are just."[39] This is set up as the advice of a father, Shuruppak, to his son Ziusudra, the Sumerian Noah figure.[40]

It is here that another interesting element of WL comes to light. Often, works of this kind are attributed to renowned figures in history. Whether it can be traced to them or not, their reputation for sagacity enhances the ethos of the composition. Solomon is singled out in Hebrew lore as a sage par excellence, and it is no coincidence that traditionally both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are attributed to him. Ziusudra also holds a prominent place within Mesopotamian wisdom. As a king before the flood, he provided the link necessary to pass on ancient wisdom.[41] In the Epic of Gilgamesh, it is Gilgamesh that visits Utnapishtim (the Akkadian equivalent of Ziusudra) to bring back wisdom, "He saw the secret and uncovered the hidden, he brought back a message from the antediluvian age."[42] In fact, the "Instructions of Shurppak" carry things one step further than the book of Proverbs, not only is the instructor well known, but the instructee, Ziusudra, uniquely among mortals survived the flood and received eternal life. This is arguably the goal of wisdom. Proverbs, in speaking of personified Wisdom declares that "she is the tree of life to those who seize and hold on to her" (Prov 3:18).

---

[39] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 98.

[40] The Sumerian examples of this date as early as 2500 BCE, and Akkadian translations are extant to the Middle Assyrian Period (William W. Hallo, ed., *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (vol. 1; The Context of Scripture; Brill, 2003), 569; Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 92.

[41] Beaulieu, "Intellectual Setting," 4-5.

[42] Ibid., 5.

A Secular Viewpoint?

Another characteristic of "Instructions" is that piety towards the gods is merely an element in proper living. It finds itself among the topics of relationships, hard work, and honesty. Whereas in the prophetic texts, obedience to God is based upon his acts in history and upon the covenant relationship he has with the people; these are absent from wisdom books. There are no references to Moses, Sinai, the Exodus, or the conquest of Canaan. In fact, even in Mesopotamia, Alster describes the "Instructions of Shuruppak" as "phrased in a secular way...[with] very few passages mentioning the gods."[43] Despite the apparent "secular" nature of wisdom's presentation, it is untenable to argue that it maintained a distinctly non-religious worldview. B. Waltke and others have rejected any notion of a distinction between secular and religious thinking within ancient Israel.[44] Alster clarifies his point in saying, "it would be a mistake to understand this as a secular way of thinking in opposition to religious thought."[45]

A modern example can be seen in the difference between the saying "early to bed, early to rise, makes one healthy, wealthy, and wise" and the injunction to "love God." Although one may see a real disconnect between the two, some people might feel that they are not giving God proper respect until they have first followed practical advice. The declaration by Proverbs that "the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord" (Prov 9:10), makes it clear the biblical writer makes a connection between these two types of

---

[43] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 31.

[44] Bruce K. Waltke and David Diewert, "Wisdom Literature," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (ed. David Baker and Bill T. Arnold; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1999), 296-298.

[45] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 31.

sayings. In fact, the "Fear of the Lord" is not just an abstract religious term but finds a

clear definition within Proverbs. The term is defined by personified Wisdom herself, in

Prov 8:13, "The fear of the Lord is hating evil, pride, and arrogance; the way of

wickedness and mouth of perversion I hate." Thus, the adherence to propriety is showing

respect to Yahweh even though the commandment to do such is put into the mouth of

mortals. This term finds itself in another piece of Sumerian wisdom called the

Instructions of Ur-Ninurta. Here, the term refers mainly to cultic obligations;

> "The man who knows fear of god, he himself…he will bring offerings, the god's "name" is dear to him…the man who does not fear the gods, to whom their prayers are not dear…a man who does not show fear of god, [who has ever] seen him attaining old age?[46]

Thus, the gods were not excluded from the worldview of wisdom's writers in

either Israel or Mesopotamia.

Explicit Assumptions – Order, Act, and Consequence

Crenshaw argues that the "fundamental assumption, taken for granted in every

representative of biblical wisdom, consisted of a conviction that being wise meant a

search for and maintenance of order."[47] He argues that in creation God set up order and

gave humanity the "necessary clues" to discover it. This emphasis upon order goes hand

in hand with wisdom's emphasis upon creation. Walther Zimmerli is credited for

stressing that wisdom theology is essentially creation theology.[48] It is also beneficial to

---

[46] "Ur-Ninurta," translated by Bendt Alster (*COS* 1.177:570).

[47] Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 11.

[48] Walther Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (ed. James L. Crenshaw;

look at it vice versa, and say that creation theology is wisdom theology, and this prevents

one from immediately assuming a group with a specific worldview. Proverbs explicitly

says that "With wisdom the Lord founded the earth" (Prov 3:19) showing that the order

that is seen in the world is the order that was created by God.[49] Murphy states that "it is

practically commonplace in wisdom research to maintain that the sages were bent on

discovering order…once the order of such events could be discovered, wisdom could be

achieved, lessons made apparent, and laws for conduct established."[50] Very related

concepts to creation and order are those of retribution or the act-consequence nexus.[51]

Adherence to this order provides blessings and disobedience will yield bad results. Klaus

Kloch has argued that "retribution" is not present within wisdom books, but it is an act-

consequence relationship.[52] He finds that the term retribution implies juridical process,

something that he finds absent within Israelite wisdom. He argues that deed and

consequence are inseparably connected and built into the system, thus they happen

without the direct intervention of Yahweh.[53]

The Library of Biblical Studies; New York: Ktav, 1976), 314-26; repr., *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (1964): 146-158.

[49] The phrase "with wisdom" may be translated a number of ways due to the flexibility of the Hebrew ב. It may also be rendered as "by" or "through."

[50] Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 115.

[51] Lennart Boström, *The God of the Sages: The Portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs* (Coniecta Biblica Old Testament Series 29; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1990), 90.

[52] Klaus Kloch, "Is There is a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?" in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Issues in Religion and Theology 4; Philadelphia: Fortress Press and SPCK, 1983), 57-87.

[53] Ibid.

It is worth noting that much of Proverbs excludes Yahweh from being the one who directly curses and blesses. In fact, Prov 5:22 reads, "his iniquities give birth to evil and by the cords of his iniquity he will be grasped." Here it is very clear that it is the natural consequences of one's own actions that bind the disobedient, requiring no punishment from a third party. This kind of terminology that associates natural consequences as actions that give birth to results, makes Kloch's assertion that Yahweh's role in this world to be the "midwife" who completes this act-consequence nexus more convincing.[54] However, this stands in contrast to Prov 10:3 which reads, "The Lord will not cause a righteous one to starve, but the desire of the wicked one he will thrust out." Here, is an example where Yahweh takes an active role. Yahweh is also active in disciplining, "the chastisement of the Lord, my son, do not reject; do not loathe his reproof" (Prov 3:11). These instances caution us against determining that the book of Proverbs excludes God from participating in the created order.

Fox has found issues with Kloch's analysis.[55] Nevertheless, Fox does agree that this is one type of retribution which he calls "natural" retribution.[56] He also argues along with Lennart Boström that it is better termed "character-consequence relationship" because of its emphasis on life-style rather than on individual action.[57] This term is helpful as long as one is careful not to limit ancient peoples to only one attitude concerning life. It is clear that within Proverbs that there is recognition of "natural"

---

[54] Ibid., 61

[55] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 54-55.

[56] Ibid., 55.

[57] Boström, *God of the Sages*, 90-91; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 54-55.

consequences along with instances where Yahweh is the explicit agent in meting out consequences.

Murphy makes an important point that should be kept in mind when trying to extrapolate ancient thought through textual means, "wisdom's alleged search for order is our modern reconstruction. It asks a question never raised by Israel: On what conviction is your wisdom based? Answer: on the order of the universe. Such an answer seems logical and probably correct; but Israel never asked it, nor consciously assumed the answer that we give to it."[58] This is an appropriate caution that must be kept in mind as we attempt to understand the ancient world.

Van Leeuwen makes the sound argument that "both Mesopotamians and Israelites saw wise human house building and other culture activities as rooted in the divine wisdom of creation."[59] The analogy of the cosmos to a house forms the foundation to this notion.[60] In Proverbs he cites 3:19-20 "With wisdom the Lord founded the earth, he established the heavens with understanding. With knowledge he cleaved the depths, and the clouds drop dew" in conjunction with 24:3-4, "With wisdom he builds a house, with understanding he establishes it. With knowledge he filled the rooms with all costly and pleasant wealth." Van Leeuwen argues that "in Proverbs, divine creation and provision

---

[58] Roland Murphy, "Wisdom—Theses and Hypotheses," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays In Honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. John Gammie et al.; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978), 41 n. 4.

[59] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel," in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (ed. Richard J. Clifford; Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 36; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 67.

[60] Ibid., 67-68.

are the implicit model for wisdom by which ordinary builders make and 'fill' houses."[61]

Thus, the divine model of creating the world, and filling it with wisdom and the

necessary things for human life become models for humanities own endeavor's to build

and fill.

In a text called "Vision of the Underworld," a ruler, possibly Esarhaddon, is

described as "one who knows (many) things, of broad comprehension with wise and

discerning understanding, *one who studies the design of what holds the earth together*."[62]

Thus this ruler's discovery of the divine hand that created and holds the word together

endowed him with similar wisdom in his own affairs. This imitation of divine

workmanship finds itself in many Mesopotamian building inscriptions where the

construction of the temple is seen as a renewal of creation and ensures the continuation of

the good things first established by the gods.[63] Van Leeuwen and others have noted the

association with and frequency of wisdom in connection with the construction of both the

tabernacle and Solomon's temple.[64] This goes hand in hand with the nature of the term

חכמה discussed previously, which is firmly related to skill and craftsmanship.

The ability of Esarhaddon to gain wisdom through study of the created world sets

the precedent for observing ethical norms in the created world; something that may be

---

[61] Ibid., 83.

[62] Ibid., 82.

[63] Ibid., 71.

[64] Ibid., 75; Robert P. Gordon, "A House Divided: Wisdom in Old Testament Narrative Traditions," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel* (ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge University Press, 1995), 94-105.

termed "natural law."[65] J. Barton argues that in ancient Israel there was an ethical code of conduct that existed outside of the realm of revealed knowledge that was considered the common moral standard. He uses the example of Gen 18:25 first presented by C. S. Rodd.[66] Abraham upon hearing Yahweh's plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah is aghast that the righteous might be destroyed with the wicked, and tries to talk him out of it by asking, "Should not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" Rodd argues that this statement by Abraham implies that he is holding another ethical standard against God's actions. That ethical norms could be drawn from the world around them would not be foreign to those who believed that God was the ultimate author of the observed world.

The notion of cosmic order and the idea that one's actions would be met with the appropriate consequences were also important concepts in Mesopotamian wisdom. Lambert in his Introduction to *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* explains that from the second millennium to the first millennium there was a very real shift in the way that people viewed the gods and their relationship to them.[67] He describes a

> citizen of Lagaš after the sack of his town by the men of the neighbouring Umma [who after] lamenting the sacking… adds: 'As for Lugalzaggisi, ruler of Umma, may Nidaba his goddess bear this guilt on her neck.'[68]

---

[65] John Barton, "Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the Old Testament," *Journal of Theological Studies* 30 (1979): 1-14.

[66] C.S. Rodd, "Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What is Just? (Gen 1825)," *The Expository Times* 83 (1972): 137-139.

[67] Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 1-20.

[68] Ibid., 4. It should be pointed that there is some ambiguity in the translation, enough that Jacob Klein translates it "Let Nidaba, the (personal) deity of Lugalzagesi, the ensi of Umma, make him (= Lugalzagesi) bear all these sins on his shoulders!" in "'Personal God' and Individual Prayer in Sumerian Religion," *Archiv für Orientforschung Beiheft* 19 (1982): 296.

Here, it is one god against another, and the adherent to the defeated goddess

places the responsibility for failure squarely upon her shoulders. Lambert contrasts this

by quoting Esarhaddon, who a thousand years later, justifies Sennacherib's sack of

Babylon by saying,

> "They (the citizens of Babylon) oppressed the weak, and gave him into the
> power of the strong. Inside the city there was tyranny, the receiving of
> bribes; every day without fail they plundered each other's goods; the son
> cursed his father in the street...Marduk, the Enlil of the gods, was angry
> and devised evil to overwhelm the land and destroy the peoples."[69]

In the first instance where blame is placed upon a personal goddess for her failure,

the failure is not heaven, but in the wickedness of humankind, and it is the gods who act

in concert to collectively punish this.[70] In the first millennium there came an expectation

for the gods to walk up to the highest standards of human ethics. The high gods became

much more omnipotent, all other powers such as demons, etc. were placed under their

power, and the gods tended to act in a more predictable manner; one which coincided

with humanity's ethical standards.[71]

Implicit Assumptions – Optimism and Knowledge

There are a number of implicit assumptions that exist within traditional wisdom

among the preponderance of its "success oriented"[72] proverbs. In a world of order that

---

[69] Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 5.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid., 5-7.

[72] Crenshaw uses the term "success orientation" in *Old Testament Wisdom*, 3.

strongly advocates good consequences for righteous action, there comes the assumption

that in following wisdom's admonitions one may altogether avoid bad fortune and enjoy

life, wealth, and prosperity. It also makes it easy to assume that there is a "best path" that

can be taken in every instance that will lead to good consequences. That this unspoken

assumption was understood anciently is evidenced by the number of speculative works

written as a counterbalance to this success orientation. If no ancient Hebrew had

recognized this assumption we would be hard-pressed to explain the compositions of Job

and Ecclesiastes.

Also implicit in this world view of traditional wisdom, and connected with the

first assumption, is that God and his ways are knowable. This coincides with the notion

that the heavens will conform to what humanity understands to be ethical, moral conduct.

Karel van der Toorn argues that the foundation of retribution "is based on the premise of

an essential similarity between gods and human beings when it comes to the appreciation

of good and evil."[73] He cites the Hittite priestly instructions that say,

> Further, neither pig nor dog may come through the doors into the place
> where bread is broken. (Are) the mind of man and god somehow different?
> No! In this which (is concerned)? No! The mind (is) one and the same.[74]

This becomes the assumed foundation for all of the declarations within

"traditional wisdom." It is assumed that humanity understands how the gods act and think.

This assumption that there is a "best path" that is to be taken, and the assumption

that this path is able to be discovered (along with its divine author) make it important for

---

[73] Karel van der Toorn, "Theodicy in Akkadian Literature," in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible* (ed. Antti Laato and Johannes C. De Moor; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 60.

[74] "Instructions to Priests and Temple Officials," translated by Gregory McMahon (*COS* 1.83:217).

the "the wise" to properly assess the circumstances. It is the proper understanding of

"time and judgment" (cf. Qoh 8:5) that is integral to wisdom's application.[75] This phrase

is taken as a hendiadys by A. Schoors who translates it as a "procedure adapted to a

concrete situation."[76] It is therefore assumed that this knowledge is attainable. This

assumption that all knowledge about the world and the divine realm is attainable and

usable for humanity's benefit becomes a dangerous assumption, one that becomes an

important point with which speculative compositions find fault.

Discrepancies in the System

     "Traditional Wisdom" found in the book of Proverbs is not as monolithic in

thought as is often assumed. It has been advocated that Proverbs is not altogether

ignorant that the wicked sometimes prosper and human endeavors do not always work

out.[77] Prov 16:8 reads, "better is a little with righteousness, than great income without

judgment." Here, by implication, it is extrapolated that wealth might be had by those

without righteousness, and those who are righteous may not have as much. This goes

---

[75] Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 11.

[76] Antoon Schoors, "Theodicy in Qohelet," in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible* (ed. Antti Laato and Johannes C. De Moor; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 388.

[77] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs," *Hebrew Studies Journal* 33 (1992): 25-36; Daniel P. Bricker, "The Innocent Sufferer in the Book of Proverbs," (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1998). Online: http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/20-Proverbs/Text/Books/Bricker-InnocentSufferer/Bricker-InnocentSufferer.pdf.

along with Prov 13:11, "wealth from vanity will diminish; the one who gathers it by hand will increase it."[78]

Other statements are cited by some scholars to highlight the humility of Israelite sages, such as "all the ways of men are clean in his own eyes, but the Lord measures spirits" (Prov 16:2), or "Do not be wise in your own eyes, Fear the Lord and turn from evil" (Prov 3:7). There are also limits set to human knowledge, "There is a way, upright before people, but its result is the way of death" (Prov 16:25; 14:12). These proverbs emphasize that Yahweh is the ultimate reality check to the actions and knowledge of humanity. Prov 16:1 reads, "to humans is the ordering of the heart, but from Yahweh is the answering of the tongue." This mirrors Prov 16:33, "In the bosom the lot is cast, but from the Lord are all its decisions."

Although these proverbs may seem to provide some counterbalance to the predominately optimistic attitude towards human action, this does not necessarily have to be the case. The "fear of the Lord" and the "way of the Lord" may be considered the very teachings that are in the book of Proverbs, and those who feel they are "wise" are those who forsake these teachings. It may not necessarily imply that someone who believed they were showing fear of the Lord by staying away from pride, arrogance, and evil may not be "clean" or "right" in the sight of the Lord. Additionally, the assertion that consequences are in the hands of the Lord still allows for human choices to dictate the corresponding positive or negative outcomes.

---

[78] I use the term "vanity" to translate the Hebrew הבל, although other terms may be preferable. The basic definition means something like "vapor" but its use here implies an improper way of acquiring wealth.

Nevertheless, one must agree with Van Leeuwen who argues that there was no dogmatic suppression of life's inconsistencies within Proverbs, but proverbs are by definition "partial utterances."[79] Fox also agrees that these confident teachings are much more effective than cautious statements that things usually work out.[80] Van Leeuwen argues that "the book of Job was inevitable, not because Proverbs was too simplistic, but because life's inequities, as reflected in Proverbs, drive faith to argue with the Deity."[81] I think that there is much to be gained in realizing that the ancient authors may not have meant everything that the text tends to convey, and the existence of reactionary texts may be more of a product of fundamental competing principles than one school of thought against another. However, it must be recognized that for all the authors may have known and despite what surfaces in a relatively small number of instances, the book of Proverbs is focused upon the principle that human action can change one's life and environment for better or for worse depending upon one's obedience to teachings. It is this principle that is being emphasized with no real effort to answer questions that inevitably surface when one's life circumstances do not seem congruous to one's choices.

Conclusions

This brief overview of WL, its characteristics, worldview, and critical assumptions has explored many issues that would take a lifetime to understand in full detail. However, it has been shown that "traditional wisdom" is didactic in nature, often

---

[79] Van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty," 29.

[80] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 60.

[81] Van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty," 34.

using the image of a father teaching his son to convey instructions. It assumes a world that is ordered and understandable, a world that was framed and created by a God that is ultimately knowable through the evidences left by this creative act. However, the optimistic perspective concerning the ability to obtain happiness while avoiding ill fortune can never fully avoid contact with conflicting principles. It is these conflicting principles that become the rallying cry of "critical" compositions, the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER II

CRITICAL WISDOM

In this chapter, I will look at the definition and categorization of "critical" wisdom texts, followed by an examination of the prevalence of these views within Mesopotamia and Israel. Then I will present an overview of each category of "critical" wisdom, briefly touching upon their prevalent themes and characteristics. Lastly, I will discuss the term theodicy and whether it can be kept as a useful term for further analysis.

Definition and Classification of Critical Wisdom

Definitions

As discussed in the previous chapter, one may choose to divide WL into two groups of texts, one group that upholds traditional values and another that takes a more critical stance towards these values. Traditional wisdom compositions, exemplified by the "Instructions" genre, tend to highlight the power of human agency in securing happiness, life, and prosperity. Critical wisdom, while not necessarily rejecting these axioms, gives a more nuanced approach concerning the question of living life.

The terms "speculative", "pessimistic", and "critical" have all been used, but the latter is preferable as an umbrella term. "Speculate" as an intransitive verb can mean "to

meditate on or ponder a subject" with "reflect" as a synonym.[82] It seems that it is

according to this definition that Alster finds "speculative" an inadequate label for the

ironic and satirical tone of some texts within this category.[83] This objection however

should be tempered by the observation that satirical and ironic texts still provide

thoughtful insights upon an issue. This being said, the transitive definition of

"speculate"—"to take to be true on the basis of insufficient evidence"—is a definition

that might place this category in areas unintended.[84] This shade of meaning might

downplay the prevalence of the conclusions of "speculative" texts. For this reason, I find

the term "speculative" is less useful. "Pessimistic" is an appropriate description for a

certain number of texts, many of which are covered under the "Vanity Theme," a

category outlined by Lambert and adopted by Alster.[85] These compositions are similar to

Qohelet in theme and conclusion, and may be regarded as pessimistic in their

preoccupation with the inevitable death of humanity. However, most of these texts are

not all "doom and gloom," but advocate some type of positive action. Furthermore, it

would not be fitting to categorize many of the so-called "Righteous Sufferer"

compositions as pessimistic, since one of their objectives is to offer praises to the gods.

Thus, I retain "critical" in the sense that most of these compositions do not fully reject

---

[82] "speculate." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2010. Merriam-Webster Online. 24 February 2010 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/speculate>

[83] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 25.

[84] "speculate." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2010. Merriam-Webster Online. 24 February 2010 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/speculate>

[85] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 19; Lambert, "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature," 19. It should be noted that Lambert gives no direct label to this category, and that Alster's use of "Vanity Theme" is extrapolated from Lambert's remarks.

traditional values, but offer a more nuanced approach to living life. In this discussion of

critical wisdom I will adopt two broad sub-categories for which the books of Job and

Ecclesiastes will function as models. The latter becomes the archetype for texts that deal

with the "Vanity Theme" and the former for texts commonly referred to as "Righteous

Sufferer" compositions.

Before leaving the subject, I wish to acknowledge some of the problems with

these categorical labels. As has been discussed with regards to the very concept of WL,

one must be cautious in transplanting concepts too easily between cultures. The "Vanity

Theme" bears its name because of the influence of Qohelet and his use of the Hebrew הבל,

traditionally translated as "vanity." This may risk giving biblical notions greater sway

than their due, but Lambert has cited a number of examples that use the term "wind"

within cuneiform texts that strengthen a label such as "vanity."[86] The Old Babylonian

version of the Gilgamesh Epic says, "as for mankind his days are numbered, whatever he

does is wind."[87] The Ballade of the Early Rulers in line 3 states, "Since time immemorial

there has been wind."[88] One of the Sumerian "Nothing is of Value" compositions also

bears the line, "That plan—its outcome was carried away by the wind!"[89] The Chicago

Assyrian Dictionary also lists "emptiness, nothingness, vanity, (said of word) lies,

---

[86] Lambert, "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature," 37-38.

[87] James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 79 as cited in Lambert, "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature," 37.

[88] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 300, 313; Lambert, "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature," 38. Lambert's translation of "from days of old there has been vanity (literally 'wind')," demonstrates his connection between Qohelet and this text.

[89] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 272.

falsehood" for *šāru*, which carries the basic definition of wind.[90] The use of wind to

imply futility and even falsehood is quite similar to the use of הבל in the Hebrew Bible.

Qohelet brings these ideas together in "all is vanity, the chasing after wind" (Qoh 2:14).

In this light, I do not think it reading too much into the cuneiform texts to use the term

"Vanity Theme" as a description. One may choose to use the term "wind" instead of

"vanity" because it represents a more neutral term. Vanity, despite the danger of using an

older English term or over-biblicizing cuneiform, carries a traditional understanding of

futility and ephemerality that exemplifies the purpose of the category.

The "Righteous Sufferer" category has found its opponents since it is advocated

that within Mesopotamian thought there is no such thing as a righteous sufferer.[91] A

commonality in many compositions is the assumption that misfortune is the result of

human misdeeds, and the sufferers admit that they are unaware of what they have done

wrong. Because of this, some hesitate to call the characters in these texts "righteous

sufferers" but instead favor the term "pious sufferers."[92] This being said, the term

---

[90] *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago, Ill.: Oriental Institute, 1956-), 17/2:139.

[91] Samuel Noah Kramer, "'Man and His God': A Sumerian Variation on the 'Job' Motif," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Martin Noth and D. Winton Thomas; Leiden: Brill, 1955), 189; Gerald L. Mattingly, "The Pious Sufferer: Mesopotamia's Traditional Theodicy and Job's Counselors," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III* (ed. William Hallo; Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1990), 305-348; Wilfred G. Lambert, "A Further Attempt at the Babylonian 'Man and His God,'" in *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner* (New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1987), 187-202.

[92] Mattingly, "Pious Sufferer," 318; Lambert, "A Further Attempt," 189.

"righteous" does not necessarily have to imply that someone is without fault.[93] And conversely, the term "pious" does not demonstrate guilt. This use of "righteous" may be implied by Qohelet's claim that "there is no righteous person (צדיק) upon the earth who does good and does not sin" (Qoh 7:20). This could be saying that there are no righteous people, or it may be saying that the righteous are not totally free from faults. The latter seems more probable in light of Qohelet's frequent use of "righteous" as a descriptive term for people. Within the Sumerian Job, the sufferer cites a proverb, "never has a sinless child been born to its mother."[94] If we define "righteous" as those who are without any fault, then this would scrap the word altogether for use in relation to people in Mesopotamia and Israel. This claim may be reaching a little too far. Taking into account that ancient authors still use the label "righteous" while acknowledging that humanity is not guiltless, I think it is appropriate to use "Righteous Sufferer" as a label for this text category.

Voices in the Margin?

Before offering descriptive treatments of these subcategories of critical wisdom, it is important to present a brief discussion concerning the prevalence of the views expressed within these compositions. Van der Toorn, in discussing some of the views espoused in these texts, states that "we must be careful not to take their point of view for the current opinion of their contemporaries…They are rather to be viewed as critical

---

[93] In agreement is Klein, "Personal God," 304 n. 32.

[94] "Man and His God," translated by Samuel N. Kramer (*ANET*, 590).

observations in the margins of an otherwise unchallenged paradigm."[95] It is true that the "character-consequence relationship" is one that is pervasive throughout genres, and seems to evidence a common cultural understanding. On the other hand, we must be cautious in limiting ancient peoples to only one perspective on life. Furthermore, Van Leeuwen argues that "fundamental aspects of a worldview…may be entirely absent from this or that genre, simply because the genre has a different *function*."[96] The genre of a composition determines the kinds of attitudes it can share. Therefore, for this attitude to manifest itself in only a handful of genres cannot be the only argument against its prevalence. Just as Proverbs is not necessarily a dogmatic assertion of an optimistic worldview that suppresses life's unfairness, certain genres tend to emphasize certain principles or ideas over others. One may not expect to find thoughts on the futility of human action in a dedicatory inscription, just as someone may not expect to find much humor in lamentation literature.

It must also be kept in mind that in making any assertion about ancient thought our understanding is always limited by the happenstance of what has survived to the present day and what has been uncovered by archeologists. Fortunately, along with these cautions, there is also a plethora of positive evidence. That both the ancient Hebrew and Mesopotamian were cognizant of life's discrepancies is manifest in the prevalence and prominence of critical wisdom compositions. What is commonly overlooked is that two-

---

[95] Karel van der Toorn, "The Ancient Near Eastern Literary Dialogue as a Vehicle of Critical Reflection," in *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures* (Leuven: Department Oriëntalistiek, 1991), 75.

[96] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Form Criticism, Wisdom, and Psalms 111-112," in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (ed. Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 70.

thirds of the core wisdom books in the Hebrew Bible advocate a more critical approach to

traditional values (Job and Ecclesiastes vs. Proverbs). This should cause one to pause. In

Mesopotamia, there is only a limited amount of "Instructions" literature (The Instructions

of Shuruppak, Ur-Ninurta, Counsels of Wisdom, Advice to a Prince, and Ahiqar) when

compared with the large number of critical works (*ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, Sumerian Job,

Babylonian Job, Ugaritic Job, Babylonian Theodicy, Dialogue of Pessimism, Ballade of

the Early Rulers, Nothing is of Value, the Wisdom of *Šupê-amēlī*). In fact, on the list of

approved scribal curriculum, the Babylonian Theodicy appears just above the Epic of

Gilgamesh, and other classical myths of Mesopotamia.[97] This implies that these texts

were not only accepted, but deemed appropriate for learning and study.[98] The

composition *ludlul bēl nēmeqi* also finds itself upon the scribal curriculum of the Neo-

Babylonian period in the second phase of training for exorcists.[99] This composition with

its long and technical description of diseases and physical ailments, and the prominent

place of exorcists in the sufferer's healing make this a nice fit as training literature.[100]

However, the text makes it perfectly clear that the exorcist's job of healing a sufferer and

reconciling him or her with the gods will fail, unless it is according to Marduk's will.

---

[97] Wilfred G. Lambert, "A Catalogue of Texts and Authors," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 16 (1962): 59-77; Karel van der Toorn, "Why Wisdom Became a Secret: On Wisdom as a Written Genre," in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (ed. Richard J. Clifford; Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 36; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 21-22.

[98] van der Toorn, "Wisdom Became a Secret," 21.

[99] Beaulieu, "Intellectual Setting," 9-10.

[100] Ibid.

Thus, amid a profession that professes to reconcile the gods with mortals, there is acknowledgement that ultimately the gods have the final say.

In this light, it may be unwise of us to allow the ancients only one perspective on each issue, and to only ascribe differing perspectives to radicals or a few extraordinary thinkers. The canonical status of some of these works within the scribal curriculum should bear testament to the acceptance of this view, not the "exceptance" of it. The fact that these works have been distributed from Mesopotamia to Syria, and remained in vogue for hundreds of years should bear testament to the influence and prevalence of their perspectives.

Even within the Hebrew Bible as a whole, the questioning of God, his intentions, and the ultimate fairness of life was quite acceptable. The questioning of God is a prominent motif within the Pentateuch and prophetic literature. Excellent examples include Abraham's questioning of God's intentions against Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:23-33), Moses' challenging of God's intentions against Israel when they make the golden calf (Exod 32:7-14), and Jeremiah's questioning of God in his complaints (e.g. Jer 12:1-4).[101] Although these do not classify as examples of WL, they demonstrate that the challenging of traditional values or even God's own actions was not considered sacrilegious but essential. The biblical psalms, whose affinity towards the "Righteous Sufferer" compositions will be discussed, contain numerous questions of where, why, and how long that are challenging questions, ones that ultimately find no answer within the

---

[101] A discussion of these instances can be found in Samuel E. Balentine, "Prayers for Justice in the Old Testament: Theodicy and Theology," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51 (1989): 597-616.

constraints of the genre.[102] Therefore, I would argue that these are not a few marginal

observations against an unchallenged paradigm, but they evidence a widespread

cognizance of the other side of traditional values and thinking. The meaning of this

awareness and the answers that it brings will be pursued in the next chapter.

The Righteous Sufferer Compositions

Some brief words about the categorization of "Righteous Sufferer" are necessary.

This category of texts includes those that highlight the afflictions of righteous individuals,

and provide an example of the composite nature of wisdom texts. In the Hebrew Bible,

the most developed example of this theme comes in the book of Job. It is widely

acknowledged that the book of Job consists of more than one component. First, there is a

narrative story that frames an account of a righteous individual who loses everything (Job

1-2). After great suffering and a debate between him and his colleagues (Job 3-37),

Yahweh eventually responds (Job 38-41), and finally Job is reconciled and restored to his

former state (Job 42). The debate between Job and his friends is quite similar in form to

the Babylonian Theodicy.[103] This text also concerns a sufferer who debates with his

friend whether traditional values are worth the effort; however, unlike Job, the discussion

is much more civil, they trade compliments rather than the accusations that sometimes fly

in the book of Job (e.g. Job 11:3, 12:2, 13:4, 16:2).

There is another group of compositions that mirror the book of Job in its

progression from loss of status, to suffering, and finally to restoration. These texts may be

---

[102] Balentine, *The Hidden God*, 120.

[103] "Babylonian Theodicy," translated by Benjamin R. Foster (*COS* 1.154).

called the Sumerian Job, the Babylonian Job, *ludlul bēl nēmeqi* (Ludlul), and a text from

Ugarit which we will call the Ugaritic Job despite its composition in Akkadian.[104] There

is some debate as to whether these texts should be included within WL.[105] Part of the

contention is that these compositions do not seem to question the justice of the gods. This

theodicy question will be discussed below, but the important criterion for inclusion into

the WL category is that a text has an explicit purpose to advocate a way of living life.

Although they generally do not accuse the gods of wrong-doing, these compositions

address the question of suffering that does not seem to be deserved. One does not

necessarily have to come to a negative conclusion to question the gods. For example,

Jeremiah knows full well he will be wrong, but is undeterred. He says, "Righteous you

will be O Lord when I make a complaint against you, yet I will speak of your judgments.

Why does the way of the wicked prosper, all the dealers of treachery at ease?" (Jer 12:1).

This is a question that is mostly absent within traditional wisdom.

In the Babylonian Job, the purpose of the composition is quite clear. After the

sufferer's eventual recovery, his personal god gives him a charge, "You must never, till

---

[104] The Sumerian Job is also called "Man and his God" (*COS* 1.179) or the "Sumerian Man and his God." The most recent complete translation is Kramer's found in ANET[3] p. 589-591. The Babylonian Job is also called "Dialogue Between a Man and his God" (*COS* 1.51). Ludlul is also called "The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer" (*COS* 1.153). The text from Ugarit lacks a commonly acknowledged name, but has been referred to by its tablet number (RS 25.460) and "A Sufferer's Salvation" (*COS* 1.152). While "Ugaritic Job" runs the risk of confusing it for a composition in the language of Ugaritic, it nonetheless identifies its find spot and provides a distinctive name. That this was found in Ugarit demonstrates the pervasiveness of Mesopotamian influence and culture. Whether this was a new composition or merely a copy of a Mesopotamian original, it most likely remains the product of native Ugaritic scribes.

[105] An excellent summary of scholarship can be found in Jacob Klein, "Man and His God: A Wisdom Poem or a Cultic Lament?" in *Approaches to Sumerian Literature: Studies in Honor of Stip (H.L.J. Vanstiphout)* (ed. Piotr Michalowski and Niek Veldhuis; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 123-143.

the end of time, forget [your] god…I will see to it that you have long life. So, without

qualms, do you anoint the parched, feed the hungry, water the thirsty, but he who sits

there with burning eyes, let him look upon your food."[106] Here, it is clear that part of the

purpose of the narrative is to teach that after one has gone through such trials it becomes

one's duty and obligation to care for those were find themselves in similar

circumstances.[107]

However, it is important to note, as many have, that without this narrative frame,

these compositions find more in common with penitential prayers and thanksgiving

psalms.[108] In fact, William Hallo has included the "Righteous Sufferer" compositions in

his article on "Prayer and Lamentation in Sumer and Akkad."[109] The penitential prayer is

often strongly associated with the lament, another genre to which the "Righteous Sufferer"

category bears similarity.[110] Text types that include penitential elements include the

Sumerian ÉR.ŠÀ.ḪUN.GÁ, DINGIR.ŠÀ.DIB.BA, and the Akkadian ŠUILLA. Although the first

two text types in Sumerian, they include numerous Sumerian-Akkadian bilingual texts.

---

[106] "Dialogue Between a Man and his God," translated by Benjamin R. Foster (*COS* 1:1.151).

[107] van der Toorn, "Theodicy in Akkadian Literature."

[108] Moshe Weinfeld, "Job And Its Mesopotamian Parallels—A Typological Analysis," in *Text and Context* (ed. W. Claussen; JSOTsup 48; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 217-226.

[109] William Hallo, "Lamentations and Prayers in Sumer and Akkad," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (ed. Jack M. Sasson; 4 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 3:1871-1881.

[110] "In this section [Mesopotamian Prayers and Laments] we face two generic distinctions that are theoretically useful but pragmatically difficult to follow. The first distinction is between prayers and laments. Although one might conceivably lament without praying or pray without lamenting, in the ancient Near Eat these two phenomena often appeared together" (Sparks, *Ancient Texts*, 90).

These three types of compositions bear much similarity in content, "sharing a threefold format of address/praise, prayer/lament, and thanksgiving."[111] The ÉR.ŠÀ.ḪUN.GÁ, or "prayer to appease the heart" is thought to have been used "during temple liturgies and apotropaic rituals," and the DINGIR.ŠÀ.DIB.BA, "incantation for appeasing an angry god," was used in the *bīt rimki* and *šurpu* rituals along with "private rituals."[112] Lambert has suggested that the ancient rubrics of ÉR.ŠÀ.ḪUN.GÁ and DINGIR.ŠÀ.DIB.BA have more to do with cultic function than content because of their great similarity.[113] The ŠUILLA, or "raising the hand", is both an incantation and prayer and used in a variety of contexts.[114] William Hallo has argued that the ÉR.ŠÀ.ḪUN.GÁ prayers are the lineal decedents of the much older genre of Sumerian letter-prayers, and understands the biblical psalms to be participants in this tradition.[115] Jacob Klein, however, has suggested that letter-prayers may have only borrowed the "individual complaint" from an older "prayer of complaint" evidenced in one of the works attributed to Enḫenduanna called "The Exaltation of Inanna." He argues that it is less likely that ÉR.ŠÀ.ḪUN.GÁs are "literary transformations of the Neo-Sumerian Letter Prayers, but rather the literary descendents of such 'individual complaints', embedded in the poem 'Man and His God' [or Sumerian

---

[111] Ibid., 102, see also 98, 103.

[112] Ibid., 98, 102.

[113] Wilfred G. Lambert, "Dingir.ša.dib.ba Incantations," *JNES* 33 (1974): 267.

[114] Hallo, "Lamentations and Prayers in Sumer and Akkad," 1878; Sparks, *Ancient Texts*, 103.

[115] William W. Hallo, "Individual Prayer in Sumerian: The Continuity of a Tradition," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88 (1968): 71-89.

Job]."[116] However one chooses to postulate the evolution of genres, it is clear that prayers of complaint are very closely linked in theme and content to the "Righteous Sufferer" compositions.

The observation that the "Righteous Sufferer" compositions have much in common with penitential prayers should also be viewed with what is known about ancient scribes and authorship. The Babylonian Theodicy bears the name of its author in the form of an acrostic. It says, "I am Saggil-kinam-ubbib the exorcist, a worshipper of god and king." The author of this composition is an exorcist, a scribe who received advanced training in this particular avenue of scholarship. As mentioned above, Ludlul was on the scribal curriculum for the second stage of training for exorcist priests, and that these composition bear affinity toward some of their duties should come as no surprise.[117] Thus, the "Righteous Sufferer" compositions, although considered WL because they advocate a specific way of approaching life, are also strongly related to penitential prayers and lamentations. The similarity in theme and questions should not be overlooked. Each genre discusses the ignorance concerning wrong doing, and the ultimate goal of appeasing the gods. The difference being that in one genre the end result of restoration is explained, while in another the result remains unknown, only hoped for. The Babylonian Theodicy which lacks any resolve to the story does include a plea which seems to reveal its ultimate relation to penitential prayers, "May the god who has cast me off grant help, may the goddess who has [forsaken me] take pity."[118]

---

[116] Klein, "Personal God," 302.

[117] Beaulieu, "Intellectual Setting," 9-11.

[118] "Babylonian Theodicy" translated by Benjamin R. Foster (*COS* 1.154:495).

It is really the center of these compositions where the critical points of view occur, while the sufferer is forsaken, not when he is restored. The prayers and lamentations that occur in the middle section of these works are really lamentations to the gods. We cannot separate these compositions from other genres in Mesopotamia or the Hebrew Bible. As discussed previously, because WL is not an actual genre, it will naturally be a composite of genres, since the criteria for WL lie in its themes and intentions rather than its form. This makes perfect sense when it is acknowledged that the scholars who participated in the lamentation literature, who composed, transmitted, and sang these compositions were a part of the same group of scholars who wrote these "Righteous Sufferer" compositions. The notion of divine arbitrariness and confession of innocence are fundamental themes within penitential prayers and lamentations, and they find themselves in this middle portion of "Righteous Sufferer" compositions.

<div style="text-align:center">The Vanity Theme</div>

As mentioned previously, one of the main categories of Mesopotamian WL according to Lambert and Alster is the "Vanity Theme." It has also been shown that these texts often bear the common idea that human action and mortal existence are ephemeral, often exemplified by wind. The attitude is explained by the author of Ecclesiastes in this statement: "As he went out from the womb of his mother, naked he will return, to go as he came. And nothing will he carry among his labor which is in his hands. This is also a great evil. Exactly as he came, thus he goes. What profit is there to him who works for wind?" (Qoh 5:14-15). Whereas the "Righteous Sufferer" compositions, as a whole, highlight the importance of relying upon the gods rather than one's own actions, the texts

of the "Vanity Theme" dwell more on the fact that death is the final negation of prosperity from which no hope of restoration is present. Although obedience and piety are not rejected, reliance upon the mercies of heaven becomes only one part of "good living" as it did within the "Instructions" genre. Another similarity between these "Instructions" and those texts of the "Vanity Theme" is their lack of similarity with cultic texts. Where the "Righteous Sufferer" texts bear remarkable affinity to lamentations and penitential elements regularly performed in the cult, these compositions provide no such link.

The assertions that mortal existence is fleeting are usually coupled with accompanying injunctions to, nevertheless, enjoy life and prosperity while one has it. There are a number of texts in Sumerian that bear similarity to one another, each bearing as their initial line, "Nothing is of value, but life itself should be sweet-tasting."[119] This declaration that one should enjoy life even though all is "vanity" has been labeled the *carpe diem* theme. This theme finds itself in the Epic of Gilgamesh,[120] the Ballade of the Early Rulers,[121] and in Qohelet of the Hebrew Bible (2:24, 3:12-13, 3:22, 9:7-10).

This category of the "Vanity Theme" covers a wider number of genres and text types than those of the "Righteous Sufferer" compositions. The setting and purpose of many of these texts are not altogether known. One example comes in the Dialogue of Pessimism which contains a clear example of the vanity theme, but without the normal

---

[119] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 270.

[120] Andrew George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (vol. 1, 2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[121] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 300-305, 312-317; Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005), 769-770.

carpe diem advice.[122] The end of the composition concludes that humanity cannot answer the question of "what is good?" and the best thing to do is commit suicide. It has been argued that his text is an example of a humorous mood rather than a deadly serious one.[123] It has also been proposed that the Ballade of Early rulers, which enumerates the silence of the long dead heroes of Mesopotamian lore, "may be a song intended for a joyous symposium in which the students of the scribal schools enjoyed excelling in literary allusions at a good meal."[124] This has prompted Alster to caution readers against taking its pessimistic attitude too seriously.[125] These observations are important cautions, but the fact that these themes appear over a large span of time in a number of texts, even if for humor and enjoyment, bears testament to their prevalence.

The Theodicy Question

It becomes almost an impossibility to work with these wisdom texts and not come in contact with the modern term "theodicy." This word was made popular in the

---

[122] See "Dialogue of Pessimism or The Obliging Slave," translated by Alastair Livingstone (*COS* 1.155:495-496).

[123] Edward L. Greenstein, "Sages with a Sense of Humor: The Babylonian Dialogue Between a Master and His Servant and the Book of Qohelet," in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (ed. Richard J. Clifford; Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 36; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 55-65.

[124] Bendt Alster, "Scribes, Sages, and Seers in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Scribes, Sages and Seers: The Sage in the Mediterranean World* (ed. L. G Perdue; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 57.

[125] Ibid.

eighteenth century by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.[126] Theodicy in its

original sense seeks to answer the dilemma created in monotheism when it is observed

that 1) God is compassionate and good, 2) he is also omnipotent and omniscient, but 3)

evil and suffering exist.[127] Because of this question's correlation with ethical monotheism,

Max Weber attempted to broaden the category to use the term in other cultures and

religions, thus "in Weber's usage, the theodicy problem referred to any situation of

inexplicable or unmerited suffering, and theodicy itself referred to any rationale for

explaining suffering."[128]

      In speaking of this concept I will adopt Max Weber's definitions for the

"theodicy problem" as referring to unmerited suffering and a "theodicy" as an

answer to this problem. A fundamental difference exists in the questions posed

concerning unmerited suffering in the ancient world and in post-Enlightenment

thought. Where the classical philosophical question is trying to reconcile God's

nature with the existence of evil, the ancient authors appear more interested in the

personal reaction to such a dilemma. The compositions in the "Righteous Sufferer"

and the "Vanity Theme" are for the most part interested in what reaction people

should have to the fact that suffering seems undeserved or that divine will is

inscrutable. The question is pointed earthward not heavenward. It is a question of

---

[126] For his work, originally published in 1710, that popularized this word, see Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* (Open Court Publishing Company, 1998).

[127] Ronald M. Green, "Theodicy," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade; vol. 14; New York: Macmillan, 1987), 431.

[128] Ibid.

how humanity should react, that is why the conclusions are either total submission

to deity, or the injunction to "seize the day."

Despite the fact that the compositions provide answers to questions that

are more centered on humanity's reactions to life's injustices, there are answers

given for why suffering often seems unmerited. These are sometimes more

implied than explained. In this sense we may say that there are theodicies within

Israel and Mesopotamia. The benefit of defining terms in this way is that one

spends less time deciding if an author's views lie outside the realm of modern

theodicy and more time on the answers to the problem of suffering provided by

the authors.

Thus, the theodicy problem can be applied to Mesopotamia and Israel if this is

broadened to mean the problem of inexplicable or unmerited suffering. The answers to

this question are then regarded as theodicies. Although cuneiform and biblical sources

may espouse certain theodicies, the compositions spend time advocating the human

reaction to life's apparent injustices. Unlike the classical dilemma that is concerned with

the heavens, these works are largely concerned with earthly reactions.

Conclusions

I have defined critical wisdom as the group of texts that, while not necessarily

rejecting the traditional values of wisdom manifest within the "Instructions" genre, give a

more nuanced treatment of how to live a happy life. These texts fall under two broad

categories of the "Righteous Sufferer," and the "Vanity Theme." The former emphasizes

that humanity's destiny ultimately lies in the hands of the gods despite one's best effort,

and advocates devotion and fidelity towards deity. Those of the "Vanity Theme" grapple with the futility of the human experience while facing the inevitability of death, and usually advocate that one should enjoy the here and now. These compositions, while offering voice to assertions that may seem at variance with many other genres of ancient literature, are, in the end, manifestations of prominent ideas that lay in the mind of ancient Israelites and Mesopotamians. I have also shown that critical compositions concern themselves less with absolving the gods from guilt, than they do of advocating how one should live when suffering comes for unknown reasons, and death seems to negate any human achievement.

CHAPTER III

EVIDENCES OF DIVINE INSCRUTABILITY WITHIN CRITICAL WISDOM

LITERATURE

After providing an overview of WL as a group of texts that have a didactic

purpose, specifically—instructing its readers how to live life—it is now possible to begin

an analysis of the notion of divine inscrutability within these texts. The gap between

human and divine realms is a common theme within all these texts, but it manifests itself

for different reasons and in different ways depending on the type of text. This chapter

will analyze these themes as they are presented in the two main categories of critical

wisdom, the "Righteous Sufferer" and the "Vanity Theme."

The Righteous Sufferer

Sumerian Job

This text was first published by Samuel Noah Kramer who recognized it as a

cuneiform forerunner to the Job motif.[129] It is the earliest known composition within the

"Righteous Sufferer" category. The sufferer first praises his god, then recounts his

abandonment. In his despair he assumes he has made some mistake even though he is

ignorant of any infraction, and asks his god to make the offense known. The god

eventually relents, and the sufferer is restored. As noted in Chapter II, this text finds great

---

[129] Kramer, "'Man and His God': A Sumerian Variation on the 'Job' Motif."

similarity with the penitential prayers and thanksgiving psalms of Mesopotamia.[130] There is also some dispute concerning the use of this text within the cult. The fact that it includes a narrative introduction and conclusion indicate its function as WL, but its ending line "a prayer of lament to a man's (personal) god" hints at an original cultic function.[131] According to Jacob Klein, most would agree that regardless of its origin it came to serve an instructional function, and its kernel of praise/lamentation represents at least a borrowing from cultic practices.[132] These considerations also hold true for the Babylonian Job.

There are a number of themes concerning inscrutability that manifest themselves in this text and continue to be an important part of the other texts discussed in this category. Most of the themes manifest themselves in this block of text shortly before the end of the sufferer's lament,

> How long will you not care for me, will you not look after me?
> Like an ox I would like to rise toward you, but you do not let me rise,
> You do not let me take the right course.
> They say—the wise men—a word true and right:
> 'Never has a sinless child been born to its mother,
> A mortal(?) has never been perfect(?), a sinless man has never existed from old'
> My god,… after you will have let my eyes recognize my sins,

---

[130] Weinfeld, "Job And Its Mesopotamian Parallels—A Typological Analysis."

[131] This ending is marked by a double line in two duplicates, indicating it was understood as a rubric classifying its cultic function, but its absence in a third duplicate indicates that this understanding may have been lost. See Klein, "Man and His God." In regards to both the Babylonian and Sumerian Job, Lambert decides that because of the inclusion of the narrative frame, it was used "as a didactic work of piety for study and contemplation," something that Klein does not reject. Klein argues that despite this narrative frame, the rubric may indicate original cultic use; see Lambert, "A Further Attempt," 201; Klein, "Man and His God," 131, 139.

[132] Klein, "Man and His God," 139.

I shall recount at the city(?) gate those of them that have been forgotten, and those of them which are visible(?)[133]

Observable is the notion that the personal god is considered to be a parent who should provide loving paternal care.[134] The sufferer makes an appeal to this compassionate side of his personal god and the questions of the sufferer give voice to his confusion. This question of "how long?" is a common one in penitential prayers and psalms where the sufferer expresses the knowledge that the deity can and will intervene.[135] In fact, there is an accusation that the god is actually preventing the sufferer from changing when he says "you do not let me take the right course." The sufferer asks for the god to let him know what he has done wrong so that he can mend it. This is probably what was preventing him from taking the "right course."

The sufferer also expresses the notion that humanity is invariably sinful, something pointed out by Kramer and further argued by Mattingly.[136] This declaration about humanity's sinfulness is something that is commonly expressed in both Mesopotamia and Israel, and represents no radical statement.[137] It is quite common in the penitential prayers of both Israel and Mesopotamia. The number of ways that someone may incur guilt or sin was limitless. The concept of sin in the ancient Near East was more

---

[133] "Man and His God," translated by Jacob Klein (COS 1.179:574 lines 100-114).

[134] Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Gods as Parents: Rise of Personal Religion," in *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (2nd ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 147-164.

[135] See Ps 6:3, 13:2-3, 35:17, 74:10; 79:5, 80:4; 89:46, 90:13, 94:3.

[136] Kramer, "'Man and His God': A Sumerian Variation on the 'Job' Motif," 71; Mattingly, "Pious Sufferer," 311.

[137] Robin C. Cover, "Sin, Sinners: Old Testament," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. David Noel Freedman; vol. 6; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 31-40.

expansive than notions commonly held in Western thought. The modern notion of sin, which is often of an ethical or moral nature, seems to be different from the ideas of religious taboos and notions of ritual impurity. The cultic regulations about what a person could and could not touch, where they must not go, and the fact that ritual impurities were similar to our notions of viral and bacterial contagion make the absolute knowledge that one is free from sin to be impossible. It is also important to note that in both cultures it was hardly relevant if the person sins intentionally or unintentionally. To continue the modern analogy of contagion, it makes little difference whether one knows they have contracted an illness from a contaminated cup or door handle, the person is still considered infected. The breaking of divine law, whether intentionally or unintentionally was subject to punishment.[138] What may seem to modern sensibilities to be unfair was seen as a means of upholding the sacred and holy, as evidenced by the need to cleanse the temple from the sins of the people in both cultures.[139] K. van der Toorn makes the distinction between ethics, and religious etiquette.[140] The violation of the former is included in our modern notion of sin, where the violation of the latter lays outside of it. However, lest we make too much of this distinction it is important to bear in mind that:

> As with ancient Mesopotamian religious texts, the distinction in Israelite literature between sin as ethical-moral and sin as cultic-ritual is often difficult to specify. Cultic sins, like moral sins, were counted as grave offenses against the deity: similar punishments (including death) were

---

[138] Ibid., 34.

[139] Ibid., 35. This can be seen in the Hebrew "Day of Atonement" and the Akkadian *kuppuru* ritual.

[140] Karel van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia: A Comparative Study* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1985), 10-39.

exacted for both, and similar expiatory sacrifices were mandated for cultic and moral sins alike…[141]

Although differing words may be used to distinguish between certain offenses, the distinctions between these two types of sins may be primarily due to their foreignness in Western thought.[142] The *Šurpu*, a series of rituals meant to absolve guilt, includes a long list of possible sins.[143] Because the sin was not known, the priest made sure that the person's sin was covered by offering an exhaustive list. These texts seem to freely mix what we would term cultic sins, ones that deal with taboos of religious observance and issues of cleanliness, with those that coincide with modern ideas of ethics and morality. For this reason, in this paper I include both moral and cultic sins under the broad label of sin.

The "Prayer of Marduk" finds similarities with the Sumerian Job, and a number of ways are listed that one might have sinned without knowledge.

> Men, by whatever name,
> What can they understand by their own efforts?
> Who has not been negligent, which one has committed no sin?
> Who can understand a god's behavior?
> I would fain be obedient and incur no sin,
> Yes, I would frequent the haunts of health!
> Men are commanded by the gods to act under curse,
> Divine affliction is for mankind to bear.
> I am surely responsible for some neglect of you,

---

[141] Cover, "Sin, Sinners: Old Testament," 34.

[142] An example in Hebrew is תועבה which is commonly translated into English as "abomination." This is primarily used to identify cultic infractions. See Francis Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 1072-73.

[143] Erica Reiner, *Šurpu: A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations.* (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlaga, 1958). The *Šurpu* also includes the use of DINGIR.ŠÀ.DIB.BA incantations; see Sparks, *Ancient Texts*, 102.

I have surely trespassed the limits set by the god.
Forget what I did in my youth, whatever it was,
Let your heart not well up against me!
Absolve my guilt, remit my punishment,
Clear me of confusion, free me of uncertainty,
Let no guilt of my father, my grandfather, my
mother, my grandmother, my brother, my
sister, my family, kith, or kin…[144]

Observed is the idea of "sins of youth," a notion that is vague by definition and also coupled with the idea of judgment for unspecified sins committed by relatives or ancestors. There is the notion that human frailty coupled with humanity's inability to understand the behavior of the gods' prevents one from absolute knowledge of innocence. Those who are suffering were assumed to have done something wrong even if they have no knowledge that such a thing has happened. That this is a common idea in penitential prayers should prevent use from ascribing this as an invention of critical wisdom literature to question the justice of the gods. The questioning of humanity's ability to perfectly perceive divine norms, and the incapacity to carry through with these perceptions is a concept that WL shares in common with penitential prayers.

The fact that the deity does not tell the sufferer the offense that has been committed is placing blame on the deity for the prolonged suffering. The expression that the entire world of the sufferer has turned upside down and that all that can go wrong has gone wrong represents the rhetorical strategy of the repentant individual. There seems little that the sufferer will not express in an effort to goad the deity into action. One of these ways is to accuse or to create situations that should not exist, one of these being where the deity is preventing justice or where the deity is punishing a repentant individual. Though the sufferer is considered to have done wrong, he remains ignorant of

---

[144] "Prayer to Marduk," translated by Benjamin R. Foster (*COS* 1.114:416)

whatever it was that may have angered his god. But it is lament of ignorance that finally caused the deity to relent.

Babylonian Job

  This text is very close to that of the Sumerian Job.[145] This follows the same general format as above, although this composition is slightly shorter and includes a short moral to the story that is put into the mouth of the man's personal god. After the narrative introduction, the sufferer begins his lament by saying, "My Lord, I have debated with myself, and in my feelings [...] of heart: the wrong I did I do not know! Have I […] a vile forbidden act?"[146] Similar to the Sumerian Job, this sufferer has no knowledge of wrongdoing, but assumes that he has offended his personal god in some way because "Brother does not de[sp]ise his brother, Friend is not calumniator of his friend!"[147] This harks back to the beginning of the composition that states "a young man was imploring his god as a friend."[148] Thus, it seems in this composition that the god must have a good reason for treating the sufferer so, but the sufferer cannot fathom what it may be. This leads the sufferer to confess faults that he may have committed in the past, but it is perfectly conceivable that they may have been fabricated to appease the angry god. In the DINGIR.ŠÀ.DIB.BA incantations or "incantations for appeasing an angry god," they employ

---

[145] Klein, "Man and His God."

[146] "Dialogue Between a Man and His God," translated by Benjamin R. Foster (*COS* 1.151:485

[147] Ibid. Although it should be noted that Klein finds this translation, accepted by Foster and Lambert, to be "far fetched" in "Man and His God," 134-135 n. 60.

[148] Ibid.

one of the two strategies for placating divine wrath. One incantation reads, "I your slave have committed every sin."[149] While, as shown above, the other strategy is to deny knowledge of these sins as show by this incantation, "I did not know my transgression, that your penalty is laid [upon me]…The transgression which [I] did I cannot remember."[150]

To a certain extent the sufferer in the Babylonian Job employs both methods. He disavows knowledge of any wrong doing, but then vaguely confesses to have sinned in his youth by saying, ""[From] when I was a child until I grew up, (the days?) have been long, when [. . .]? How much you have been kind to me, how much I have blasphemed you, I have not forgotten you."[151] Unlike the previous poem that lacks any statement by the god, this text has an explanation from the god who decreed the unfortunate event. In what remains there is no mention from the mouth of the deity concerning any sins committed by the sufferer, but there is both comfort and advice given. The sufferer is reminded that the god was in control the entire time, "were you not ordered to live, how could you have lasted the whole of this grievous illness?"[152] As mentioned in the previous chapter, the god also instructs the sufferer not to forget his god anymore and to be kind to those who find themselves in similar predicaments. It is significant that this text ends with an injunction to attend to more "moral" matters, those of serving the needy. What is interesting is that in many of the texts that profess no knowledge of sin, reference is

---

[149] Lambert, "Dingir.ša.dib.ba Incantations," 283.

[150] Ibid., 287.

[151] *COS* 1.152:486

[152] *COS* 1.152:486

mostly made to "cultic" concerns, things that a person may have missed or had no knowledge concerning its need. The god does ask the sufferer to not forget him ever again, but the injunction to not "forget" is coupled with the exhortation to care for the needy.

There is also a dichotomy between how the sufferer observes himself and how the god observes others in a similar situation. The sufferer himself believes that sin has brought this misfortune upon himself, but the god makes no mention of this fact in his closing address. He only instructs the former sufferer to go and help those who are suffering; people whom the sufferer might assume are suffering divine punishment for sin. However, the deity is not concerned with sin, but in helping those that are unfortunate. One begins to sense that the author is silently critiquing the sufferer's views about sin and punishment, and finding benefits to suffering other than the absolving of guilt.

Ugaritic Job / *ludlul bēl nēmeqi*

The fragmentary nature of the Ugaritic Job and its clear similarities with *ludlul bēl nēmeqi* (Ludlul) make it advantageous to discuss these compositions together.[153] The Ugaritic Job comes from Ugarit, although composed in Akkadian and steeped in Mesopotamian tradition. The composition is fragmentary and is only known from one copy, but forms a bridge between the themes included in the first two compositions to what appears in Ludlul, which is discussed below. What is extant is the end portion of the sufferer's description of his afflictions, which is then followed by a lengthy praise of

---

[153] A translation of the Ugaritic Job may be found in *COS* 1.152:486 and a translation of Ludlul may be found in *COS* 1.153:486-92.

Marduk, the god who both afflicts and restores the main character. The most pertinent

passage concerning inscrutability is the mention that,

> My omens were obscure, they became like […]
> The diviner could not reach a ruling concerning me,
> The "Judge" would give no sign.
> The omens were confused the oracles mixed up.
> Dream interpreters used up the incense, diviners the lambs,
> Learned men debated the tablets (about my case),
> They could not say when my affliction would run its course.[154]

The tablet is fragmentary and contains no mention of the sufferer either

confessing ignorance or guilt concerning sins, but this section enforces the inscrutability

of the sufferer's present circumstances by specifically citing the failure of the established

means for obtaining divine will. The two divinatory methods unambiguously mentioned

are those of extispicy and dream interpreting. Divination was based upon the premise that

the gods left some trace of their intentions or will in the world around them. This includes

passively observing abnormalities in nature and abnormalities in human or animal

appearance or behavior. This also included the interpretation of dreams, which in the case

of the sufferer in the Ugaritic Job involved the use of incense. Also very useful in the

case of the unknown sin were ways that sought to provoke a divine message. This latter

category includes extispicy and may also include dreams that are provoked through a

night stay in a temple known as incubation. The methods and practices of these methods

were reserved for priests, who were highly trained scribes, and its secrets are known as

"wisdom" (*nēmequ*) and to have descended from the gods.[155] However, this system was

all but full-proof and there was the greatest care to ensure that the results were

---

[154] "A Sufferer's Salvation," translated by Benjamin R. Foster (*COS* 1.152:486).

[155] van der Toorn, "Wisdom Became a Secret."

satisfactory. Before one performed an extispicy ritual, it was important to pray that the god, commonly Shamash, would "place the truth" within the animal.[156] What is implied in this ritual is that the truth is not always to be found.

The problem of the ineffectual ritual also finds itself in a historical context in the Hittite texts called "Plague Prayers of Muršili II."[157] A plague was ravaging through the Hittite kingdom and a number of prayers were composed to demonstrate the measures taken to make restitution for possible wrong-doings that may have caused the plague. Near the end of the second prayer, it records,

> [Or] if the people have been dying because of some other manner, let me either see it in a dream, or [let] it [be discovered] by means of an oracle, or let a prophet speak it. Or the priests will sleep long and purely (in an incubation oracle) in regard to that which I convey to all of them…Let someone then see it in a dream. Let the matter on account of which people have been dying be discovered.[158]

The king, who had come up with reasons for the plague and did his best to confess and fix the problem, asks the gods to give him the answer. Similar to the Sumerian Job, the king wishes to know the offense so that he can stop the plague. The king admits that it is beyond him as to why the gods have caused the plague to continue and asks for divine assistance. The failure of the king's efforts to ascertain the problem is a sign that the gods do not wish the plague to abate. But the frustration lies in the fact that Muršili will make any reparation asked of him, but he cannot discover what needs to be mended.

---

[156] See Foster, *Before the Muses*, 207-211.

[157] "Plague Prayers of Muršili II," translated by Gary Beckman (*COS* 1.60:156-160)

[158] *COS* 1.60:159

This motif of the failure of human efforts to procure divine oracles is also mirrored in a number of other texts. Although these texts vary between time and culture, it is apparent that the inability to obtain divine omens was not an isolated incident. A Sumerian Letter-prayer to Enki reads, "(But) now, whatever I do, the judgment of my sin is not […] My fate has come my way, I am lifted onto a place of destruction, I cannot find an omen."[159] Although the sufferer does not explicitly express his ignorance concerning sin, this statement comes after a declaration of past obedience. A prayer to Nabu, where a sufferer in a similar situation says, "O Nabu, where is your forgiveness, O son of the [Lo]rd, where are your oracles?"[160] In the "Literary Prayer to Ishtar" the king asks that a sign be given before all resources are used up, "The dream interpreters must not exhaust [ ] And the diviner must not [ ] the…[]."[161] An *eršemma* lament reads "It is as if no one inquires about me, no one is looking for me…It is as if no one goes to the dream interpretess…It is as if no one goes anywhere for me!"[162] The fact that this idea is so pervasive throughout cultic, literary, and historical texts bears testament that this occurrence was not unheard of in the Mesopotamian world. This theme finds its greatest emphasis and attestation within Ludlul. In order to continue the

---

[159] Hallo, "Individual Prayer in Sumerian," 85.

[160] Foster, *Before the Muses*, 699.

[161] The "Literary Prayer to Ishtar" also appears to have this same theme as pointed out in Ibid., 608. Although very fragmentary it reads "The dream interpreters must not exhaust [ ] And the diviner must not [ ] the…[]."

[162] Mark Cohen, *Sumerian Hymnology: The Eršemma* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1981), 102.

discussion of this "omen-failure" motif it becomes important to offer a brief

summary of Ludlul.

Ludlul is the longest and most extensive cuneiform composition within the

category of the "Righteous Sufferer." It contains a similar structure to the compositions

discussed above, but also begins and ends with praise to Marduk. The importance of

Marduk in this composition mirrors the Ugaritic Job and with this composition it shares

important features. Although others have long since published thoughts on this

composition, the publication of an additional fragment by D. J. Wiseman in 1980

represents an important contribution to the study of Ludlul.[163] This was recognized by

William Moran who argued that this new fragment is crucial to the understanding of

Ludlul.[164] He finds the emphasis that Thorkild Jacobsen and others have placed upon a

certain statement in the middle of the composition to be troublesome. This statement

comes after the sufferer voices his frustration that he is being treated like someone who

has violated a number of cultic obligations. The sufferer then declares,

> I wish I knew that these things were pleasing to a god!
> What seems good to one's self could be an offense to a god,
> What in one's own heart seems abominable could be good to one's god!'
> Who could learn the reasoning of the gods in heaven?
> Who could grasp the intentions of the gods of the depths?
> Where might human beings have learned the way of a god?

---

[163] H. Frankfort et al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man an Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946); Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*; D. J. Wiseman, "A New Text of the Babylonian Poem of the Righteous Sufferer," *Anatolian Studies* 30 (1980): 101-107.

[164] William Moran, "The Babylonian Job," in *The Most Magic Word: Essays on Babylonian and Biblical Literature* (ed. Ronald S. Hendel; Washington DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2002), 182-200.

Jacobsen finds two answers within Ludlul, an answer for the heart and for the mind. His answer for the mind was "a denial that human standards of values can be applied to the gods. Man is too small, too limited in outlook, to pass judgment on things that are divine."[165] And the answer for the heart was "the duty to hope and trust."[166] Moran finds that the importance of this passage has been overemphasized since it only finds itself on tablet II. I agree with Moran that this statement has been overemphasized, but I do not agree with his further argument that the composition is a critique of the religion of the personal god in which the sufferer ultimately discovers Marduk as his savior.[167] Moran's statement that this section of text

> is, unquestionably, a remarkable passage. Most striking are the lines that stress the inscrutability of the gods. Recognition of this inscrutability was ancient and common in Mesopotamian religious thought. But here it is given a radically new twist. Not only are the gods inscrutable, but they hold man to norms of behavior that they would not reveal and he could not discover.[168]

I argue that this declaration of inscrutability is neither a radical twist nor must be thought remarkable within the broader Mesopotamian context. As mentioned previously, in a prayer to Marduk, the sufferer declares "What can they understand by their own efforts? Who has not been negligent, which has committed no sin? Who can understand a god's behavior?"[169] A similar statement exists in an Akkadian proverb, "The will of a

---

[165] Frankfort et al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man an Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, 215.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Moran, "The Most Magic Word," 195.

[168] Ibid., 190.

[169] "Prayer to Marduk," translated by Benjamin R. Foster (*COS* 1.114:416).

god cannot be understood, the way of a god cannot be known. Anything of a god [is difficult] to find out."[170] I agree that the statement by the sufferer in Ludlul is unique in that he explicitly emphasizes the fact that humanity is unable to fathom divine norms, but this very notion is at the heart of expressions of inscrutability. In Ludlul, the sufferer is mostly concerned about cultic matters, matters that must be dictated by divine will. It is in this realm that the sufferer wonders if the things that he understands may be completely wrong.

The term commonly translated as "way" or "behavior" comes from the Akkadian *alaktu* derived from the root *alāku*. According to the CAD it can mean "1. gait 2. behavior, customary ways…3. road…4. passage….5. caravan."[171] This is frequently used to refer the actions of the gods. The "way" of a god is not always unknowable since in one context Nebuchadnezzar is said to be one "who strives to find out about their divine ways (in order to follow them)."[172] Another text reads, "I constantly cared for the shrines of the gods and followed the ways of the gods."[173] The citations indicate that to search and to discover the "ways of the gods" was a symbol of piety. Tablet II of *Šurpu* in listing a number of offenses that the individual wishes to have remitted also lists, "He does not know what is a crime against god, he does not know what is a sin against the goddess."[174] This may imply that one remains under condemnation if one does not actively ascertain

---

[170] Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 266.

[171] *The Assyrian Dictionary*, 1/1:297.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Ibid., 298.

[174] Reiner, *Šurpu*, 13.

divine will. Those who understand "the way of a god" understand the cultic observances

that should be preformed. For the sufferer to claim that the "way of the god" is beyond

him, is making the statement that what he understands should be performed may not be

right, and what he assumes ought not to be done, the god wants accomplished.

Nevertheless, that this declaration of ignorance concerning the "ways of god" appears in

a proverb collection and in a penitential prayer to Marduk indicates that this saying was

not radical, but is a "safe" cliché that expresses the sufferer's feelings. Thus, even though

at one point some may claim that they seek to discover divine behavior, it was also a

commonly held idea that this search could never yield perfect results.

> The gap originally filled by D.J. Wiseman and rightly emphasized by Moran reads,
>
> The lord can see (*ibarri*) all the gods keep in their hearts,
> but not one of the gods can fathom his ways (*alaktašu ul īde*);
> Marduk can see (*ibarri*) all the gods keep in their hearts,
> but not one god can divine his intentions (*ul ilammad ṭenšu*).
> As his hand is heavy, so his heart is merciful;
> as his weapons are savage, so his will is healing.
> Without his consent who may soothe his blows?
> without his willing it who may stay his hand?[175]

This statement at the beginning of the composition constitutes a praise to

Marduk, and it is very similar to the lament given in tablet II. Inscrutability is

proclaimed as a manifestation of Marduk's power. He is not shackled by anything

that will obligate him to act one way or the other. It is here that the gods are put in

the same relationship towards Marduk as humanity is towards the gods. As Moran

points out, the only thing certain about Marduk is that as sure as he will be fierce,

---

[175] This section of Ludlul, first published by Wiseman has been followed up by an additional exemplar. The present translation is by A. R. George and F. N. H. Al-Rawi, "Tablets from the Sippar Library VII. Three Wisdom Texts," *Iraq* 60 (1998): 195.

he will always be merciful as well.[176] This part of the composition becomes an

important part of the composition for both Moran and Lambert.[177] Lambert has

pointed that this idea is much older than Ludlul, manifest in the Sumerian name

MIR.ŠA.KUŠU, which he translates as "savage-relenting."[178] He also points out that

this name appears as one of the fifty names given to Marduk in the Middle

Babylonian Enuma Elish. This indicates that the idea that Marduk was savage

first, and always relenting later was a part of Marduk's nature anciently

understood. As Moran put it, "if his mercy is unpredictable, it is also certain."[179]

The elevation of Marduk above the other gods removes his subjection to any

supernatural or rational law, something that is both a relief to saved, but troubling

to afflicted. Also at the beginning of tablet I the sufferer states, "By his command

he makes one incur sins, on his day of justice sin and guilt are absolved."[180]

Moran points out that this flies in the face of the theodicy question.[181] The

worshipper is not concerned that Marduk's actions create and absolve evil or may

seem arbitrary or unknowable. Inscrutability is both an object to be praised and

lamented.

---

[176] Moran, "The Most Magic Word," 194.

[177] Lambert, "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature."

[178] Ibid., 32.

[179] Moran, "The Most Magic Word," 194.

[180] George and Al-Rawi, "Tablets from the Sippar Library," 195.

[181] Moran, "The Most Magic Word."

Marduk's effective use of divination as to ascertain the plans of the other gods, evidenced in the use of the verb *barû*, and the inability of the other gods to find out his way (*alaktašu*), brings us back to the divinatory problem first discussed in the Ugaritic Job. The omen-failure motif finds no passing comment in Ludlul, but occurs three times in two tablets, soon after the praise and the description his illness in tablet I, and the beginning and end of tablet II.[182] First it is said, "My omens were confused, they were contradictory every day, the prognostication of diviner and dream interpreter could not explain what I was undergoing."[183] In the second mention,

> I called to my god, he did not show his face, I prayed to my goddess, she did not raise her head. The diviner with his inspection did not get to the bottom of it, nor did the dream interpreter with his incense clear up my case, I beseeched a dream spirit, but it did not enlighten me, the exorcist with his ritual did not appease divine wrath.[184]

The third instance reads,

> The exorcist recoiled from my symptoms, while my omens have perplexed the diviner. The exorcist did not clarify the nature of my complaint, while the diviner put no time limit on my illness. No god came to the rescue, nor lent me a hand, No goddess took pity on me, nor went at my side.[185]

These passages constitute the beginning, middle, and end of the sufferer's trials. The significance of divinatory failure for both the Ugaritic Job and Ludlul

---

[182] We do not expect it on tablets III and IV since the restoration of the sufferer commences at the beginning of tablet III.

[183] "The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer" translated by Benjamin R. Foster (*COS* 1.153:487)

[184] Ibid., 488

[185] Ibid., 489

seems to be demonstrated by Marduk's inscrutability first presented in the beginning praise. When Marduk has decided something, there is no overturning it. In a sense, he is above the law. The divinatory system functioned upon the premise that the gods left traces of their intentions and of the future within the world and if humanity could discovery the plan, they could use it to their advantage or even attempt to change it through incantations.[186] However, these texts indicate that such is impossible without the approval of the deity. As indicated in the previous chapter, Ludlul does not have a completely negative view of the established cultic means of determining a sufferer's illness or the means by which to treat it. It is an exorcist that visits the sufferer, carrying a tablet, and the sufferer proceeds through Marduk's temple of Esagil to complete his restoration.

This notion of the unpredictability and absolute sovereignty of Marduk is expressed in the Ugaritic Job by this statement of praise after the sufferers restoration,

> [He it] was who smote me, then was merciful to me.
> He scuttled(?) me, then moored me,
> He dashed me down, then grabbed me (as I fell),
> He scattered me wide, then garnered me,
> He thrust me away, then gathered me in,
> He threw me down, then lifted me high
> He snatched the jaw of death,
> He raised me up from hell.
> He smashed my sniper's weapon,
> He wrested the shovel from the digger of my grave.[187]

---

[186] Beaulieu, "Intellectual Setting" 11.

[187] *COS* 1.152:486

Although this text is highly fragmentary is appears to glory in the same idea that Marduk is both savage and relenting. Why such disasters happen is not explained, in fact, cannot be explained, but one finds comfort in that Marduk will always relent. This listing of opposing couplets resembles Qoh 3:2-9 in some respects. This section will be explained below, but it also explains a deity who makes actions appropriate for different times, but the ability to understand why and when are denied to humanity, not through divinatory means, but rather through the use of "time and judgment."

The malfunction of the divinely appointed means of determining the will of the gods serves different levels of purpose in the text. It adds emphasis on the ultimate despair that the sufferer is in. He has hit rock bottom—"I, who touched bottom like a fish"— and no mortal can help nor is help forthcoming from heaven. As mentioned previously, the scribes who would have composed, and copied this text were participants in the business of obtaining divine will and appeasing divine wrath. To admit the failure of the system is to admit failure in the occupation and craft of those who composed this very text. This becomes an expression of humility on the part of the authors who acknowledge that all wisdom is useless when it contradicts divine will. Thus, help comes not through personal righteousness, but through absolute submission to deity.

The failure of appointed methods of communication with the divine is mirrored in Ps 74:9-10, "our signs we do not see, there is no prophet anymore, and no one is with us who knows how long. How long O God will distress reproach, will enemies spurn your name forever?" The psalmist laments that there is no prophet who may give an answer from God concerning the duration of affliction. This also bears similarity to 1 Samuel 28 where Saul is denied answer

through any of the means that he had allowed in his own kingdom, "neither by dreams nor by Urim, or by prophets" (1 Sam 28:6). Unlike the previous examples the reason for the divine silence is very explicit in the text, "you did not obey the voice of the Lord and you did not perform his anger in Amalek" (1 Sam 28:18). Also dissimilar is that Saul first inquires of the Lord to get an answer concerning the approaching Philistine armies, not necessarily to discover his error or duration of affliction. The story seems to use the ineffectiveness of approved oracles to drive Saul to make greater mistakes by seeking the "witch" of Endor. However, in this way the Saul story does bear some resemblance to this Ugaritic Job in that inscrutability is ultimately caused by the decree of the deity.

Babylonian Theodicy

The Babylonian Theodicy is different from the other "Righteous Sufferer" texts in that the dialogue between the sufferer and his friend comprises the entire composition. Moshe Weinfeld finds this text to be the closest Mesopotamian parallel to the book of Job.[188] The sufferer recounts his own trials which seem to be undeserved, and also notes instances where divine order seems to be absent. The sufferer represents the critical viewpoint; the friend with whom he is debating becomes the faithful voice in favor of traditional values. However, it is commonly accepted that the composition finds some conclusion evident in the friend's

---

[188] "Job And Its Mesopotamian Parallels—A Typological Analysis."

admission that the gods created humanity with the ability to lie, and that this

creates some of life's problems.[189]

The sufferer at the end of his second speech asks the question, "Can a

happy life be a certainty?" and exclaims, "I wish I knew how that might come

about!" This gets at the heart of the sufferer's anxiety, because terrible things

seem to have happened for no reason, his greatest anxiety is to ensure a "*ūmū*

dumqi" or a life of good fortune and his wish may be translated more literally "I

wish I knew its way (*alaktašu*)." In essence, this becomes the familiar plea to

know the way of the gods, but here emphasized as the way to a life of good

fortune. The friend gives answers to what has been observed in the Sumerian Job,

Babylonian Job, Ugaritic Job, and Ludlul; the encouragement to have faith and

trust. Though fragmentary the friend reassures that "The [fore]most protection

[. . .] in prayer: The reconciled goddess returns to [. . .] The re[conciled gods]

will take pity on the fool(?), the wrong-doer. Seek constantly after the [rites?] of

justice. Your mighty [. . .] will surely show kindness, [. . .] . . . will surely grant

mercy." Here is where the dialogue format of the Theodicy allows the question to

be pushed further than it otherwise could. The sufferer then retorts that "The

on[ager], the wild ass, that had its fill of [. . .], Did it pay attention [to] ca[rry out?]

a god's intentions? The savage lion that devoured the choicest meat, Did it bring

its offerings to appease a goddess's anger?" Although similar in some respects to

the New Testament teaching that God clothes the lilies of the field (Matt 6:28),

---

[189] Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 65.

the sufferer finds the fact that "Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Matt 6:29) to be salt in a wound rather than comforting.

The friend in this rebuttal acknowledges the inscrutability that gives the sufferer so much anxiety. The friend explains, "perfect in all wisdom, O gem of wis[dom], You are a mere child, the purpose of the gods (*milik ilīm*) is as remote as the netherworld." He then goes on to explain that the animals that he has spoken of can have terrible things happen to them as well, they will fall in pits, and be killed by the king.

The sufferer throughout the text seems to be most agitated by the fact that there is no "profit" in the things that he has done. This concern for profit finds echoes in the "Vanity Theme" compositions which should caution against completely segregating these compositions within categories. The friend resorts to assertions of divine inscrutability in rebuttals to the uselessness of serving the gods. When the sufferer exclaims earlier that "in my youth I tried to find out the will (*ṭēmu*) of (my) god…I bore the yoke of profitless (*lā nēmelu*) servitude" the friend replies that "the strategy (*šibqi ili*) of a god is [as remote as] innermost heaven, the command of a goddess (*qibīt pî*) cannot be dr[awn out]." After the sufferer asks, "What has it profited (*ú-at-tar*) me that I knelt before my god?" the friend replies "Divine purpose (*libbi ili*) is as remote as innermost heaven, it is too difficult to understand, people cannot understand it…Even if one (tries to) apprehend divine intention (*pakki ilim*), people cannot understand it." The friend uses a variety of vocabulary to convey this point. It is nonetheless clear that the command, purpose, and plan of the gods are inscrutable. This however does not

prevent the friend from stating, "Unless you serve the will of a god (*ṭēm ili*), what will be your profit?...Seek after the favorable breeze of the gods, what you lost for a year you will recoup in a moment." This bears similarity to the usage of this phrase "will of god" discussed in Ludlul. Pious people sought after the "will of god" but this is by nature a frustrating search. It is difficult, faraway, and impossible to comprehend completely.

It is significant that the friend does not accuse the sufferer of having sinned. Instead, the friend just assumes that sometimes deities do things in a roundabout way. The friend holds onto the fact that there are reasons that these things happen that are unfathomable, and he keeps faith in the compassion and the eventual mercy of the deity.

An interesting feature of this composition is that the friend, the voice of tradition, is on the defensive from the beginning of the composition. Like the black pieces in a game of chess that always begin second, he must always react to what is said. The friend's responses become more feeble by the end of the dialogue. His second to last answer only reiterates his previous point twice that the gods cannot be understood. After the sufferer asserts that "they reject the truthful man who he[eds] the will of the gods" the friend rather than advocate trust as he has before, finally agrees with the sufferer and says, "They malign a poor man as a thief, they lavish mischief upon him, they conspire to kill him. They make him suffer every evil because he has no wherewithal(?). They bring him to a horrible end, they snuff him out like an ember." The friend does not seem to be defending a position more than acquiescing with the sufferer that people are

the cause of the trouble, and leaves the gods out of it, except for the fact that they

created humanity that way. With the friend no longer providing the

encouragement to trust, the sufferer finishes by once again emphasizing his

terrible state and his own innocence, and finishes with a plea to the gods, "May

the god who has cast me off grant help, May the goddess who has [forsaken me]

take pity, The shepherd Shamash will past[ure] people as a god should." It is

significant that it is sufferer who has the last word, it is the not the friend. The

friend becomes silent, caving into what he has admitted to through the course of

the dialogue. The sufferer nevertheless takes the traditional advice given to him

earlier, and relies upon the mercies of Shamash.

The Book of Job

　　　The book of Job is a book of great complexity and this section can only briefly

touch upon the theme of inscrutability. This notion of divine inscrutability is something

that both Job and his friends can agree upon. Both Job and Eliphaz utter a very similar

statement that God

עֹשֶׂה גְדֹלוֹת עַד־אֵין חֵקֶר וְנִפְלָאוֹת עַד־אֵין מִסְפָּר:

does great things that are unsearchable and marvelous things without
number (Job 9:10; see also 5:9).[190]

　　　Eliphaz says this in order to encourage Job to submit and to accept the

"chastisement of the Almighty" (Job 5:17). Job, however, while agreeing with this

statement uses it to increase his distance from God so much as to make a mutually

intelligible relationship impossible. The next verse reads,

---

[190] Job 5:9 reads only slightly different "he does great things and unsearchable;
marvelous things that are innumerable."

הֵן יַעֲבֹר עָלַי וְלֹא אֶרְאֶה וְיַחֲלֹף וְלֹא־אָבִין לוֹ:

If he crosses by me, I will not see it, and if he passes, I will not understand him (Job 9:11).

This is reiterated in v. 16,

אִם־קָרָאתִי וַיַּעֲנֵנִי לֹא־אַאֲמִין כִּי־יַאֲזִין קוֹלִי:

If I call and he answers I will not trust that he listened to my voice (Job 9:16).

Here, he feels so disconnected that even if he receives an answer, it may not be given in response to his question. He levels his accusation,

²¹ תָּם־אָנִי לֹא־אֵדַע נַפְשִׁי אֶמְאַס חַיָּי:

²² אַחַת הִיא עַל־כֵּן אָמַרְתִּי תָּם וְרָשָׁע הוּא מְכַלֶּה:

²³ אִם־שׁוֹט יָמִית פִּתְאֹם לְמַסַּת נְקִיִּם יִלְעָג:

I am innocent, I do not know my soul, I despise my life. One thing is this, thus I say, he causes the end of the righteous and the wicked. If a scourge will kill me suddenly, the despair of the innocent he derides (Job 9:21-23).

Job feels that there is no rhyme or reason to the actions of God, he will destroy both the innocent and the wicked. This ultimate divide between the divine and the mortal renders the two parties unable to communicate,

³² כִּי־לֹא־אִישׁ כָּמֹנִי אֶעֱנֶנּוּ נָבוֹא יַחְדָּו בַּמִּשְׁפָּט:

³³ לֹא יֵשׁ־בֵּינֵינוּ מוֹכִיחַ יָשֵׁת יָדוֹ עַל־שְׁנֵינוּ:

For he is not man like me that I may answer him, and we come together in judgment. There is no one between us to judge, who will place his hand upon both of us (Job 9:32-33).

Job's complaint becomes very similar to those of the other Mesopotamian compositions, in that he cannot discover what he has done and asks to be shown. He asks,

²³ כַּמָּה לִי עֲוֹנוֹת וְחַטָּאוֹת פִּשְׁעִי וְחַטָּאתִי הֹדִיעֵנִי:

How many iniquities and transgression do I have? My sin and my transgression, make them know to me (Job 13:23, see also 10:2).

There seems to be some differences with Job's plea to know his transgression. Job asks this question while refusing to let go of his "integrity" while those in Mesopotamia ask this question with the belief that they have sinned, albeit in some vague way. Unlike the Ugaritic Job and Ludlul, there is also no mention of the means by which this communication should come, nor is there mention of a prophet, dreams, or Urim as in 1 Samuel. However, the theophany at the end of Job does mirror the Babylonian Job where God directly makes an address at the end.

Zophar provides a rebuttal to Job, in Job 11:7-8, that mirrors the answers given by the friend in the Babylonian Theodicy.[191] Zophar chastises Job and asks,

<div dir="rtl">

הַחֵקֶר אֱלוֹהַ תִּמְצָא אִם עַד־תַּכְלִית שַׁדַּי תִּמְצָא׃[7]

גָּבְהֵי שָׁמַיִם מַה־תִּפְעָל עֲמֻקָּה מִשְּׁאוֹל מַה־תֵּדָע׃[8]

</div>

Searching, can you find God? Unto completeness can you find out the Almighty? The height of heaven, what do you do? The depth of sheol, what can you know? (Job 11:7-8).

Highlighting Job's inability to "search" and to "find out," Zophar uses the height of heaven and the depth of sheol to exemplify this. This saying mirrors a proverb that finds prominent place with "Vanity Theme" books and will be discussed below in more detail, but a version of it has already been cited in the discussion on Ludlul. This occurs when the sufferer exclaims, "Who could learn the reasoning of the gods in heaven? Who could grasp the intentions of the gods of the depths?"[192] Zophar is specifically responding to Job's alleged statement "my teaching is clean and I am pure in your eyes" (Job 11:4).

---

[191] The history of this proverb will be discussed later and is outlined by F. Greenspahn to whom I am indebted for his examples; see "A Mesopotamian Proverb and Its Biblical Reverberations," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 114 (1994): 33-38.

[192] *COS* 1.153:488

The passage in Job makes no mention of divine "intention" or "will" but only speaks of God himself. The significance of this difference may be merely the absence of a commonly used idiom, although the semantic equivalent of Akkadian *alaktu* is found in the Hebrew דרך, and the "way of the Lord" is not an uncommon phrase in the Hebrew Bible.[193] However, the Lord's "ways" are positive and not rooted in a proverb that highlights inscrutability. In the book of Isaiah Yahweh declares,

<div dir="rtl">

8 כִּי לֹא מַחְשְׁבוֹתַי מַחְשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם וְלֹא דַרְכֵיכֶם דְּרָכָי נְאֻם יְהוָה:
9 כִּי־גָבְהוּ שָׁמַיִם מֵאָרֶץ כֵּן גָּבְהוּ דְרָכַי מִדַּרְכֵיכֶם וּמַחְשְׁבֹתַי מִמַּחְשְׁבֹתֵיכֶם:

</div>

For my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways
saith the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, thus are my ways
higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts
(Isaiah 55:8-9).

This declaration is similar to Mesopotamian sources, but it is not advocating the inscrutability of God's thoughts, but emphasizing how much better his ways are to those of the wicked. For Zophar to speak of finding out God himself rather than his "way" puts much more emphasis upon the totality of God, rather than just his behavior or his knowledge. It is not the divine will or way that is inscrutable, but God himself. It is important to notice, however, that both Job 11:7-9 and Isaiah 55:8-9 use the analogy of creation to emphasize the distance between human and divine thought.

Common to both Job and Qohelet is the focus upon God's creations to highlight his ultimate power and knowledge that remain inscrutable to human observers. In chapter 28 Job uses the unknown phenomena within the earth to emphasize Yahweh's sole knowledge of wisdom. Job 28:12-14 reads,

---

[193] Koch, "דֶּרֶךְ *derekh*" *TDOT* 3:270-273; Haldar-Ringgren, "דֶּרֶךְ *derekh*" *TDOT* 3:275.

וְהַחָכְמָה מֵאַיִן תִּמָּצֵא וְאֵי זֶה מְקוֹם בִּינָה: 13 לֹא־יָדַע אֱנוֹשׁ עֶרְכָּהּ וְלֹא תִמָּצֵא בְּאֶרֶץ הַחַיִּים: 14 תְּהוֹם אָמַר לֹא בִי־הִיא וְיָם אָמַר אֵין עִמָּדִי:

From where may wisdom be found? Where is this, the place of understanding? People do not know its order, and it is not found in the land of the living. The deep says it is not in me and the sea says it is not with me.

This seems to be the closest Hebrew equivalent to expression the inscrutability of divine will. It is not divine will, but wisdom that represents it. The same wording is mirrored just a few verses later,

וְהַחָכְמָה מֵאַיִן תָּבוֹא וְאֵי זֶה מְקוֹם בִּינָה: 21 וְנֶעֶלְמָה מֵעֵינֵי כָל־חָי וּמֵעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם נִסְתָּרָה: 22 אֲבַדּוֹן וָמָוֶת אָמְרוּ בְּאָזְנֵינוּ שָׁמַעְנוּ שִׁמְעָהּ: 23 אֱלֹהִים הֵבִין דַּרְכָּהּ וְהוּא יָדַע אֶת־מְקוֹמָהּ:
24 כִּי־הוּא לִקְצוֹת־הָאָרֶץ יַבִּיט תַּחַת כָּל־הַשָּׁמַיִם יִרְאֶה: 25 לַעֲשׂוֹת לָרוּחַ מִשְׁקָל וּמַיִם תִּכֵּן בְּמִדָּה: 26 בַּעֲשׂתוֹ לַמָּטָר חֹק וְדֶרֶךְ לַחֲזִיז קֹלוֹת: 27 אָז רָאָהּ וַיְסַפְּרָהּ הֱכִינָהּ וְגַם־חֲקָרָהּ: 28 וַיֹּאמֶר | לָאָדָם הֵן יִרְאַת אֲדֹנָי הִיא חָכְמָה וְסוּר מֵרָע בִּינָה: ס

From whence comes wisdom and where is this, the place of understanding? It is concealed from the eyes of all the living and from the birds of the heavens it is shut. Destruction and death say "in our ears we have heard its sound." God understands its way and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth, under all the heavens he sees, making weight for wind and he regulates water by measure. When he made a statute for the rain and a way for thunder-bolts ,then he saw it .And he took account of it, he understood it and also searched it. But he said to humanity, behold, the fear of the Lord, this is wisdom and the turning from evil is understanding.

This passage implies that wisdom is not one of the creations of God, but was discovered by him and became known to him. Interestingly, it is the "way" or דרך of wisdom that he discovers. However, rather than giving this knowledge to humanity, Yahweh asks them to trust in his own knowledge of wisdom from the creation of the world. This discourse by Job about the wisdom's concealment could have been pulled straight out of the book of Proverbs considering the themes that it contains. The use of

creation imagery emphasizes the power and omnipotence of the Lord, and also emphasizes its remoteness in time and place.

Elihu finishes his chastisement of Job in chapters 36-37 using a similar argument that looks to the creations of God as a symbol of his omnipotence which makes humanity unable to pass judgment by saying,

שַׁדַּי לֹא־מְצָאנֻהוּ שַׂגִּיא־כֹחַ וּמִשְׁפָּט וְרֹב־צְדָקָה לֹא יְעַנֶּה: 23

לָכֵן יְרֵאוּהוּ אֲנָשִׁים לֹא־יִרְאֶה כָּל־חַכְמֵי־לֵב: פ 24

The Almighty, we cannot find him out, great of strength and judgment and
a multitude of righteousness, he cannot mistreat. Thus men fear him, he
does not regard any of the wise of heart. (Job 37:23-24)

When Yahweh answers Job, he seems to pick up where Elihu left off, emphasizing that he organized the created world and keeps it operating in order to emphasize Job's insignificance. Job finds no answer to God's reply in 40:4-5. Yahweh then goes on to demonstrate his power by highlighting his command over the Behemoth and Leviathan. Job finally answers in 42:2-6,

יָדַעְתָּ כִּי־כֹל תּוּכָל וְלֹא־יִבָּצֵר מִמְּךָ מְזִמָּה: 2

מִי זֶה ׀ מַעְלִים עֵצָה בְּלִי דָעַת לָכֵן הִגַּדְתִּי וְלֹא אָבִין נִפְלָאוֹת מִמֶּנִּי וְלֹא 3
אֵדָע:

שְׁמַע־נָא וְאָנֹכִי אֲדַבֵּר אֶשְׁאָלְךָ וְהוֹדִיעֵנִי: 4

לְשֵׁמַע־אֹזֶן שְׁמַעְתִּיךָ וְעַתָּה עֵינִי רָאָתְךָ: 5

עַל־כֵּן אֶמְאַס וְנִחַמְתִּי עַל־עָפָר וָאֵפֶר: פ 6

I know that all things are possible and no thought is withheld from you.
Who is this that conceals counsel without knowledge; thus I spoke but I
did not understand, it was too great for me and I did not know it. Listen,
and I will speak, I will answer you and make it known to me. By the
hearing of the ear, I heard you, but now my eye sees you. Thus I reject and
I repent in dust and ashes.

Job, who had been demanding a meeting with God, finally receives his wish, but cannot bring himself to ask the questions that he asked earlier. Instead, he accepts his

own limitations to understanding God's doings, and repents. All participants within the dialogue in the book of Job use the notion of the inscrutability of God and wisdom in arguments. Job's friends and Elihu use it to emphasize that Job has sinned, and he cannot expect know more than God. Job himself uses it to distance himself from God and to emphasize that true wisdom is unattainable by mortals. God then outlines his majesty to emphasize how futile the knowledge of Job is. Job then professes ignorance, which doesn't exactly seem a change of tact, but Job's use of his inability to understand becomes a declaration of humility rather than a challenge. Similar to Ludlul that both lamented and praised the inscrutability of Marduk, Job laments the chasm that separates him and God, and does not refute this understanding at the end. However, the game changing event occurs because Job has "seen" rather than only "heard." This finds a mirror in the theophanies that occur at the end of Ludlul and the Babylonian Job. Even though little has been learned intellectually, there is comfort in direct experience with Divinity. Even though Job puts up the most stubborn defense against the questioning of God concerning the question of the righteous sufferer, he eventually submits to his ignorance and God's omnipotence just as all of the other "Righteous Sufferer" compositions have eventually.

"Nothing is of Value" (Nıɒ.ɴᴀᴍ A, B, C, D)

Four different texts that have been reconstructed by Jeremy Black and Bendt Alster bear

the opening line "Nothing is of value but life itself should be sweet-tasting."[194] Alster

who considers these to be "very different texts, yet with a common theme" identifies

them as early forerunners to the *carpe diem* advice in Mesopotamian literature.[195] The

opening line itself provides sufficient illustration to its outlook, and the phrase "nothing is

value" mirrors quite clearly the second verse of Qohelet "all is vanity" (Qoh 1:2). But the

underlying theme in this wisdom category does not necessarily hinge upon uncertainty

concerning the divine realm. In fact, such a declaration expresses certainty that there is no

"value."

Included in what is known as Nıɒ.ɴᴀᴍ A is an ancient proverb highlighting

human limitations and concluding with another assertion of *carpe diem*, "(Even) the

tallest one cannot reach to the sky; (Even) the broadest one cannot go down to the

Netherworld…The good life, let it be defiled in joy! Let the "race" be spent in joy!"[196]

This saying offers a variation to a common theme that is manifest at the beginning of the

composition. By evoking imagery that demonstrates humanity's limited control over

---

[194] Text and translation of these texts can be found in Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 270-279.

[195] Ibid., 269, 295.This line also finds itself in the instructions of Shuruppak (Ibid., 253, 271).

[196] Ibid., 270.

godly affairs, it uses this as the reason to advocate that one enjoy life. This is slightly different from the "nothing is of value" statement, where it is the lack of value in earthly affairs that argues that one should seize the day.

Frederick Greenspahn has identified and traced this specific proverb through NIĜ.NAM, the Sumerian "Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living," the OB Epic of Gilgamesh, the Dialogue of Pessimism, and he finds a number of biblical echoes including Job 11:7-9.[197] Greenspahn identifies all but the latter as the "primary evidence" for the proverb, and finds that "beginning as a depiction of human limitations, it came to highlight the gulf between mortals and deities before finally being used as a literary cliché [in the Dialogue of Pessimism], mocked less for its inaccuracy than its triteness."[198] He argues that this notion of restricted access to the divine realm is manifest in the tower of Babel story.[199] He understands that this proverb "draws on standard themes and phrases" throughout the Near East, one of which is manifest in "The Exaltation of Inanna," "You are as lofty as heaven, you as broad as earth."[200] Something similar was noted above in Ludlul, "Who could learn the reasoning of the gods in heaven? Who could grasp the intentions of the gods of the depths?" This saying in Ludlul is highlighting the inability to understand, and to make sense of the present plight, whereas

---

[197] Greenspahn, "Mesopotamian Proverb."

[198] Ibid., 34.

[199] This is discussed in more detail under the sub-heading "Gilgamesh Stories."

[200] William W. Hallo and J. J. A. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (Near Eastern Researches 3; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 30-31, II:123-124 as cited in Greenspahn, "Mesopotamian Proverb," 34.

the proverb presented in NIG.NAM is highlight the physical inability to change one's lot in life.

NIG.NAM D also contains this proverb but precedes it by a mention of smoke offerings, which according to Alster calls into question the effectiveness of these offerings since they do not even reach the gods.[201] The emphasis that human actions, including rituals, cannot reach the divine realm to change things, is not a problem being wrestled with, but a fact that is stated with positive advice at the end.

Ballade of the Early Rulers

This text has two versions that are very similar, one of which is referred to as the Standard Sumerian version and the other as the Syro-Mesopotamian version which is mostly made of fragments from Emar and some from Ugarit.[202] Alster understands the Ballade to be an example of "humorous wisdom" and that "whatever pessimism [that] is expressed here should be taken with a grain of salt."[203] I agree that there may be some light hearted humor in this composition, but the fact that these themes are able to be used in something close to a "drinking song" should bear testament to the prevalence the views expressed.[204] Similar to "Nothing is of Value" compositions, the Ballade does not contain overt assertions of divine inscrutability, but it does take the limits of human knowledge to be an incontrovertible fact that must be reconciled with. This is manifest in lines 2-3 of

---

[201] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 276, 278-279.

[202] Ibid., 300-305, 312-317.

[203] Alster, "Scribes, Sages, and Seers in Ancient Mesopotamia," 57.

[204] Ibid.

the Syro-Mesopotamian version, "According to the decisions of the gods (*ina ṭēm ilim-ma*) lots are allotted. Since time immemorial there has been [wi]nd!"[205] Thus there is nothing inscrutable about the "plan of the gods" and it is by their decree that humanity's mortal sojourn is brief and fruitless. After asking for the whereabouts of the long dead heroes of Mesopotamian lore, the familiar proverb is cited once more, "Like the remote heavens, has my hand ever reached them? Like the deep underworld (lit., earth), no one knows them."[206] This saying finds itself in a slightly different form. The first parallel line highlights the inability of humanity to access heaven, whereas the second focuses on the lack of knowledge in relation to the underworld. Since the emphasis of the poem lies in the inability of these long dead great heroes to escape death and their present insignificance, it is natural that the notion of knowledge and memory should come up. In the face of this familiar proverb, the Ballade finds a similar conclusion to "Let one day of happiness make up for 36,000 years of silence (of death)!"[207]

Gilgamesh Stories

Gilgamesh is the protagonist of a number of independent stories in Sumerian that were reworked in the Old Babylonian composition called "Surpassing all other Kings" and later into the Standard Babylonian Epic called "He who saw the Deep."[208] Although

---

[205] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 312-313.

[206] Ibid., 303.

[207] Foster, *Before the Muses*, 770.

[208] There are also Middle Babylonian versions; see George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 1:3-33.

the Sumerian poems do not build off of each other, "Gilgamesh and Huwawa," "The Death of Gilgamesh," and "Enkidu and the Netherworld" include a common theme where Gilgamesh wishes to cheat death. In the first his great deeds are done to establish a "name" for himself, in the second, despite his great deeds and his meeting with Ziusudra, the gods declare that he must die because no mortal except Ziusudra could be given eternal life.[209] And in the last, Enkidu travels to the netherworld to retrieve Gilgamesh's toy, but fails in his quest. Similar to the Ballade and "Nothing is of Value" inscrutability is not a major theme, but the distance between human and divine spheres is highlighted through action and power rather than knowledge.

The Sumerian "Gilgamesh and Huwawa," present in two versions (A, B), contains the proverb mentioned above and note by Greenspahn. In version A as Gilgamesh discusses with Utu his intentions to go to the mountains, he explains "That [death] will happen to me too -- that is the way things go. No one is tall enough to reach heaven; no one can reach wide enough to stretch over the mountains. Since a man cannot pass beyond the final end of life, I want to set off into the mountains, to establish my renown (Sumerian MU = name) there." Gilgamesh, after acknowledging his fate, proposes to establish a "name."[210] This is also mentioned in the episode of the Old Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh Epic that mirrors "Gilgamesh and Huwawa" when Gilgamesh chides Enkidu by saying, "Who is there my friend, that can climb to the sky (heaven)? Only the gods have [dwelled] forever in sunlight. As for man, his days are numbered,

---

[209] George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 15; "The Death of Gilgameš" in *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.8.1.3#).

[210] Greenspahn, "Mesopotamian Proverb," 33.

whatever he may do, it is but wind…If I fall, I should have made my name…[A name that] is eternal I will establish forever."[211] Gilgamesh later turns his quest from merely seeking a name that would endure the ages, but actual immortality by obtaining the secret from Utnapishtim. In a fragment of the Old Babylonian version reportedly from Sippar the bar-maid Shiduri tells Gilgamesh to abandon his fruitless quest,

> O 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,]…[212]

The old notion of the futility of human efforts in the face of death again becomes the catalyst for the *carpe diem* theme, which finds here its more thorough expression within cuneiform literature.

As mentioned early, Greenspahn in his analysis of the "heavenly ascent" proverb sees this understanding at the heart of the story of Babel and its tower; humanity cannot either enter the divine realm, nor can it establish a name.[213] Gen 11:4 reads,

> [4] וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָבָה | נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם
> פֶּן־נָפוּץ עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:
> And they said, come now, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower and its top will be in heaven and we will make for ourselves a name, lest we be scattered across all the land.

---

[211] George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 1:201.

[212] Ibid., 279.

[213] Greenspahn, "Mesopotamian Proverb," 35-38.

The idea of reaching beyond one's bounds and specifically of establishing a "name" finds echoes in the Epic of Gilgamesh. This futile act is only marked by failure in Gilgamesh, whereas in the biblical story it is a punishable act of hubris.

The Dialogue of Pessimism

This composition consists of dialogue between a man and his obliging servant. Through the texts, the master of the slave proposes different actions, such as riding in his chariot or sacrificing to the gods. After the servant offers words of encouragement for the proposed action, the master will decide not do it, and the servant responds with reasons that not do so is advantageous. For instance, the slave upon hearing his master's wish to sacrifice to his personal god encourages by saying "a man who makes a sacrifice to his personal god will be context."[214] When his master changes his mind he declares, "Can you teach your personal god to chase after you as a dog? He'll just demand of you rites, a votive statue, and many other things."[215]

The composition culminates in the question by the master, "Now then, what is good (ṭāba)?"[216] The slave answers in the "heavenly ascent" proverb that has played such a prominent role in the "Vanity Theme" texts, "What's good is to break my neck and your neck and to be thrown in the river. Who is tall enough to ascend to the heavens? Who is broad enough to encompass the earth?" Like the Ballade of the Early Rulers, this proverb moves from finding meaning in the realm of mere physical ability into the realm of

---

[214] "Dialogue of Pessimism," translated by Alasdair Livingstone (*COS* 1.155:496)

[215] Ibid.

[216] Ibid.

knowledge. No longer is it merely used to emphasize the inability of humanity's capacity

to thwart death or change one's "lot" in life, but here it is the inability to answer the

fundamental question of "what is good?" This emphasis on alternative actions finds a

parallel in Qoh 3:2-9. In "Dialogue" there is a reason for both performing and not

performing an action which makes the absolute knowledge of what is good to be difficult

to discern, whereas in Qohelet there is a "time" for opposing actions that negate their

ultimate usefulness. Qohelet's wonders what is the profit (יתרון) in 3:9, whereas the

Dialogue wonders what is good (*ṭāba*), although this same idea is mirrored elsewhere in

Qohelet (see Qoh 2:3, 6:12). Both understand the answer to be within the divine realm, a

place that cannot be reached physically nor mentally.

Qohelet

    Qohelet finds himself at the end of a long continuum of works that deal with

death and the ultimate futility of human efforts. Qohelet's similarities to Gilgamesh have

not gone unnoticed.[217] In addition to the old themes concerning the futility of human

efforts in the face of death, Qohelet highlights humanity's inability to learn and

understand God's works. Unlike the previous compositions of the "Vanity Theme" that

find little to say about unjust suffering or perceived injustices, Qohelet finds that

perceived injustices provide evidence that the work's of God are inscrutable. Qohelet is

---

[217] Bruce Jones, "From Gilgamesh to Qohelet," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III* (ed. William W. Hallo, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly; Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 349-379; M. A. Shields, "To Seek But Not to Find: Old Meanings for Qohelet and Gilgamesh," in *Gilgameš and the World of Assyria: Proceedings of the Conference Held at Mandelbaum House, the University of Sydney, 21-23 July, 2004* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007).

in dialogue with the proverbial wisdom of the "Instructions" genre, and finds himself cutting at the heart of this genre which assumes that it understands divine will within the created world. Qohelet's denial of humanity's ability to understand the world and thus glean "profit" mirrors Gilgamesh's failure to achieve eternal life.[218]

It is not possible to provide a comprehensive treatment of the book of Qohelet, but a look at the questions that are asked by Qohelet, his occasional statements of purpose, and some of the conclusions offered will prove to be beneficial. For the initial question one has to look no further than Qoh 1:2-3, "Vanity of vanities, said Qohelet, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What profit does a person have among all his toil which he toiled under the sun?"[219] I translate the terms הבל, and יתרון as "vanity" and "profit" respectively. The translation of הבל is notoriously difficult. Although there is little room to conduct an exhaustive word study on the הבל some brief words are in order.[220] According to its standard definition and what can be gleaned from other Semitic languages, the word הבל corresponds to wind, breath, or vapor.[221] Michael Fox has argued that הבל can be translated as "absurd" in most cases in Qohelet, and uses the definition of "absurd" by Albert Camus to advocate his position.[222] He defines absurd according to Camus as

---

[218] Martin A. Shields discusses the common motif of failure between these compositions in "Gilgameš and the world of Assyria."

[219] It should be acknowledged that a construction such as "vanity of vanities" can be translated as a superlative such as "most vain." This being said, I prefer the more literal and traditional rendering, which has practically entered English as a calque.

[220] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 27-49.

[221] Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Brown-Driver-Briggs*, 210; Seybold, "הֶבֶל *hebhel*; הָבַל *hābal*" TDOT 3:313-314.

[222] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 30-31.

"irrational, an affront to reason."[223]Although I would not reject that Qohelet had this idea

for some uses of הבל, to say that in "almost all cases, it means 'absurd'" may be carrying

the case too far. I prefer to follow C. L. Seow's approach to the הבל who argues that "no

single definition…works in every case" and follow the tradition of the Septuagint (LXX)

and the Vulgate by using "vanity."[224] As noted above, one is dealing with metaphorical

language and to decide on a specific definition one may be losing out on possible shades

of meaning. Thus, for us to see vapor, deception, ephemerality, or absurdity every time

we read the word would be a definition more apt to capture the semantic range of the

word within the mind of the ancient reader.[225] Fox is correct in his assessment that הבל

can denote something "absurd" but I feel that this is not the overarching stress of

Qohelet's message.

In the case of Qohelet 1:2-3, it is clear that הבל is being used as an opposite to

יתרון. Something that is הבל has no יתרון.[226] The following examples in vv. 4-7 are those of

the generations that come and go, the sun rising and setting, and the rivers emptying but

never filling. Uniquely, Qohelet looks to the natural world for examples that provide

analogy for the vanity of human efforts.

As mentioned previously, the question of profit for one's own efforts finds

expression in the Babylonian Theodicy when the sufferer cites the breakdown in social

---

[223] Ibid., 31.

[224] The LXX uses ματαιότης and the Vulgate uses "vanitas."

[225] These are some of the definitions that appear in Fox's assessment; see *A Time to Tear Down*, 27-33.

[226] Fox, however, separates v. 2 and v. 3, arguing that the former is the summary of the entire work, while the latter provides the thesis statement for vv.4-11; see Ibid., 159-69.

order and asks, "How have I profited that I have bowed down to my god?"[227] This uses the same root as יתרון, which appears in Akkadian as *watāru*.[228] The suffer finds that his own personal obedience has been for naught since he finds himself on the other end of the social ladder. This corresponds with his previous question, "Can a happy life be a certainty? I wish I knew how that might come about!" Qohelet goes a step further than the Theodicy by seeing profitless endeavors not only in human attempts to secure good fortune, but also in the natural world. The sufferer of the Theodicy ultimately turns from his wise friend, and relies upon his god for help, whereas Qohelet accepts the fact that sometimes there is no profit. True to form within the "Vanity Theme" Qohelet invokes the old teaching that one ought to enjoy the moment. Qohelet also seeks an answer quite similar to the master's question in the Dialogue of Pessimism, "Now then, what is good? (*ṭāba*)" This is reflected in Qoh 2:3, "I conducted my heart in wisdom to seize folly so that I might see what is good (טוב) for a person," and Qoh 6:12, "For who knows what is good (טוב) for a person in life, the number of days of his vanity?"

The traditional answer to the question comes in a variety of places (2:24, 3:12-13, 3:22, 9:7-10). Qoh 3:12 reads, "I know there is no good in them but to rejoice and to do good in one's life." The slightly more extended version of this thought comes in 9:7-10 which reads,

<p dir="rtl">7 לֵךְ אֱכֹל בְּשִׂמְחָה לַחְמֶךָ וּֽשֲׁתֵה בְלֶב־טוֹב יֵינֶךָ כִּי כְבָר רָצָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֶׂיךָ:</p>

<p dir="rtl">8 בְּכָל־עֵת יִהְיוּ בְגָדֶיךָ לְבָנִים וְשֶׁמֶן עַל־רֹאשְׁךָ אַל־יֶחְסָר:</p>

---

227 Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 87.

⁹ רְאֵה חַיִּים עִם־אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי הֶבְלֶךָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לְךָ תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ כֹּל יְמֵי הֶבְלֶךָ כִּי הוּא חֶלְקְךָ בַּחַיִּים וּבַעֲמָלְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה עָמֵל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ׃

¹⁰ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכֹחֲךָ עֲשֵׂה כִּי אֵין מַעֲשֶׂה וְחֶשְׁבּוֹן וְדַעַת וְחָכְמָה בִּשְׁאוֹל אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה הֹלֵךְ שָׁמָּה׃ ס

Come, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a good heart since God has favored your works. At all times, let your clothes be white and may oil not be lacking upon your head. Experience life with the wife whom you love all the days of the life of your vanity which he has given you under the sun all the days of your vanity. For this is your portion in life and your toil which you must toil under the sun. All which your hand is able to find to do, do it in your strength for there is no work nor thought nor knowledge nor wisdom in sheol to whence you go.

In the previously cited works, the impetus for such a philosophy of *carpe diem* was the inevitability of human death, and humanity's lack of power to alter their own mortal situation. The Dialogue of Pessimism while extending humanity's futility into the realm of knowledge and thus beyond physical action does not espouse *carpe diem* as a philosophy, but rather advocates suicide.[229] Qohelet bridges the gap between the physical and mental limitations by arguing that one cannot obtain the necessary wisdom by observing the created order.

Having discussed the questions along with the answers that are put forward by Qohelet, I will now examine the ways in which the theme of inscrutability is presented. Qohelet opposes the assumption in traditional wisdom that a correct course of action can be found in every situation. Qohelet demonstrates in many places that human knowledge falls short of what is required to discover this "best" option. Most importantly is Qoh 3:1-11. Verse one reads,

לַכֹּל זְמָן וְעֵת לְכָל־חֵפֶץ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמָיִם׃

---

[229] This is most likely a humorous emphasis to the dilemma.

For everything there is an appointed time and a time for every occurrence
under the heavens.

What follows in vv. 2-8 is a pairing of events that may be described as opposites.

Qohelet acknowledges that there is a time and a place for conflicting events in life.

However, if one's ultimate end is יתרון (profit), it would be of little worth to gather stones

only to cast them away again. This seems to be Qohelet's sentiment in v. 9 when he

writes, "What is the profit of the doer in that which he labors?" Here, Qohelet is looking

for יתרון or gain that will stand the test of time, but he finds none. Qohelet understands

that there can be things gained by these actions, but he finds the certainty of their

eventual undoing to be problematic. The difficulty of the problem is fully explained in

3:11 which reads:

אֶת־הַכֹּל עָשָׂה יָפֶה בְעִתּוֹ גַּם אֶת־הָעֹלָם נָתַן בְּלִבָּם מִבְּלִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִמְצָא
הָאָדָם אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים מֵרֹאשׁ וְעַד־סוֹף׃

He has made everything beautiful in its time, and yet he placed eternity in
their hearts so that no person can find out the work that God has done
from beginning to end.

The translations of העלם and מבלי אשר לֹא make the exact meaning of the verse

tricky. The translational options for העלם have been the source of a considerable amount

of scholarship which has been summarized and evaluated by Brian Gault.[230] Gault

identifies ten ways that this has been understood. Further distilling Gault's excellent

summary, options (1-6) are variations upon העלם as "eternal," (7) understands it as "world"

---

[230] For a more thorough overview see Brian P. Gault, "A Reexamination of 'Eternity' in
Ecclesiastes 3:11," *Bibliotheca sacra* 165 (2008): 39-57. I also found C. Seow's
summary to be useful in *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and
Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 163.

and (8) as "knowledge, (9) as "darkness, obscurity" and (10) as "toil."[231] Since options (8, 9, 10) different from either the vowels or consonants of the Masoretic text, it becomes advantageous to first look text critically at עלם.

The Septuagint (LXX) translates העלם as τòν αἰῶνα. The Greek αἰών may be translated as "lifetime," "eternity," or "world" which carries similar ambiguities to the current Masoretic voweling of העלם.[232] This can be seen in the Vulgate's translation which uses *mundum* or "world." Both the Vulgate and LXX, with the Masoretic text, interpret העלם as the defective spelling of העולם. The definition of "world" for עולם is found in Mishnaic Hebrew, but is unattested in Biblical Hebrew.[233] The Vulgate's rendering carries little weight since it is only attested in later Hebrew. The Aramaic Targum offers some variety by understanding עלם to come from the verbal root meaning "to conceal." The Targum reads,

> Also the Great Name…He concealed (כסימנהון) from them, for the evil inclination which was in their hearts was made known to Him. For if it was entrusted to man, he would use it and find out through it what will happen at the end of days forever and ever. And he also concealed (כסימנהון) from them the day of death so that it would not be made known to a man from the beginning what will be at the end.[234]

Although the Targum translates עלם as a conjugated verb, this is evidence that עלם was understood as a Qal passive participle similar to עֲלֻמֵנוּ or "our secret" that is found in

---

[231] Gault, "A Reexamination," 40-42.

[232] Ibid., 47 n. 37.

[233] Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Brown-Driver-Briggs*, 761-763.

[234] Peter S. Knobel, "The Targum of Qohelet: Translated with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes," in *The Aramaic Bible.* (ed. Kevin Cathcart, Michael Maher, and Martin McNamara; vol. 15; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1991), 28.

Ps 90:8. This same verbal root meaning "to conceal" also finds attestation in the Niphal in Qoh 12:14. Gault favors this as his option (9). He argues that the spelling of עלם favors this interpretation, since עולם is only spelled defectively twice among the seven times it occurs in Qohelet.[235] He favors the meaning of "darkness" from analogy of other Semitic languages, but this is not unambiguously attested. This argument is based mostly upon the spelling, and the fact that it also occurs defectively within Qohelet make that argument less convincing. It is also less likely since its use in the Qal form only occurs once in Ps 90:8 mentioned above.

Although the ancient versions all differ in their interpretation of עלם, they all agree upon the basic consonantal text. This makes Fox's argument for metathesis less likely.[236] The LXX and the Vulgate, although differing in translation, both understand עלם to be a defective spelling for עולם. The Masoretic vocalization, which is a later manifestation of a presumably old tradition, also reflects this understanding. Thus, if we discount possibilities (7-10)[237] then we are left to understand עלם as a defective spelling for the Biblical Hebrew עולם commonly translated "eternity."

The phrase מבלי אשר לא occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible. This adverb מבלי is composed of the preposition מן with בלי, an adverb of negation. Alone, בלי can mean "without" as seen in בְּלִי־מָיִם "without water" (Job 8:11) and בְּלִי־דָעַת "without knowledge"

---

[235] For plene spelling, see Qoh 1:4, 2:16, 3:14, 9:6, 12:5. For defective, see Qoh 1:10, 3:11. Gault actually says that it occurs only 6 times, see "A Reexamination," 52.

[236] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 210-211.

[237] I discount option (8) which comes from an Arabic word. There is no reason to look outside of Hebrew.

(Job 38:2). The מִן can have either a negative or causative force when attached to בְּלִי.[238]

With the negative מִן, the double negatives do not cancel each other out, but they

emphasize the negation.[239] This can be seen in the common construction מִבְּלִי יוֹשֵׁב

"without inhabitant" (Jer 9:10) and it finds a meaning parallel to מאין, as seen in מִבְּלִי־אִישׁ

מֵאֵין יוֹשֵׁב "without people, without inhabitant" (Zeph 3:6). With the causative מִן it is again

often used in double negative constructions such as הֲמִבְּלִי אֵין־קְבָרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם "Is it because

there are not graves in Egypt?" (Exod. 14:11) and הֲמִבְּלִי אֵין־אֱלֹהִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל "Is it because

there is no God in Israel?" (2 Kgs 1:3). It may also negate an infinitive as in פֶּן־יֹאמְרוּ הָאָרֶץ

אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָנוּ מִשָּׁם מִבְּלִי יְכֹלֶת יְהוָה לַהֲבִיאָם "Lest they say, the land from whence you brought

us, "Because the Lord could not bring them…" (Deut 9:28). The use מבלי with the

particle אשר is unique to Qoh 3:11. Gesenius understands מן as a causative and arrives at

the translation of "except that (yet so that man cannot...)."[240] Taken this way, one has to

deal with a double negative and a double causative. This interpretation implies that

despite what is placed in people's hearts, they cannot find out God's work. C. Seow and

R. Scott follow the LXX, which appears to take מן as a negative, and translate it as "so

that."[241] This translation implies that it is because of what is placed in their hearts that

they cannot find out God's work. I choose the latter, since it is corroborated in the LXX

and makes better sense.

---

[238] See GKC §119y, 152y

[239] See GKC §152y

[240] Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (ed. E. Kautzsch; trans. A. E. Cowley; Mineola, Ny.: Dover, 2006). §152, y

[241] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 163; R Scott, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes.* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965), 220; Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Brown-Driver-Briggs*, 115.

God has placed eternity into the heart of humanity that prevents them from understanding the work that God has done. Since God is considered to be the orchestrator of earthly events, each "time" that is described in vv. 2-8 is considered his work. Therefore, because of the eternity placed in the heart of humankind, they cannot know when the events will happen, nor can they understand why such events happen. The statement seems ripe with irony. God makes discreet actions appropriate at specific times. However, humankind has been given the time-related עלם into its heart which has no boundaries. Thus, the boundless nature that exists in humanity's heart is prevented from coming into contact with God's "time" that provides clear defined answers. Thus, the infinite God knows finite time, but the infinite within the heart of humankind prevents the discovery of divine finiteness. Even though God has made conflicting actions beautiful in their time (3:11), it is beyond human understanding to understand why certain events are beautiful in their time, or to understand when the time is "beautiful" for these things to happen.

The inability to ascertain appropriate times for action becomes problematic when applying wisdom that depends on this knowledge. Qohelet points out in 8:5-7,

<div dir="rtl">

5 שׁוֹמֵר מִצְוָה לֹא יֵדַע דָּבָר רָע וְעֵת וּמִשְׁפָּט יֵדַע לֵב חָכָם׃

6 כִּי לְכָל־חֵפֶץ יֵשׁ עֵת וּמִשְׁפָּט כִּי־רָעַת הָאָדָם רַבָּה עָלָיו׃

7 כִּי־אֵינֶנּוּ יֹדֵעַ מַה־שֶּׁיִּהְיֶה כִּי כַּאֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה מִי יַגִּיד לוֹ׃

</div>

The seeker of the commandments does not know an evil thing; the heart of the wise knows time and judgment. Indeed, to every occurrence there is a time and judgment, but the evil of humankind is great upon him, for he does not know what will be, for who will tell him what will be?

The wise know "time and judgment," which A. Schoors takes as a hendiadys meaning "a procedure adapted to the concrete situation."[242] As noted above, because of the non-concrete "eternity" it is impossible to know when procedures are appropriate if the future or the present is never fully comprehended.

Another point to notice in v. 5 is that the wise are equated with those who keep the commandments, an important part of WL. In 7:19-20, Qohelet exclaims that

<div dir="rtl">

19 הַחָכְמָה תָּעֹז לֶחָכָם מֵעֲשָׂרָה שַׁלִּיטִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ בָּעִיר׃

20 כִּי אָדָם אֵין צַדִּיק בָּאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה־טּוֹב וְלֹא יֶחֱטָא׃

</div>

Wisdom strengthens the wise more than ten lords who are in a city.
But a person, there is no righteous one in the land who does good
and does not sin.[243]

Qohelet points out that even the wise cannot be considered perfect or without fault. Because obedience is an important precursor to wisdom, as voiced in 8:5, this also prevents humanity from perfect knowledge. Thus, the fallibility of humanity becomes a weak point for reliance upon wisdom.

In 7:23–24, Qohelet proclaims,

<div dir="rtl">

23 כָּל־זֹה נִסִּיתִי בַחָכְמָה אָמַרְתִּי אֶחְכָּמָה וְהִיא רְחוֹקָה מִמֶּנִּי׃

24 רָחוֹק מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה וְעָמֹק | עָמֹק מִי יִמְצָאֶנּוּ׃

</div>

I have tried all of this by wisdom, I said, I will be wise, but that was far from me. Something far away and very deep, who can find it out?[244]

This verse also poses some translational difficulties, but the basic meaning is clear. The last verse may also be translated, "Whatever has been is far and very deep, who will

---

[242] Schoors, "Theodicy in Qohelet," 388.

[243] For the adversative nature of כי in this context see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 258.

[244] On the use of עָמֹק | עָמֹק to convey intensity, see GKC §133, k.

find it?" The other occurrences of מַה־שֶּׁ in Qohelet usually mean "that which was" or

"whatever was" in reference to things which occurred in the past. [245] However, the context

makes the translation "that which" preferable, since this 7:24 is in parallel to 7:23. There

has been no mention of past events, and the item that is far away in 7:23 is wisdom. Early

in Qohelet, he explained that "[he] gave [his] heart to seek and search out with wisdom"

(1:13) and that "I gave my heart to know wisdom" (1:17) Here, however, he

acknowledges his shortcoming as a way of emphasizing the limited nature of wisdom's

potential. The emphasis that wisdom is both far and deep mirrors the Mesopotamian

"heavenly-ascent" proverb, and the proverb that bewails that the "plan of god" is difficult

to find out. There is very little difference between understanding wisdom and

understanding the "work of God."

[16] כַּאֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי אֶת־לִבִּי לָדַעַת חָכְמָה וְלִרְאוֹת אֶת־הָעִנְיָן אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה
עַל־הָאָרֶץ כִּי גַם בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה שֵׁנָה בְּעֵינָיו אֵינֶנּוּ רֹאֶה:
[17] וְרָאִיתִי אֶת־כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי לֹא יוּכַל הָאָדָם לִמְצוֹא אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה
אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַחַת־הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בְּשֶׁל אֲשֶׁר יַעֲמֹל הָאָדָם לְבַקֵּשׁ וְלֹא יִמְצָא וְגַם
אִם־יֹאמַר הֶחָכָם לָדַעַת לֹא יוּכַל לִמְצֹא:

When I gave my heart to knowledge, wisdom, and to seeing the toil which
it done upon the land (for neither day or night does he see rest for his eyes),
and I saw all the work of God that a person is not able to find out the work
which is done under the sun; though a person labors to seek, he will not
find, and though the wise person tries for knowledge, he cannot find it out.

Similar to Qoh 3:11, Qohelet consistently denies comprehension of the "work of

God" to humanity. This is not the inability to find out everything that happens, but to

---

[245] On מַה־שֶּׁ acting as an indefinite pronoun, see GKC §137, c. Parallels include Qoh 1:9
and 3:15. This construction is only used by Qohelet in the Hebrew Bible, although it
finds use in the later Hebrew of the Mishnah, see Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the
Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Leipzig:
Oriental, 1903), 736. Cited 28 March 2010. Online:
http://www.tyndalearchive.com/tabs/jastrow/.

understand the things that do happen. Qohelet seems confident that he can see the works

under the sun; in fact, he makes statements elsewhere that emphasize that there is nothing

new under the sun, it is one eternal round (Qoh 1:9-10). Thus the lack of human

knowledge is its inability to understand the purpose and timing for events.

⁴ שֹׁמֵר רוּחַ לֹא יִזְרָע וְרֹאֶה בֶעָבִים לֹא יִקְצוֹר:

⁵ כַּאֲשֶׁר אֵינְךָ יוֹדֵעַ מַה־דֶּרֶךְ הָרוּחַ כַּעֲצָמִים בְּבֶטֶן הַמְּלֵאָה כָּכָה לֹא תֵדַע אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת־הַכֹּל:

⁶ בַּבֹּקֶר זְרַע אֶת־זַרְעֶךָ וְלָעֶרֶב אַל־תַּנַּח יָדֶךָ כִּי אֵינְךָ יוֹדֵעַ אֵי זֶה יִכְשָׁר הֲזֶה אוֹ־זֶה וְאִם־שְׁנֵיהֶם כְּאֶחָד טוֹבִים:

The one who observes wind will not sow and the watcher of rain clouds
will not harvest. You do not know the way of the spirit according to the
bones in the filling womb, thus you do not know the work of God who
does all things. In the morning sow your seeds, and in the evening do not
rest your hand, for you do not know where it is, if this or that is better, or
if both of them are equally good (Qoh 11:4-6).

The inability to know the present or future, or the work of God, is made on

analogy of the inability to understand the coming weather, and the forming of children

inside the womb. This emphasizes that it is both the timing of God's work, and how it is

performed that is beyond comprehension. Unlike the Mesopotamian compositions,

Qohelet makes no mention of the mind or will of God, but only emphasizes the

inscrutability of his work.

Conclusions

I have presented a brief synopsis of the themes of inscrutability towards divinity

that are manifest in the critical WL of both Israel and Mesopotamia. Inscrutability

appears in a number of ways for a variety of reasons. The analysis of these instances will

be brought together in Chapter V, but a brief synopsis of the forms of inscrutability are

given here. I have shown that in the "Righteous Suffer" category much emphasis is placed upon the unknown sin and even the standards by which one is judged. Inscrutability also manifests itself when cultic means of determining divine will are frustrated. In consequence to these two unknowns, a sufferer often exclaims that divine will or behavior are unknowable. These motifs feature prominently within (3) and appear in other genres outside of WL. It has been shown that the "Vanity Theme" compositions tend to emphasize physical human limitations rather than mental or perceptive limitations and this is manifest quite often in the "heavenly-ascent" proverb. In the book of Qohelet which finds itself at the end of a long tradition of vanity related books, the theme of physical limitations is coupled with humanity's inability to understand God and his created world. Qohelet and Job find similarities in that they emphasize the created world in order to demonstrate the ultimate wisdom and inscrutability of God. Wisdom, which acts as the Hebrew counterpart to the Mesopotamian "will of the gods," is considered to be concealed by God in both Qohelet and Job.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

As seen in Chapter III, the inscrutability of the divine realm is a common theme within WL of the Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamia. The expression of inscrutability occurs in a number of ways, and functions on a variety of levels within a given text. Some texts carry over meaning from their original cultic setting, and were directed towards the gods. On a different level these texts formed the curriculum with which to instruct new initiates on the limitations of their craft. On still another level inscrutability as an important theme within the texts provides support to the philosophy on life that is espoused within each text. The themes manifested within WL are not marginal, but manifest important principles that bear widespread influence within Israel and Mesopotamia. This can be seen especially in looking at the use of divine inscrutability. The inscrutable divine is most prevalent within the "Righteous Sufferer" category, but is also an important idea within texts within the "Vanity Theme."

In making some concluding remarks concerning the use of divine inscrutability within critical WL, I will take the evidence of this phenomenon discussed in Chapter III and analyze its form and function. I define form as the way in which inscrutability is expressed, and function as the purpose that these forms serve. Having done this, I will make some concluding observations about how the use of inscrutability can provide important perspectives in the study of WL.

The Form of Divine Inscrutability

There are a number ways in which the divine realm appears inscrutable within critical wisdom compositions. They may be first grouped into five main categories, but none are wholly unrelated to the others. These include: the unknown sin, the failed-omen motif, statements concerning divine behavior, the "heavenly-ascent" proverb and lastly, the concealment of wisdom.

The unknown sin is the most common motif of divine inscrutability within the "Righteous Sufferer" compositions, in which the sufferer disavows any knowledge concerning a sin that would warrant the current punishment. I define this as specifically referring to a person's personal reflection on past misdeeds compared to their understanding of divine standards. A specific declaration of ignorance is included in the Sumerian Job, Babylonian Job, Ludlul, and Job, but this theme is not limited to WL. In fact, this is also present in penitential prayers like the "Prayer of Marduk", and is an important characteristic of the DINGIR.ŠÀ.DIB.BA, and the ÉR.ŠÀ.HUN.GÁ The notion of the unknown sin has roots in the plethora of ways in which infractions could be committed in the ancient world. The expression of the unknown sin is both the cause for many penitential prayers and a rhetorical strategy meant to demonstrate humility before the gods.

The failed-omen motif, although related to the unknown sin, includes cases where the sufferer is unable to receive a divine message regarding the nature of the sin, the duration of the illness, or a message of forgiveness. The problem of the failed-omen occurs in a number of places, including: a letter-prayer, a literary hymn, a penitential prayer, and a Hittite prayer rooted in a historical event. This also finds parallel in Psalm

74 as well as in 1 Samuel 28. Among WL this motif occurs in the Ugaritic Job and Ludlul. This was a common occurrence and when one failed to receive proper answers, it was assumed that the will of the gods was against the petitioner. In both the Ugaritic Job and Ludlul, this is important in demonstrating that Marduk is inscrutable when he wills it so. This is an expression of humility on the part of the cultic officials, who by including this idea, acknowledge that the success of their craft is solely within the hands of deity.

Statements concerning divine behavior or will are reactions to feelings of unknown sin and the failed-omen motif. One such statement is manifest in Ludlul when the sufferer exclaims, "Where might human beings have learned the way of a god?" This statement was proverbial, demonstrated by its inclusion in an Akkadian proverb. It also finds inclusion in a penitential prayer called a "Prayer to Marduk" where it expresses humility on the part of the supplicant. Despite the examples that demonstrate that righteousness may be expressed through seeking after a "way of a god," one must assume that to acknowledge one's inability to fully understand a god's behavior was also a sign of humility and praise. The inability to understand divine behavior is also coupled with the "heavenly-ascent" proverb, such as this instance in Ludlul: "Who could learn the reasoning of the gods in heaven? Who could grasp the intentions of the gods of the depths?" Both Ludlul and the Babylonian Theodicy contain statements concerning divine behavior. The idea of divine behavior being inscrutable is absent as a proverbial expression within both Job and Qohelet. However, the prominent theme of the concealment of wisdom may serve this same function within the Hebrew Bible. And like the Mesopotamian tendency to combine the inscrutability of divine behavior with the

"heavenly-ascent" proverb, the concealment and description of wisdom is often association with the height and depth of the world.

The "heavenly-ascent" proverb is common within the "Vanity Theme" compositions. It appears in NIĜ.NAM A as "(Even) the tallest one cannot reach to the sky; (Even) the broadest one cannot go down to the Netherworld." Initially beginning as a proverb highlighting the physical limitations of humanity, it came to include the limits of intellectual and mental capacity as well. This proverb occurs in Sumerian proverb collections, the "Nothing is of Value" compositions (NIĜ.NAM A, D), various Gilgamesh compositions, and Ballade of the Early Rulers. Job and Qohelet include this idea where it is combined with the idea of wisdom's concealment. All these texts, with the exception of Job, use the notion of either physical or mental ability to attain the divine realm as an important reason for advocating their *carpe diem* philosophy.

Because so many Mesopotamian compositions were included in this study, it should come as no surprise that the commonalities which exist are largely representative of motifs that play a more prominent role in these texts. Job and Qohelet, which are representative of both categories of critical wisdom, although sharing many similarities in theme and content with their Mesopotamian counterparts, express the idea of divine inscrutability differently.

Within Job and Qohelet, one may observe that finding out God is directly tied to understanding natural phenomena, and the inability to understand these things reflects upon the inability of humanity to comprehend God. This is seen in the sayings of Eliphaz, Job, Elihu, and Yahweh. Although it may be used to argue the transcendence of God, this same inscrutability can be used to make God unapproachable as is done by Job. Qohelet,

while also including natural phenomena within his definition of the "work of God," equates God's work with the events of life. Just as one cannot understand the creations and the natural world, one cannot understand God's ongoing work where everything has a time and season. This ability to understand God and his creations is explained by the concealment and hiddenness of wisdom. The focus upon creation to emphasize the transcendence of divine wisdom in the Hebrew Bible finds connections to wisdom's basis in craftsmanship and building. The divine construction of the cosmos and its proper working, evidence transcendent wisdom only mirrored in the constructions of temples, and in other types of good craftsmanship.

This inability to perfectly perceive God demonstrated by the inability to understand divine creation is not solved, but the answers that form a long tradition in the "Righteous Sufferer" and "Vanity Theme" categories come to the fore. Job submits before the appearance of God, and is restored; while Qohelet advocates that one should enjoy life in the moment.

The Function of Divine Inscrutability

I have divided the function of these five forms of divine inscrutability into cultic and instructional functions. An important function of declarations of inscrutability within the Mesopotamian "Righteous Sufferer" compositions comes from their cultic use. Whether the compositions were used in the cult, or these statements are merely borrowed from the genre of penitential prayers or lament, an important purpose was to declare inscrutability, not towards a human audience but towards the gods. Even though these wisdom compositions appear to have also served a function other than the cult, the

closing lines, where extant, in all compositions mention some kind of penitential purpose.[246] The other function which I label as "instructional" refers to the way in which inscrutability is used outside of its cultic setting. However, these two categories of "cultic" and "instructional" can never be totally separate, since one may still provide teachings that are meant to offer praises to the gods outside of a cultic setting.

Cultic Functions

Demonstration of Contrition

The declaration that a sufferer is ignorant of wrongdoing and in abject despair is an effort to evoke pity and to demonstrate that the gods should stop their punishment. This idea can be clearly seen in a collection of omens that depended upon the psychological state or behavior of an individual.[247] This collection was edited in an article called "Ein Sittenkanon in Omenform" or "a moral canon in omen form," and some of its sayings have also been called omen-wisdom.[248]

> 96:10 If he says "I am weak," he will become strong.
> 96:11 If he says "I am poor," he will become rich.
> 98:22 If their heart is troubled, it will rejoice, it will light up.
> 104:12 If he asks himself "Why should I keep it up?" he will rejoice.
> 92:34 If he says all the time "When shall I see? When shall I see?" his
> days will become longer.

---

[246] The exceptions being the Ugaritic Job and Ludlul where the endings are not totally preserved.

[247] Sparks, *Ancient Texts*, 223-224.

[248] Fritz Kraus, "Ein Sittenkanon in Omenform," *Zeitschrift für Assyrologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 43 (1936): 77-113.

102:32 If he is just, and nevertheless things go wrong, later on things will go better.[249]

I see these omens as expressing one underlying purpose for the expression of the ignorance. The declaration of ignorance was ultimately supposed to bring understanding and comfort. Even if some of these statements seem to challenge the deity, they express confusion in the very system in which they are expecting comfort to come.

Demonstration of Divine Omnipotence

It is also apparent that inscrutability was not only something to be lamented, but also to be praised. This can be seen quite explicitly in Ludlul, where similar passages concerning the inscrutability of the gods appear in both the praise and lament. This serves to highlight the ultimate power of the deity; he is above all and is not limited by human observation, or even the observation of the lesser gods. This removes the obstacles that may prevent a god from providing the necessary help to the sufferer. Important to the declaration of praise is an abiding belief that the gods will be merciful eventually even if the rational and timing for their actions is beyond human understanding.

---

[249] The page and line numbers are from Kraus, "Sittenkanon," and translations are by Giorgio Buccellati, "Ethics and Piety in the Ancient Near East," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (ed. Jack M. Sasson; vol. 3; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 1689-1690.

Instructional Functions

Humility of Cultic Officiators

An important function that many of the "Righteous Sufferer" compositions served was to teach priests the limitations of their abilities. Even though the "wisdom arts" were given by the gods, the gods remained in sole control. This is obvious in the omen-failure motif, in which the ability to ascertain the infraction, to determine how long it would go on, and the ability to cure an illness or appease the gods were all hampered by divine will. This demonstrated that if anything went against the will of a deity, divinely sanctioned or not, it would not succeed. This did not necessarily discount the benefits that these divinatory measures could provide, as may be seen in Ludlul where an exorcist still plays a prominent role in the sufferer's restoration. The exorcist, carrying a tablet, is sent to the sufferer by Marduk to begin the healing process that culminates in progression through Marduk's temple of Esagil.

Suffering Does Not Equal Sin

The ignorance of sin or its absence of mention puts some doubt upon the equation that sin equals suffering in a number of compositions.

Because of the emphasis on inscrutability that weighs in so heavily in Ludlul, and the emphasis on the "savage-relenting" aspect of Marduk's character, the sin-punishment connection falls to the wayside. If divine will becomes so inscrutable that one does not know sins and misdeeds, this puts the whole equation into doubt or at least renders it unimportant. The sufferer's declaration that "He speaks and makes one incur many sins,

On the day of his justice sin and guilt are dispelled," puts the decision of both sin and forgiveness outside of the realm of human action and solely into the hands of Marduk.

The Babylonian Job makes strides in the direction of rejecting the correlation between sin and punishment but makes no explicit statements. The fact that the sufferer is ignorant of wrongdoing coupled with the absence of sin in the message conveyed by the deity put the equation of sin and suffering in doubt. The god even tells the restored sufferer to not forget him ever again, by serving those who are thirsty and hungry; those whom the sufferer might have thought were suffering under divine anger.

The Babylonian Theodicy makes very little mention of sin, but advocates that the purposes of the gods go in round-about ways, and things will eventually work out. The admission that suffering is often caused by the lying tongue of humanity, is admission that suffering is not always divine punishment for sin, but the result of human action. Qohelet uses the inability to determine if bad or good will befall someone as grounds for rejecting the notion that suffering is always a result of sin. This advocacy to not put too much trust in righteous action is seen in Qohelet's advice to "don't be too righteous" (Qoh 7:16).

Concluding Remarks

Whereas the compositions that pass on traditional values have a tendency to emphasize the principle that one's own actions can have great consequences for good or evil, the theme of inscrutability within critical wisdom serves to highlight the competing principle that human action is insignificant in a larger world. The emphasis upon the unknown sin, the failure of omens, the inability to understand the behavior of gods, the inability to

enter the divine realm, and the concealment of wisdom render the emphasis placed upon sin and suffering—itself an emphasis upon human action—to be unimportant. The change of focus finds two answers within compositions of the Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamia: total submission to divine mercy and the exhortation to enjoy the moment.

The emphasis placed upon inscrutability and the focus that is taken away from the character-consequence relationship serve to unshackle the gods from any constraints. Within the "Righteous Sufferer" category, because the notion of the inscrutable divine is an act of praise and lament, the unfettering of deity from this standard is both comforting and terrifying. Although a deity who knows no law may be frightening to the sufferer, a deity that remains unhindered commands the infinite capacity to bestow mercy as well.

For many of the "Vanity Theme" compositions, the inability of humanity to reach the divine realm is coupled with the idea of divine inscrutability, both of which express the futility of human action. For Qohelet, the lack of desired consequences that correspond to one's character (whether righteous or wicked) and the eventuality of death turn his focus upon the ancient philosophy of *carpe diem*.

From what has been discussed earlier it should not be assumed that critical wisdom writers were advocating anything revolutionary or new. Because of the pervasiveness and acceptance of these themes it must be recognized that these ideas held greater sway than is often assumed. Those within both Israel and Mesopotamia were well aware of competing principles in life and this shows through the written works that have survived to the present day. The inscrutability of the divine realm was an important aspect of ancient thought that emphasized the futility of human action, but this could still coexist with its competing principle that one could know and follow divine will.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alster, Bendt. "Scribes, Sages, and Seers in Ancient Mesopotamia." Pages 47-63 in *Scribes, Sages and Seers: The Sage in the Mediterranean World*. Edited by L. G Perdue. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008.

---. *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*. Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005.

Balentine, Samuel E. "Prayers for Justice in the Old Testament: Theodicy and Theology." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51 (1989): 597-616.

Balentine, Samuel. *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Barton, John. "Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the Old Testament." *The Journal of Theological Studies* 30, (1979): 1-14.

Beaulieu, Paul-Alain. "The Social and Intellectual Setting of Babylonian Wisdom Literature." Pages 3-19 in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*. Edited by Richard Clifford. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007.

Black, J. A. et al., eds. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*. http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/. Oxford, 1998-2006.

Boström, Lennart. *The God of the Sages: The Portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs*. Coniecta Biblica Old Testament Series 29. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1990.

Botterweck, G. J. and H. Ringgren, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 8 vols. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974-.

Bricker, Daniel P. "The Innocent Sufferer in the Book of Proverbs." Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1998. Online: http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/20-Proverbs/Text/Books/Bricker-InnocentSufferer/Bricker-InnocentSufferer.pdf.

Brown, Francis, S. Driver, and C. Briggs. *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996.

Buccellati, Giorgio. "Ethics and Piety in the Ancient Near East." Pages 1685-1697 in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995.

Cohen, Mark. *Sumerian Hymnology: The Eršemma*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College,

1981.

Cover, Robin C. "Sin, Sinners: Old Testament." Pages 31-40 in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Crenshaw, James. L. "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 129-142.

---. *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*. Westminster John Knox, 1998.

Foster, Benjamin R. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. 3rd ed. Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005.

Fox, Michael V. *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999.

---. "Wisdom in the Joseph Story." *Vetus Testamentum* 51 (2001): 26-41.

Frankfort, H., H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, and William A. Irwin. *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man an Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946.

Gault, Brian P. "A Reexamination of 'Eternity' in Ecclesiastes 3:11." *Bibliotheca sacra* 165 (2008): 39-57.

George, A. R., and F. N. H. Al-Rawi. "Tablets from the Sippar Library VII. Three Wisdom Texts." *Iraq* 60 (1998): 187-206.

George, Andrew. *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Gesenius, Wilhelm. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Edited by E. Kautzsch. Translated by A. E. Cowley. Mineola, Ny.: Dover, 2006.

Gordon, Robert P. "A House Divided: Wisdom in Old Testament Narrative Traditions." Pages 94-105 in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*. Edited by John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Green, Ronald M. "Theodicy." Pages 430-441 in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Edited by Mircea Eliade. New York: Macmillan, 1987.

Greenspahn, Frederick E. "A Mesopotamian Proverb and Its Biblical Reverberations." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114 (1994): 33-38.

Greenstein, Edward L. "Sages with a Sense of Humor: The Babylonian Dialogue Between a Master and His Servant and the Book of Qohelet." Pages 55-65 in

Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel. Edited by Richard J. Clifford. Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 36. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

Hallo, William W., ed. *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*. Vol. 1 of *The Context of Scripture*. Brill, 2003.

---. "Individual Prayer in Sumerian: The Continuity of a Tradition." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1968): 71-89.

---. "Lamentations and Prayers in Sumer and Akkad." Pages 1871-1881 in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*. Edited by Jack M. Sasson. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995.

Hallo, William W., and J. J. A. van Dijk. *The Exaltation of Inanna*. Near Eastern Researches 3. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.

Heintz, Jean-Georges. "De l'Absence de la Statue Divine au «Dieu qui se Cache» (Esaïe, 45/15): Aux Origines d'un Thème Biblique." *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 59 (1979): 427-437.

Jacobsen, Thorkild. "The Gods as Parents: Rise of Personal Religion." Pages 147-164 in *The Treasures of Darkness a History of Mesopotamian Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.

Jastrow, Marcus. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. Leipzig: Oriental, 1903. Cited 28 March 2010. Online: http://www.tyndalearchive.com/tabs/jastrow/.

Jones, Bruce. "From Gilgamesh to Qohelet." Pages 349-379 in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*. Edited by William W. Hallo, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly. Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1990.

Klein, Jacob. "Man and His God: A Wisdom Poem or a Cultic Lament?" Pages 123-143 in *Approaches to Sumerian Literature: Studies in Honor of Stip (HLJ Vanstiphout)*. Edited by Piotr Michalowski and Niek Veldhuis. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

---. "'Personal God' and Individual Prayer in Sumerian Religion." *Archiv für Orientforschung Beiheft* 19 (1982): 295-306.

Kloch, Klaus. "Is There is a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?." Pages 57-87 in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*. Edited by James L. Crenshaw. Issues in Religion and Theology 4. Philadelphia: Fortress Press and SPCK, 1983.

Knobel, Peter S. "The Targum of Qohelet: Translated with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes." *The Aramaic Bible.* Edited by Kevin Cathcart, Michael Maher, and Martin McNamara. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1991.

Kramer, Samuel Noah. "'Man and His God': A Sumerian Variation on the 'Job' Motif." Pages 170-182 in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*. Edited by Martin Noth and D. Winton Thomas. Leiden: Brill, 1955.

Kraus, Fritz. "Ein Sittenkanon in Omenform." *Zeitschrift für Assyrologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 43 (1936): 77-113.

Lambert, Wilfred G. "A Catalogue of Texts and Authors." *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 16 (1962): 59-77.

---. "A Further Attempt at the Babylonian 'Man and His God'." Pages 187-202 in *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner*. New Haven Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1987.

---. *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960.

---. "Dingir.ša.dib.ba Incantations." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 33 (1974): 267-322.

---. "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature." Pages 30-42 in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*. Edited by J. Day, R. P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*. Open Court Publishing Company, 1998.

Mattingly, Gerald L. "The Pious Sufferer: Mesopotamia's Traditional Theodicy and Job's Counselors." Pages 305-348 in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature : Scripture in Context III*. Edited by William Hallo. Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1990.

Moran, William. "The Babylonian Job." Pages 182-200 in *The Most Magic Word: Essays on Babylonian and Biblical Literature*. Edited by Ronald S. Hendel. Washington DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2002.

Murphy, Roland. *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002.

---. "Wisdom - Theses and Hypotheses." *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays In Honor of Samuel Terrien*. Edited by John Gammie, Brueggemann, Walter A., W. Lee Humphreys, and James M. Ward. Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978.

Pearce, Laurie E. "The Scribes and Scholars of Ancient Mesopotamia." Pages 2265-2278 in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*. Edited by Jack M. Sasson. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995.

Pritchard, James B., ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.

von Rad, Gerhard. "The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom." Pages 439-447 in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*. Edited by James L. Crenshaw. Library of Biblical Studies. New York: Ktav, 1976. Repr., *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, 292-300.

Reiner, Erica. *Šurpu: A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations.* Osnabrück: Biblio Verlaga, 1958.

Rodd, C. S. "Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What is Just? (Gen 1825)." *The Expository Times* 83 (1972): 137-139.

Sasson, Jack M. "Absalom's Daughter: An Essay in Vestige Historiography." Pages 179-196 in *The Land That I Will Show You: Essays on the History and Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honor of J. Maxwell Miller*. Edited by J. Andrew Dearman and M. Patrick Graham. Sheffield: Sheffield, 2001.

Sæbø, Magne. "Yahweh as *Deus absconditus*: Some Remarks on a Dictum by Gerhard von Rad." Pages 43-55 in *Shall Not The Judge of All the Earth Do What is Right?: Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw*. Edited by David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt. Winona Lake Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2000.

Schoors, Antoon. "Theodicy in Qohelet." Pages 375-409 in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*. Edited by Antti Laato and Johannes C. De Moor. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

Scott, R. *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes.* Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965.

Seow, C. *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Shields, M. A. "To Seek But Not to Find: Old Meanings for Qohelet and Gilgamesh." *Gilgameš and the World of Assyria: Proceedings of the Conference Held at Mandelbaum House, the University of Sydney, 21-23 July, 2004*. Leuven: Peeters, 2007.

Sparks, Kenton. *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005.

The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Chicago Ill.: Oriental Institute, 1956-.

van der Toorn, Karel. *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia: A Comparative Study*. Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1985.

---. "The Ancient Near Eastern Literary Dialogue as a Vehicle of Critical Reflection." Pages 59-75 in *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures*. Leuven: Department Oriëntalistiek, 1991.

---. "Theodicy in Akkadian Literature." Pages 57-89 in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*. Edited by Antti Laato and Johannes C. De Moor. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

---. "Why Wisdom Became a Secret: On Wisdom as a Written Genre." Pages 21-29 in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

Tov, Emanuel, ed. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library*. Rev. ed. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

Van Leeuwen, Raymond C. "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel." Pages 67-90 in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*. Edited by Richard J. Clifford. Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 36. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

---. "Form Criticism, Wisdom, and Psalms 111-112." Pages 65-84 in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*. Edited by Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi. Grand Rapids Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2003.

---. "The Sage in Prophetic Literature." Pages 295-306 in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. Edited by John G Gammie and Leo G. Perdue. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990.

---. "Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs." *Hebrew Studies Journal* 33 (1992): 25-36.

Waltke, Bruce K., and David Diewert. "Wisdom Literature." Pages 295-328 in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*. Edited by David Baker and Bill T. Arnold. Grand Rapids Mich.: Baker Academic, 1999.

Weinfeld, Moshe. "Job And Its Mesopotamian Parallels—A Typological Analysis." Pages 217-226 in *Text and Context*. Edited by W. Claussen. JSOTsup 48. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988.

Whybray, R. N. "The Sage in the Israelite Royal Court." Pages 133-139 in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. Edited by John G Gammie and Leo G. Perdue. Winona Lake Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990.

Wiseman, D. J. "A New Text of the Babylonian Poem of the Righteous Sufferer."

Anatolian Studies 30 (1980): 101-107.

Zimmerli, Walther. "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology." Pages 314-26 in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*. Edited by James L. Crenshaw. The Library of Biblical Studies. New York: Ktav, 1976. Repr., *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (1964): 146-158.