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The Pain and Necessity of Kingship in Old Babylonian *Etana*

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Abstract This paper investigates two couplets in the Old Babylonian version of *Etana*, respectively preserved as ll. 5-6 and 13-14 of MLC.1363 (OB Morgan). It gives a philological-grammatical analysis offering new solutions to two problems, one in each couplet: the nature of an *isinnum*, 'festival' said to be ordained by the gods while kingship was not yet set up; and the precise description of a group of people said to be deprived of *mitluku*, 'deliberation' in kingship's absence. The couplets, newly interpreted as implying both a critique of kingship and an endorsement of its ultimate necessity, are then set in broader Mesopotamian as well as biblical context.

Keywords Epic of Etana. Cuneiform Literature. Babylonian Mythology. Ancient Conceptions of Kingship. Cuneiform Literature and the Hebrew Bible.

Summary 1 A Mysterious Festival. – 2 No Counsel for the People. – 3 The Couplets in Context. – 4 Summary.

> Therefore, it is natural that the fool, a stranger to the custom, rejoices and congratulates himself when freed from his chains, but the one who knows laments bitterly, resists being taken along, and would much rather remain in chains as before. So, you vain man, don't try to be a king before you have acquired sense!
>
> (Dio Chrysostom, *De Regno* IV 69-70)[1]

More than 130 years after Edward Thompson Harper's 1894 *editio princeps*, the *Epic of Etana* remains tantalizing.[2] It is known in three versions – Old Babylonian, Middle-Assyrian, and Neo-Assyrian – significantly divergent in phrasing and all fragmentarily attested and with an unknown tablet count. Combining evidence from all three, what is known of *Etana*'s plot can be summarized

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1 οὐκοῦν τότε, ἐπειδὰν ἄρωσι τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐκ τῶν δεσμῶν, εἰκός ἐστι τὸν μὲν ἀνόητον καὶ ἄπειρον τοῦ πράγματος χαίρειν καὶ μακαρίζειν ἑαυτὸν ἐπὶ τοῖς γιγνομένοις, τὸν δὲ εἰδότα ὀδύρεσθαι καὶ μὴ ἐθέλειν ἑκόντα συνακολουθεῖν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον, ὥσπερ εἶχε, μένειν ἐν ταῖς πέδαις. μὴ οὖν πρότερον, ὦ μάταιε, βασιλεύειν ἐπιχείρει πρὶν ἢ φρονῆσαι. Translation adapted from Parpola 1983, xxxi.

2 The latest edition of all three versions of *Etana* is Földi 2024, from which the transliterations given here are adapted. The next-most recent is Haul 2000, there accompanied by extensive thematic and philological analysis. A usefully succinct overview of the poem and its history of research can be found in the introduction to Földi 2024. Manuscript abbreviations follow Földi 2024 throughout: OB Morgan = MLC.1363; OB Susa = Sb.9469; MA based on Ist-A.142, VAT.10291, VAT.10137, VAT.10529; and SB = the Nineveh recension of the text. Transliterations from secondary literature are reproduced while substituting subscript numbers for accents to mark sign values in accordance with *Kaskal* editorial guidelines. The only abbreviations employed here not part of the standard Assyriological literature are: eBL (electronic Babylonian Library [https://www.ebl.lmu.de/]); ETCSL (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature [https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/]); OED (Oxford English Dictionary Online [https://www.oed.com/?tl=true]); and SEAL (Sources of Early Akkadian Literature [https://seal.huji.ac.il/]).

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as follows.[3] In ages primordial, the gods decide not to set up kings. After a kingless interim, the gods change course and kingship is set up. Etana rules over Kish. He is childless. A separate plot thread opens. An eagle and a serpent live in a tree, the eagle in its branches, the serpent at its roots. The eagle eats the serpent's young, and is punished for his crime. His wings broken by the serpent, he lies helpless in a pit, whence he is rescued by Etana and nursed back to health. The eagle, bearing Etana on its back, twice endeavors to fly up to highest heaven, where a solution for Etana's childlessness is kept: *šammu ša* (*w*)*alādi*, "the plant of birth". The first ascent is aborted by a terrified Etana; the second succeeds. Immediately upon Etana and the eagle's arrival in heaven, the text breaks off. The expedition's outcome remained unknown until 2020, when Benjamin Foster and Andrew George's publication of an entirely different text – YBC.2394, an Old Babylonian dialogue between a father and his son – revealed that the gods did not grant Etana a son.[4] This indicates that, as has long been suspected, Etana's predicament was no more solved by a magical plant than Gilgamesh's was.[5] Moreover, as Foster and George remark, it "suggests that Baliḫ, as known from the Sumerian King List, was not thought to be his [Etana's] biological son".[6] Whether or not this suggestion holds true cannot be known until additional manuscripts of *Etana* are recovered to inform us of the story's conclusion. If it does, one suspects that Baliḫ succeeds Etana through adoption, and that if so, the myth may be an etiology of adoption itself.[7]

This paper investigates two couplets in the Old Babylonian version of the poem, respectively preserved as ll. 5-6 and 13-14 of MLC.1363 (OB Morgan). Following philological-grammatical analysis, new solutions are proposed for two cruxes, one in each couplet: the nature of an *isinnum*, 'festival' said to be ordained by the gods while kingship was not yet set up (§ 1); and the precise description of a group of people said to be deprived of *mitluku*, 'deliberation' in kingship's absence (§ 2). The couplets, hypothesized based on the preceding reanalysis to imply both a critique of kingship and an endorsement of its ultimate necessity, are set in broader context (§ 3), and argued to bear on three themes of broader Mesopotamian as well as biblical salience: the shortsightedness of the gods (§ 3.1), the connection of power in general and kingship in particular with (forced) labor (§ 3.2), and the role of the king as counselor (§ 3.3).

1 A Mysterious Festival

The couplet ll. 5-6 is part of a description of humanity's primordial kinglessness:

3. *ba-nu ki-ib-ra-tim ša-ki-nu ši-ki-it-tim*
4. *ṣi-ru a-na ni-ši i-lu i-gi$_4$-gu*
5. *i-si$_2$-nam a-na ni-si i-ši-mu*
6. *šar-ra-am la iš-ku-nu ka-lu ni-ši e-pi$_2$-a-tim*
7. *i-na ši-a$_3$-tim la ka-aṣ-ra-at ku-ub-šum me-a-nu*
8. *u$_3$ ḫa-aṭ-ṭu$_2$-um uq-ni-a-am la ṣa-ap-ra-at*

Scholars have understood these lines in widely diverging ways. Below are nine representative translations, given in chronological order along with accompanying transliterations when present:

3 For an overview of the poem's plot, see Haul 2000, 5-33; on the number and outcome of Etana's flights to heaven, Horowitz 1990.

4 The dialogue is also edited as SEAL no. 1738, and was recently discussed in Greenstein 2025. At one point in their argument, the son tells his father (ii 43-51; translation adapted from Foster, George 2020, 42-3): *putti atta tīde // etana ana šerrim // itt*[*ag*] *išam šadiam // iṣ*[*urriš*] *ana puḫri ša ilī // [šamêš]am īli //* (ruling) [*ana awil*]*ūtim iškunūniš*[*šu*] *// š*[*âšu*]*m ilī lā īkušūšūma // šerram lā išrukūšum // ina šīmātim*, "You yourself know that Etana // W[an]dered the uplands seeking a child // [Like] a bi[rd] (alt. [with] a bi[rd]) to the assembly of the gods // He went up to [heaven]. // (ruling) They ordained for [him the lot of ma]nkind, // H[i]m the gods did not approach, // Nor bestow upon him a child, // As a thing destined to be (lit. among destinies)". Note that for ii 48, SEAL reads not [*a-na a-wi-l*]*u-tim iš-ku-nu-ni-iš-*[*šu*] but [*a-na* SIP]$_A$*-tim iš-ku-nu-ni-iš-*[*šu*], and translates "They (the gods) appointed [him] for [shepherd]ship".

5 Alster wrote (1989, 84): "The whole story would certainly be senseless if Etana did not somehow get hold of the plant of birth, but presumably he made a kind of mistake, or violated a condition set up for him, so that he finally appeared less successful than he would otherwise have been (cf. Gilgamesh […])". In postulating that Etana failed to make use of the plant of birth, Alster's analysis aligns with YBC.2394. Yet the dialogue implies that this failure was due not to a mistake on Etana's part, but rather to a divine decision not to grant Etana the plant at all.

6 Foster, George 2020, 51 ad ii 38-51. The Sumerian King List relates (ll. 68-71): ba-li-iḫ dumu e-ta-na-ke$_4$ mu 400 (var. 410) i$_3$-ak, "Baliḫ, son of Etana, ruled for 400 (var. 410) years". For editions of the Sumerian King List, see ETCSL c.2.1.1 and Glassner 2004, 117-26; for analyses of the list's purpose and history, Marchesi 2010 and Gabriel 2023.

7 To my knowledge, these possibilities have not yet been raised.

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1) Langdon[8]	**2) Speiser**[9]	**3) Wilcke**[10]
3. *ba-nu ki-ib-ra-tim ša-ki-nu ši-ki-it-tim*		3. *ba-nu ki-ib-ra-tim ša-ki-nu ši-ki-it-tim*
4. *ṣi-ru a-na ni-ši i-lu I-gi*$_2$[sic]*-gu*		4. *ṣi-ru a-na ni-ši i-lu i-gi*$_4$*-gu*
5. *i-zi-nam a-na ni-ši i-ši-mu*		5. *i-si*$_2$*-nam a-na ni-si i-ši-mu*
6. *šar-ra-am la iš-ku-nu ka-lu ni-ši e-bi-a-tim*		6. *šar-ra-am la iš-ku-nu ka-lu ni-ši e-pi*$_2$*-a-tim*
7. *i-na ši-we-tim la ka-aṣ-ra-at ku-ub-šum me-a-nu*		7. *i-na ši-a*$_3$*-tim la ka-aṣ-ra-at ku-ub-šum me-a-nu*
8. *u*$_3$ *ḫa-ad-du-um uk-ni-a-am la sa-ap-ra-at*		8. *u*$_3$ *ḫa-aṭ-ṭu*$_2$*-um uq-ni-a-am la ṣa-ap-ra-at*
3. they who create the (four) regions, who found the 'foundations', i.e. sanctuaries.	3. They who created the regions, who set up the establishments,	3. Die Bildner der Weltufer, die alles setzen, –
4. But the Igigi were hostile to the people,	4. The Igigi were too lofty for mankind,	4. erhaben sind für die Menschen die Götter, die Igigū –
5. (and) they fixed a term upon mankind.	5. A stated time for mankind they decreed.	5. bestimmten für die Menschen ein Fest.
6. The pale-faced people, all of them, had not yet set up a king.	6. The beclouded people, in all, had not set up a king.	6. Einen König setzten sie nicht ein unter all den zahlreichen Menschen.
7. At that time no tiara had been worn, nor crown,	7. At that time, no tiara had been tied on, nor crown,	7. Bei diesen ist die Kopfbinde nicht geknüpft, die Kappe,
8. And no sceptre had been studded with lapis lazuli.	8. And no scepter had been inlaid with lapis;	8. Und das Szepter mit Lapislazuli nicht besetzt.
4) Kinnier Wilson[11]	**5) Foster**[12]	**6) Selz**[13]
3. *ba-nu ki-ib-ra-tim ša-ki-nu ši-ki-it-tim*		3. *ba-nu ki-ib-ra-tim ša-ki-nu ši-ki-it-tim*
4-5. *zi-<ik>-ru* †*ka-li-šu-nu*† *i-lu I-gi*$_4$*-gu i-si*$_2$*-nam a-na ni-ši i-ši-mu*		4. *ṣi-ru a-na ni-ši i-lu i-gi*$_4$*-gu*
		5. *i-si*$_2$*-nam a-na ni-si i-ši-mu*
6. *šar-ra-am la iš-ku-nu ka-lu ni-ši e-pi*$_2$*-a-tim*		6. *šar-ra-am la iš-ku-nu e*$^{\text{I}}$(=KA)*-lu ni-ši e-pi*$_2$*-a-tim*
7. *i-na ši-a*$_3$*-tim la ka-aṣ-ra-at ku-ub-šum me-a-nu*		7. *i-na ši-a*$_3$*-tim la ka-aṣ-ra-at ku-ub-šum me-a-nu*
8. *u*$_3$ *ḫa-aṭ-ṭu*$_2$*-um uq-ni-a-am la ṣa-ap-ra-at*		8. *u*$_3$ *ḫa-aṭ-ṭu*$_2$*-um uq-ni-a-am la ṣa-ap-ra-at*
3. The (four?) Creators of the World Regions *were* the..... of.....,	3. The creators of the world regions, establishers of all physical form,	3. Die Erschaffer der (vier) Weltregionen, die das Weltgefüge setzten,
4-5. And unanimously the Igigi established a Festival for the people.	4. The Igigi-gods…[14]	4. Erhaben für die Menschen (sind) die Igigū-Götter,
	5. Ordained a festival(?) for the people.[15]	5. Sie bestimmten für die Menschen den Fest(kalender),
6. But a king they did not appoint over any of the *tribes* and peoples,	6. Among all the teeming peoples they had established no king,	6. Einen König (aber) setzten sie nicht über die zahlreichen Menschen.
7. And at that time unworn remained head-cloth and 'crown';	7. Then no headdress had been assembled, nor crown,	7. In diesen (Tagen) war kein Turban, keine Krone gewunden,
8. No sceptre was inlaid with (the royal) lapis lazuli,	8. Nor yet scepter had been set with lapis,	8. Und das Zepter war mit Lapis-lazuli (noch) nicht verziert.

8 Langdon 1932, 10-11.
9 Speiser 1955, 114.
10 Wilcke 1977, 156-8.
11 Kinnier Wilson 1985, 30-1.
12 Foster 1993, 439.
13 Selz 1998, 162-3.
14 Cf. Foster 2005, 535: "Those sublime for the people, the Igigi gods".
15 Cf. Foster 2005, 535: "Ordained the festival(?) for the people".

7) Haul[16]	**8) SEAL**[17]	**9) Földi (trans. Foster)**[18]
3. *ba-nu ki-ib-ra-tim ša-ki-nu ši-ki-it-tim*	3. *ba-nu ki-ib-ra-tim ša-ki-nu ši-ki-it-tim*	3. *ba-nu ki-ib-ra-tim ša-ki-nu ši-ki-it-tim*
4. *ṣi-ru a-na ni-ši i-lu i-gi$_4$-gu*	4. *ṣi-ru a-na ni-ši i-lu i-gi$_4$-gu*	4. *ṣi-ru a-na ni-ši i-lu i-gi$_4$-gu*
5. *i-si$_2$-nam a-na ni-si i-ši-mu*	5. *i-si$_2$-nam a-na ni-si i-ši-mu*	5. *i-si$_2$-nam a-na ni-si i-ši-mu*
6. *šar-ra-am la iš-ku-nu ka-lu ni-ši e-pi$_2$-a-tim*	6. *šar-ra-am la iš-ku-nu ka-lu ni-ši e-pi$_2$-a-tim*	6. *šar-ra-am la iš-ku-nu ka-lu ni-ši e-pi$_2$-a-tim*
7. *i-na ši-a$_3$-tim la ka-aṣ-ra-at ku-ub-šum me-a-nu*	7. *i-na ši-a$_3$-tim la ka-aṣ-ra-at ku-ub-šum me-a-nu*	7. *i-na ši-a$_3$-tim la ka-aṣ-ra-at ku-ub-šum me-a-nu*
8. *u$_3$ ḫa-aṭ-ṭu$_2$-um uq-ni-a-am la ṣa-ap-ra-at*	8. *u$_3$ ḫa-aṭ-ṭu$_2$-um uq-ni-a-am la ṣa-ap-ra-at*	8. *u$_3$ ḫa-aṭ-ṭu$_2$-um uq-ni-a-am la ṣa-ap-ra-at*
3. Die die Weltufer erschufen, das *Menschengeschöpf* (?) setzten,	3. The creators of the (world's) boundaries, who set fast the ordinance,	3. Those creators of the world regions, establishers of all physical form,
4. die erhaben sind über die Menschen, die Götter, die Igigū,	4. The Igigu gods, exalted for the people,	4. Those sublime for the people, the Igigi-gods,
5. bestimmten den Menschen ein Fest.	5. ordained a feast for the people.	5. Ordained the *holy day* for the people.
6. Den König hatten sie (noch) nicht eingesetzt unter allen zahlreichen Menschen;	6. They had not instituted a king among the teeming people,	6. Among all the teeming peoples they had established no king,
7. daher war keine Tiara, keine Kopfbinde geknotet,	7. There had been bound neither turban nor tiara,	7. Then no headdress had been put together, no crown,
8. und kein Szepter war mit Lapis besetzt.	8. The scepter had not yet been set with lapis.	8. Nor yet scepter had been set with lapis,

Line 5, *isinnam ana nišī išīmū*, has been variously interpreted. The crux is *isinnam*. Stephen Langdon and Ephraim A. Speiser respectively interpreted *isinnam* as referring to a 'term' or 'stated time' imposed on humanity by the hostile Igigi. Langdon remarked regarding the Igigi, "Apparently they restricted mankind to short life and condemned them to labor. The phrase may be connected with Gen. 3,17-19 and Ps. 90,10".[19] Yet as Foster remarked: "[T]here is no philological basis for such an interpretation. If the Akkadian word used here really means 'festival', the older version would still refer not to death but rather to a holiday".[20] Since Langdon invoked Genesis and Psalms as comparanda for his interpretation of the line, one may speculate that underlying his rendering of *isinnam* as 'term' is the double meaning of Heb. מועד: 'appointed time' and 'festival'.[21]

All subsequent translators have understood *isinnam* to mean 'festival', yet have disagreed as to what the festival in question is. One interpretive strand takes it as referring to a specific celebration, e.g., René Labat's "la Fête (du Nouvel-an)"[22] and Bendt Alster's "the coronation of the king";[23] James Kinnier Wilson endorsed Labat's rendering and wrote: "The relevance of this festival to the kingship [...] is that it became the traditional time for coronation and represented the beginning of the king's years of reign".[24] The issue with taking *isinnam* as connected to the coronation of the king is, as Gebhard Selz put it: "Alster [...] meint es wäre auf 'the coronation of the king' angespielt. Das scheint mir aber mit der Aussage von Z. 6 kaum zu vereinbaren: Ein 'Krönungsfest', aber 'keinen König'?".[25] As Selz indicated in the same note, one way to sidestep this problem was put forward by Alster, who rendered the couplet as: "The gods established a festival for the people, (and now follows an account of how it happened: First the gods had) not (yet) appointed a king".[26] Such an interpretation would obviate the couplet's dissonance, yet as Alster's bracketed text suggests, takes as expressed much, perhaps too much, that the text does not say.

16 Haul 2000, 106-7.
17 SEAL no. 1524.
18 Földi 2024 (Trans. B. Foster).
19 Langdon 1932, 8 n. 5.
20 Foster 1993, 439 n. 1.
21 Clines 2001, מוֹעֵד 3 (p. 179) and 4 (p. 181) respectively.
22 Labat et al. 1970, 296.
23 Alster 1989, 84.
24 Kinnier Wilson 1985, 31 n. 5.
25 Selz 1998, 163 n. 132.
26 Alster 1989, 84.

Taking a different approach, Michael Haul took the 'festival' as referring to religious worship in general. He wrote of the state of affairs at the beginning of the poem:

> Allerdings fehlte anfangs noch das zur Ordnung der Stadt und der zivilisierten Welt gehörende Bindeglied zwischen den Menschen und den Göttern, eine höchste irdische, zur göttlichen Sphäre vermittelnde Instanz: das Königtum. Mit ihm fehlte das ‚Fest' und es fehlten die Tempel, d. h., es gab noch keinen geregelten Kult. All dies wird erst durch die Einsetzung eines Königs gewährleistet werden [...] Die Erwähnung des Festes in Z. i 5 lässt sich problemlos auf die Institution des Königtums beziehen: der enge Zusammenhang zwischen dem Königtum und rituellen Festen ist uns aus vielfältigen Keilschriftquellen, in denen der König als die zentrale Figur des Kultes erscheint, aufs Beste vertraut.[27]

Yet the temporal sequence indicated by the plain sense of ll. 5-6 is the reverse: it is said first that the *isinnum* was decreed, and second that kings were not appointed. Taking up Haul's identification of the 'Fest' with the cult in general, the couplet's implication would be not that cult and temple were introduced "durch die Einsetzung eines Königs", but rather that religious worship preceded kingship. Such a reading is tentatively proposed by Foster: "[P]erhaps [...] religious observance was established first, then kingship was provided".[28] Foster also observes: "The line remains obscure; perhaps 'lineage' or 'genealogy' is meant".[29] Yet neither 'lineage' nor 'genealogy' fits with the known attestations of *isinnum*.

A new interpretation of ll. 5-6 may be offered. The CAD (I-J) translated *ilū igigū isinnam ana nišī išīmū* as "(before kingship existed) the divine Igigu assigned for mankind a permanent festival".[30] In that spirit, one may take the couplet as reiterative:

> 5. They ordained a festival for the people:
> 6. Among all the teeming peoples they established no king.

Understood thus, the 'festival' in question would *be* the absence of kings. This might be because kings, by the nature of their office, impose labor on their subjects and so curtail their leisure and enjoyment. Their absence, here taken not as a primordial state rectified by divine decree but as the result of one, may then be reckoned as yielding a happy and restful condition afforded by, and thus comparable with, a holy day (*isinnum*). (One may note that the very same logic underlies the transformation of Old English *hāligdæg*, 'holy day' into Middle English *haliday* and later into 'holiday'.)[31] Taking *isinnum* to be unrelated to kingship leaves open the question of why it is mentioned at all; understanding it to be a coronation festival leaves unclear why such a festival was ordained without kings being set up. This approach avoids both difficulties.

As in the CAD's above-given translation, *isinnum* would refer not to a specific cultic festival but to celebration more generally. Such a use of *isinnu* is likewise recognized by the CAD,[32] and is evidenced for instance in *Gilgamesh* XI 75: *isinna ippušū kī ūmī akītimma*, "They (the ark-constructing craftsmen) made *isinnu* as if it were the New Year's festival"; and *Gilgamesh* I 226: *ūm*[*išam-m*]*a* [... *š*] *akin isinnu*, "[Every] day [...] there [is] an *isinnu*".[33] Citations gathered under *isinnu* 2b, "in transferred meaning"[34] – e.g., *isinša tamḫāru* "Her *isinnu* is battle",[35] and *qablu u ippiru isinanni* "Battle and hardship are our *isinnu*"[36] – likewise show that *isinnu* could connote festive enjoyment, and so be metaphorically applied to activities other than literal religious festivals.

In light of the preceding analysis, one may render ll. 3-8 as follows:

27 Haul 2000, 7.

28 Foster 2005, 535 fn. 1. As a reference for this interpretation, Foster cites Haul 2000, 7, though Haul in fact argued for the reverse sequence.

29 Foster 2005, 535 fn. 1.

30 CAD I-J, 196.

31 OED, s.v. "holiday (*n.*)".

32 CAD I-J, 196-7, *isinnu* 2, 'secular festival'.

33 For an edition of *Gilgamesh*, see George 2022.

34 CAD I-J, 197.

35 *Agušaya* iii 7; edition Pohl 2022, 124-75.

36 *Tukultī-Ninurta Epic* v 12'; edition Machinist 1978.

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3. *bānû kibrātim šākinu*[37] *šikittim*
4. *ṣīrū ana nišī ilū igīgū*
5. *isinnam ana nišī išīmū*
6. *šarram lā iškunū kalû nišī epiātim*
7. *ina šiātim lā kaṣrat kubšum meānum*
8. *u ḫaṭṭum uqniam lā ṣaprat*

3. The creators of the world regions, establishers of all form,
4. Those exalted for the people,[38] the Igigū gods,
5. Ordained a festival for the people:
6. Among all the teeming peoples they established no king.[39]
7. Then no headdress had been put together, no crown,
8. Nor yet had scepter been set with lapis.

These six lines would then be neatly divided into three couplets.

2 No Counsel for the People

The text then describes the consequences of the Igigi's decision not to set up a king, but rather to withhold kingship from the people:

9. *lā banû ištēniš parakkū*
10. *sebetta bābū uddulū eli dapnim*
11. *ḫaṭṭum meānum kubšum u šibirrum*
12. *qudmiš ānim ina šamā'ī šaknū*

9. Not a single dais had been built,
10. Seven gates were shut against the hero.[40]
11. Scepter, crown, headdress, and staff,
12. Were set before Anu in heaven.

This brings us to ll. 13-15:

13. *u_2-ul i-ba-aš-ši mi-it-lu-ku ni-ši-ša*[41]
14. [*šar*]-ʳ*ru*¹-ʳ*tum*¹ *i-na ša-ma-i ur-*ʳ*da*¹-*am*
15. […] (x) x ʳ*i*¹-ʳ*iš*²¹/ʳ*ka*²¹-ʳ*ri**¹ ʳ*šar*²¹-*r*[*a*²-*am*²] ʳ*i*¹-*ši*-ʳ*i*¹

Scholars have likewise diverged in their understanding of these lines:

37 If *ša-ki-nu* is analyzed not as a substantivized plural of *šākinu*, but – as one intuitively analyzes *bānû*, found earlier in the line – as a singular participle referring, in apposition, to the plural *ilū igīgū*, it should be normalized not as *šākinū* (as in Földi's edition), but rather *šākinu*. (In his analysis, Haul twice normalized the phrase as *šākinu šikittim* [2000, 116; 117] and thrice as *šākinū šikittim* [2000, 117; 119; 212], without commenting on the alternation.) As relevant below, *šākinu* would then be a poetic, case ending-retaining bound form (on such forms, see von Soden 1931, 211-2). On the appositional use of singular participles to refer to plural nouns, see von Soden 1995, § 134 c. This grammatical phenomenon is very precisely defined by Huehnergard (2011, 197): "A participle modifying a plural noun, when the former stands in the bound form before another noun, may be singular".

38 To my knowledge, until Haul's edition of the poem (Haul 2000), scholars uniformly took *ṣi-ru a-na ni-ši i-lu i-gi_4-gu* as a complete sentence: e.g., "But the Igigi were hostile to the people" (Langdon) or "erhaben sind für die Menschen die Götter, die Igigū" (Wilcke). Haul, followed here, analyzed *ṣi-ru* not as a stative but as the plural substantivized verbal adjective *ṣīrū*, "Die Erhabenen" (Haul 2000, 118-9), and took it as standing in apposition to *ilū igīgū*. He therefore translated "die erhaben sind über die Menschen, die Götter, die Igigū". Similarly, Foster has "Those sublime for the people, the Igigi gods" (Foster 2005, 535), and SEAL, "The Igigu gods, exalted for the people".

39 On *i-na ši-a_3-tim*, here translated 'then', see Földi 2024 ad OB Morgan 7; on the translation "teeming people" for *ni-ši e-pi_2-a-tim*, Haul 2000, 119 ad i 6.

40 On this line, see Lambert 1980a and Streck 2009, 484-5.

41 The sign *ša* in *ni-ši-ša*, clear in Langdon's 1932 copy, has been abraded from the tablet.

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1) Langdon[42]	**2) Speiser**[43]	**3) Wilcke**[44]
13. *u*[*sic*]-*ul i-ba-aš-ši mi-it-lu-ku ni-ši-ša*		13. *u*$_2$-*ul i-ba-aš-ši mi-it-lu-ku ni-ši-ša*
14. *šar-ru-tum i-na ša-ma-i ur-da-am*		14. *x-x-tum i-na ša-ma-i ur-da-am*
15. ……		15. [x x x x x x x x] x [I]štar *ša[r-r]a-[am] i-ši*
13. there being no direction for her people.	13. there being no counseling for its people.	13. nicht gibt es Beratungen für ihr Volk.
14. (Then) kingship descended from heaven.	14. (Then) kingship descended from heaven.	14. Die... stieg vom Himmel herab.
15……	15. [marked as missing]	15. [...]..., [Ištar war auf der Suche nach ei[nem] Kö[nig].
4) Kinnier Wilson[45]	**5) Foster**[46]	**6) Selz**[47]
13. *u*$_2$-*ul i-ba-aš-ši mi-it-lu-ku* †*ša ni-ši*†		13. *u*$_2$-*ul i-ba-aš-ši mi-it-lu-ku ni-ši-ša*
14. [*ša*]*r*-[*r*]*u-tum i-na ša-ma-i ur-da-am*		14. [*ša*]*r*$^{?}$-*ru*$^{?}$-*tum i-na ša-ma-i ur-dam*[sic]
15. [ ] x [*I*]*štar* ˹*šar*˺-*r*[*a-am*] *i-ši-i*		15. [not included]
13. There was no..... of the people.	13. There was no right counsel for their(?) people:	13. Es gab keinen Rat(geber) für ihr (=Ištars) Volk.
14. (When) the sceptre of kingship came down from heaven,	14. (Then) [ ] came down from heaven.	14. kam das *Königtum(?)* vom Himmel herunter.
15. [.....] Ištar sought a king.	15. [marked as part of a gap]	15. [not included]
7) Haul[48]	**8) SEAL**[49]	**9) Földi (trans. Foster)**[50]
13. *u*$_2$-*ul i-ba-aš-ši mi-it-lu-ku ni-ši-ša*	13. *u*$_2$-*ul i-ba-aš-ši mi-it-lu-ku ni-ši-ša*	13. *u*$_2$-*ul i-ba-aš-ši mi-it-lu-ku <a-na> ni-°\ši°-ša*
14. [*be*$^{?}$]-˹*el*$^{?}$˺-*tum i-na ša-ma-i ur-da-am*	14. [*ša*]*r*-[*r*]*u-tum i-na ša-ma-i ur-da-am*	14. [*šar*]-˹*ru**˺-˹*tum*˺ *i-na ša-ma-i ur-*˹*da*˺-*am*
15. [X X X (X X)] X -˹*Ištar*$^{?}$˺ ˹*šar*˺-*r*[*a*$^{?}$-*am*] ˹*i*˺-*ši*-˹*i*˺	15. [… … …] x ˹*Ištar?*˺(˹**U.DAR**˺?) ˹*šar*˺-*r*[*a-am*] ˹*i*˺-*ši*-˹*i*˺	15. […] (x) x ˹*i*˺-˹*iš*$^{?}$˺/˹*ka*$^{?}$˺-˹*ri**˺ ˹*šar*$^{?}$˺-*r*[*a*$^{?}$-*am*$^{?}$] ˹*i*˺-*ši*-˹*i*˺
13. Da es keinen Besonnenen ihres Volkes gab,	13. No common counsel existed for its (the land's) people.	13. There was no right counsel for *its* people:
14. stieg ˹die Herrin˺ vom Himmel hinab,	14. Kingship(?) descended from the heavens.	14. (Then) did [kin]gship come down from heaven.
15. [.....] suchte ˹Ištar (?)˺ ˹einen König (?).˺	15. [...] Ištar(?) sought a king(?).	15. [...]... had a king,

The crux at hand is *ni-ši-ša* (l. 13), which has – with the exceptions of Kinnier Wilson's †*ša ni-ši*†, "of the people" and Foster's "their(?) people" – been uniformly construed as appended with a feminine singular possessive suffix. Scholars have put forward two options as to what noun that suffix refers back to, and thus to whom the people are said to belong.

The first – endorsed by Langdon, Claus Wilcke, Alster,[51] Selz, and Haul – is Ištar, with *ni-ši-ša* then being "her people". This interpretation presents two difficulties. First, there would be no parallel for the people of the land in general being spoken of as belonging to Ištar. Second, Ištar is not mentioned before l. 13 for her to serve as the implied referent of *ni-ši-ša*. However, Wilcke floats as a possibility, and Haul argues, that Ištar appears immediately after l. 13 and can therefore serve as such a referent. Wilcke wrote of l. 14: "Die Spuren am Zeilenanfang passen zu [*ša*]*r*-[*r*]*u-tum* (so die communis opinio […]); die Lesung [*b*]*e*-[*e*]*l-tum* scheint aber nicht ausgeschlossen zu sein";[52] and of l. 15: "Ergänzung

42 Langdon 1932, 11.
43 Speiser 1955, 114.
44 Wilcke 1977, 156-8.
45 Kinnier Wilson 1985, 30-1.
46 Foster 1993, 439.
47 Selz 1998, 164-5.
48 Haul 2000, 106-7.
49 SEAL no. 1524.
50 Földi 2024 (Trans. B. Foster).
51 Alster 1989, 85.
52 Wilcke 1977, 157 ad l. 14.

und Lesung nach Z. 19ff. der jungen Version".[53] The SB lines here referred to by Wilcke, which occur at the equivalent point in the narrative to the OB passage under discussion, and only the beginnings of which are preserved, do seem to speak of Ištar searching for a king:

> I 19. ⌜d⌝*iš-tar re-e*$_2$*-a* […] Ištar a shepherd (acc.) […]
> I 20. LUGAL *i-še-*⌜ ⌝*-i* […] She was seeking a king […]

In arguing for *bēltum* over *šarrūtum*, Haul wrote:

> Das Pron.-Suff. von *nišīša* verweist, wenn richtig ergänzt, auf [*bēl*]*tum* in Z. 14 bzw. auf *Ištar* in Z. 15, also auf einen erst später realisierten Referenten. Die Ergänzung mit *bēltum* nach dem Vorschlag von C. Wilcke [...] ist vor allem aufgrund dieses *-ša* und der so gewonnenen parallelen Satzsubjekte für Z. 14 und 15 gewählt.[54]

Yet however much [*be*ʾ]-⌜*el*ʾ⌝*-tum* would cohere with *ni-ši-ša* being "her (Ištar's) people", as well as with Ištar's search for a king in the poem's SB version, it can be ruled out on epigraphic grounds. Streck writes of l. 14: "[P]hoto and copy rather support a reading [*r*]*u* of the second sign".[55] And Földi notes: "[C]ollation from the photograph confirms ⌜*ru*⌝".[56] As such, if *ni-ši-ša* in l. 13 is in fact "Her (Ištar's) people", the referred-to goddess would be mentioned neither in the preceding 12 lines nor in the line immediately following; she could conceivably appear in l. 15, yet the line is too fragmentary to confidently analyze.

The second option – put forward by Michael Streck,[57] and taken up by SEAL as well as (tentatively) by Földi – is *mātum*, "the land", invoked in l. 2, with *ni-ši-ša* being "its (the land's) people". This approach, it should be noted, was anticipated by Speiser's "There being no counseling for its people", on which Speiser remarked: "Evidently, the Earth's".[58] This second interpretation raises neither difficulty presented by the first: people are naturally taken as being of a land,[59] and *mātum* appears in l. 2 and so can serve as a referent for *ni-ši-ša* (albeit a distant one).

Another point of scholarly disagreement regarding l. 13 is the grammatical construction underlying *u*$_2$*-ul i-ba-aš-ši mi-it-lu-ku ni-ši-ša*. To my knowledge, all interpreters except for Haul, Kinnier Wilson, and Alster have understood its basic meaning to be "There was no *mi-it-lu-ku* for *ni-ši-ša*". This creates a difficulty: one would in that case intuitively take *ni-ši-ša* as the genitive *nišīša*, yet a genitive would need to be preceded by *ana* to match the expected sense of "for". As far as I know, this issue has not been spelled out, though Földi's *<a-na> ni-ši-ša* serves to implicitly acknowledge it, as does his entertaining Kinnier Wilson's emendation †*ša ni-ši*†.[60] A different solution to this problem is supplied by Haul,[61] who, following von Soden,[62] analyzed *mi-it-lu-ku* as a case ending-retaining bound form. Haul therefore translated *mi-it-lu-ku ni-ši-ša* as "Besonnenen ihres Volkes".[63] An analysis of *mi-it-lu-ku ni-ši-ša* as a genitive construction is likewise evinced by Alster's "counseling of her (sc. Ištar's) people".[64]

As an alternative, *ni-ši-ša* may be construed as ending with the OB poetic locative-terminative ending *-iša*(*m*).[65] The word would then still be read in the conventional way (*nišīša*), yet be translated as "for the people", and *ul ibašši mitluku nišīša* rendered as "There existed no counsel for the people". This solution has two advantages: it sidesteps the problem of the unclear referent, and unlike Kinnier

53 Wilcke 1977, 157 ad l. 15.

54 Haul 2000, 123 ad i 13f.

55 Streck 2009, 485 ad Morgan Tablet i 14.

56 Földi 2024, ad OB Morgan 14.

57 Streck 2009, 484 ad Morgan Tablet i 7 and 13.

58 Speiser 1955, 114 n. 9.

59 People (*nišū*) are said to be of a land (*mātu*) in e.g., *māta… išni ṭēm nišīša*, "The land's people lost their reason" (Frame 1995, B.2.4.8: 18); *eli māt aššur māta eli nišīša nišī luraddi*, "Verily did I add land to the land of Aššur, and people to its people" (Grayson 1991, A.0.87.1: 31-32 [=A.0.100.5: 133]). For the association between *mātu* and *nišū*, see also citations under *mātu* 1h (CAD M/1, 418).

60 Földi 2024, ad BabaOB$_1$ i 13.

61 Haul 2000, 123 ad i 13f.

62 von Soden 1931, 212.

63 Haul aligned with Selz (1998, 164 n. 139) in construing *mi-it-lu-ku* as a substantivized adjective, though he did not rule out the possibility of its being an infinitive (2000, 123 ad i 13f).

64 Alster 1989, 85.

65 On *-iša*(*m*), see von Soden 1995, § 67 g; Mayer 1995, 184-6; Mayer 2015, 192-3 ad § 67 g; and note also Wasserman 2003, 78 n. 87 and `www.ebl.lmu.de/library/BM.120003` ad l. 13.

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Wilson's †*ša ni-ši*†, does so without emending the text; and it supplies the expected sense whereby there is no counsel for, rather than of, the people, without requiring Földi's postulated haplography <*a-na*>. Following this interpretation, the couplet may be translated as:

13. There existed no counsel for the people,
14. (So) [king]ship descended from heaven.

3 The Couplets in Context

Taken together as newly reinterpreted, the couplets would mean that the Igigi ordained for humanity a holiday-like state of kinglessness, but that this decision deprived the people of deliberation and so was promptly reversed.[66] This in turn may evince an ambivalent yet ultimately affirming view of kingship: that it is a necessary pain.

For the couplets to indicate such an origin for kingship, and to implicitly characterize kingship in this way, would bear on three themes of broader Mesopotamian as well as biblical concern: the shortsightedness of the gods, the connection of power in general and kingship in particular with (forced) labor, and the role of the king as counselor.

3.1 Shortsighted Gods

As here interpreted, in OB *Etana* the Igigi evince flawed decision-making of a kind central to other Mesopotamian compositions, most notably *Atraḫasis*. In that text, the Anunna exploit the Igigi, yet in so doing end up sparking class warfare in heaven. Humans are created to resolve the conflict, yet they multiply and their noise keeps Enlil from sleeping. The deluge is sent to extinguish the clamor, yet leaves the gods without sustenance. In every case, the gods make decisions beneficial in the short term yet deleterious in the long run. Further evincing their shortsightedness, it is only after the deluge that the gods set up measures to curb humanity's continuous increase.[67] Had these been created concomitantly with humans, Enlil's sleep would not have been disturbed in the first place. As hypothesized here, the Igigi evince similarly faulty decision-making. In not appointing kings, the Igigi ordain for humankind the *isinnum* of their absence. Yet in doing so, they deprive humans of *mitluku* and create an untenable situation only remedied by introducing kingship after all.[68]

66 This would cohere with Cancik-Kirschbaum's analysis of *Etana* (2007, 175), "Eine konkrete politische Form ist nicht von vorneherein Teil des von den Göttern bestimmten menschlichen Geschicks. Zwar sind die Amtszeichen bereits konzipiert (Z. 11-12), jedoch erst zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt – und offensichtlich durch *ul ibaššû mitlukū*, Nicht gab es (genügend) Besonnene' (Z. 13) begründet – wird die Realisierung von Herrschaft unter Menschen notwendig". Note that Cancik-Kirschbaum, like Haul, aligns with Selz's analysis of *mi-it-lu-ku* as referring not to an abstraction but to a person (1998, 164 n. 139) and also that the tablet has *ibašši* (*i-ba-aš-ši*), not *ibaššû*, with there being no cause to normalize *mi-it-lu-ku* as a plural form.

67 Post-diluvian population controls are introduced in OB *Atraḫasis* III vii 1-11, part of a partially preserved speech delivered by Ea to Bēlet ilī; in what we have, Ea ordains non-child-bearing women and baby-killing demons. These lines are paralleled in theme, though not (as far as we can tell based on what remains of the equivalent speech in *Atraḫasis*) in phrasing, by SB *Gilgamesh* XI 183-95, addressed by Ea to Enlil. On these lines, see commentary in George 2003, 519; 891-2 (ad 185-6; ad 187; ad 188-9), though they are here understood as having a slightly different meaning than posited by George. George takes Ea's message to Enlil as being that "It would be better not to have sent a Deluge but instead to send a lion or a wolf to reduce the population, a famine or a plague to decimate the people" (2003, 519), and understands the population-curbing forces to be invoked by Ea as "alternatives [that] remain at Enlil's disposal and should be used in future" (2003, 892 ad 188-9). Yet it would better parallel *Atraḫasis*, more closely match the danger-filled reality of human life, and cohere to a greater extent with Ea's employment of imperatives earlier in his address to Enlil (XI 185-7), for Ea to speak of said population-controls as measures that *should*, not merely *could*, be employed to keep the population in check. As such, the precatives he uses throughout the passage in describing the measures should be translated not with 'could', as does George (2022), but rather with 'let', as does for instance Foster (2019); and e.g., *erra litbâmma māta lišgiš* (XI 195) be rendered not as "Erra could arise and slaughter the land" but as "Let Erra arise and slaughter the land!". On the idea that SB *Gilgamesh* XI suggests that death itself was created after the flood, see Lambert 1980b, 57.

68 The way in which kingship is introduced deserves comment. In SB (I 19-22), it is Ištar who descends from heaven to seek a king. As discussed, in OB it is likely said that kingship descended from heaven. This would parallel the incipit of the Sumerian King List ([nam]-lugal an-ta ed_3-de_3-a-ba, "When kingship descended from heaven", ETCSL c.2.1.1: 1). And just as in SKL, the line may imply that the abstract quality of *šarrūtu* here acts as an independent agent, resolving to go down to earth though the gods did not command it to do so. One would however assume that, in OB as in SB, it is Ištar who brings kingship down with her, thus accomplishing the descent of *šarrūtu*.

Divine shortsightedness likewise figures in *The Tamarisk and the Palm* (edition Wilcke 1989, 170-90; lines quoted below from p. 171),[69] which supplies the closest known parallel to *Etana*'s own "basileogony".[70] This disputation text is known in four versions: OB, MB, MA, and (early) NA (Wilcke 1989 TḪa-b, E, Ab, and Ac respectively).[71] The composition opens with a prologue. OB preserves one recension thereof; MB and NA another, albeit with divergences (the section is broken off in MA). The OB recension reports that when the gods established the land, they "exerted themselves" for humans (TḪa 2, *ittanḫū ilū ana awīlūtim*), convening council and sending down plenty upon them (TḪa 2-3a).[72] It then reports that "Before, the gods had named a king [t]o direct the land, strengthen the people, // To administer the [Ci]ty Kish, the Black-Headed Ones, the numerous people" (TḪa 3b-5, *ina pāni* // [*an*]*a šutēšir mātim guššur nišī ibbū šarram* // [*āl*]*am kiš ana šapārim ṣalmāt qaqqadi nišī madātim*). This implies that, just as in *Etana*, land, people, and Kish were already created before kingship was ordained.[73] The same is indicated in the MB/NA recension. It relates that when the gods established the land and built a city for the ancient people, when they piled up the mountains and dug the rivers, they held council (ll. 1-5). It then declares that "Before, kingship had not existed in the land, and sovereignty was bestowed upon the gods (alone)" (l. 6, *ina pānāma šarrūtu ina māti ul ibašši u bēlūtu ana ilī šarkat*). One may interpret this statement to mean that "lordship was vested in the gods" (Foster 2005, 927), with the implication being that in kings' absence the gods ruled directly over mankind.[74] Yet one suspects that it rather means that sovereignty itself was not to be found among humans, just as in OB *Etana* crown, scepter, and headdress were set before Anu in heaven before kingship descended to earth. MB then tells us that the gods loved the Black-Headed People (l. 7, *ilū irāmūma nišī ṣalmāt qaqqadi*; NA is corrupt at this point).[75] Out of this love, the gods gave monarchy to humankind, appointing a king and consigning to him the Land of Kish so that he may watch over its inhabitants ([*nišī*?] *ša mātam kiš u*[*g*] *ammerūnišša ana naṣāri*, ll. 7-8 [MB]).[76] (But as Šiduri told Gilgamesh, life eternal the gods never gave to mankind, but kept it for themselves).[77] In this as in the OB version of *The Tamarisk and the Palm*, that the gods do not establish kingship from the outset, but only do so after Man and city had already been created, suggests that they behave shortsightedly, and play it by ear.

69 I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the relevance of this text to OB *Etana*.

70 On etiology and justification of kingship in ancient Mesopotamia, see Cancik-Kirschbaum 2007, Jiménez 2013 (esp. 245-7), and Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 205-17. On Assyrian conceptions of kingship specifically, see Radner 2010 and Machinist 2011.

71 On the four versions, see Wilcke 1989, 163-70; for a manuscript list, 170. Wilcke writes (1989, 169), "Die Frage, welche der vier uns vorliegenden Versionen einer ursprünglichen Fassung am nächsten stehe, scheint müßig. Wir finden den Text des Streitgedichtes im Fluß".

72 One wonders what exactly *ittanḫū* – derived from *anāḫu*, "to toil, exert oneself, become tired" – conveys. Does it mean that the gods labored, *Atraḫasis*-style, for humanity's benefit – Wilcke, translating (1989, 183) "da mühten sich die Götter für die Menschheit ab", seems to imply as much – or does it refer to self-exertion more generally, with the gods then noted to have taken pains to care for humanity? If the former, perhaps the gods' labor produced the *nuḫšum* sent down to humanity (yet why would mention of toil be immediately followed up by talk of convening council?). If the latter, then *ittanḫū* might rather denote the benevolent diligence motivating the gods' giving humanity plenty and kingship.

73 As Jiménez writes (2013, 246), "In […] narratives of the creation of the king […] such as the one contained in the prologue of *The Date Palm and the Tamarisk* or at the beginning of *Etana*, the existence of humankind prior to the election of a king is taken for granted". On other texts testifying, albeit less clearly, to a view whereby kingship post-dated humanity's creation, see Cancik-Kirschbaum 2007, 172-5.

74 This would parallel the biblical account of kingship's creation (see discussion of 1 Samuel 8 below).

75 The versions differ from one another in how they describe the gods at this narrative juncture: OB has *ittanḫū ilū ana awīlūtim*; MB, *ilū irāmūma nišī ṣalmāt qaqqadi*; NA, *šarra ilāni rāmūniššu nišī ṣalam* (sic) *qaqqadi iqbûniššu*, "The gods had love for the king, and *assigned* the Black-Headed People to him". (For NA, I follow Lambert 1960, 162 over Wilcke 1989, 171 while agreeing with Wilcke 1989, 179 n. b that NA is corrupt at this point). *ittanḫū* implies that the gods exerted themselves, and perhaps did literal labor, for humanity's benefit. Yet *irāmūma* implies no such effort, but denotes only that the gods loved the people. This difference between OB and MB coheres with the lessening emphasis on divine labor between OB and later Mesopotamian mythology, manifest for instance in the difference between the respective cosmic histories of *Atraḫasis* and *Enūma eliš* (on labor in *Atraḫasis*, see Gabriel 2018, 186-92 and Helle 2026; on *Enūma eliš*'s transformation of *Atraḫasis*'s anthropogony, Seri 2006, 515; Foster 2016, 94-5; Wisnom 2024, 267).

76 The portion expected from context to describe the appointment of a king is broken off in MB (E 5), and corrupted out of existence in NA (Ac 9). Foster (2005, 927) translates […] *ša mātam kiš u*[*g*]*ammerūnišša ana naṣāri* as "… [the people] of the land of Kish gathered around him to look at(?)". Yet it would better cohere with the rest of the passage, all of whose actions are performed by the gods, as well as with OB, in which the gods appoint the king to administer Kish, to hew closer to Wilcke's (1989, 179), "[Die Menschen] des Landes Kiš versammelten sie ihm". Two notes may be offered. First, neither "versammeln" nor "gather around" fits the established meanings of *gamāru*, and one should rather translate *u*[*g*]*ammerūnišša* in line with *gamāru* 3c (CAD G, 30), "To pay or deliver in full". Second, *ša* might function here not as a genitive particle but a topicalization marker, in which case one need not reconstruct *nišī* at the broken ending of l. 7, but rather translate "Regarding the Land of Kish, they consigned it to him".

77 *Gilgamesh* OB VA+BM a+18-20. I thank Benjamin Foster for pointing out this contrast between kingship and death in Mesopotamian thinking.

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3.2 Kingship and Drudgery

Explicit in *Atraḫasis* and implicit in *Etana* as here interpreted is a connection between power and labor.[78] In *Atraḫasis*, the power of the Anunna manifests in their exploitation of the Igigi's labor. Humans are created to replace the Igigi as the working class, and the subsequent relationship between gods and humans is likewise defined by the perpetual labor imposed by the former on the latter. If, as here hypothesized, OB *Etana* describes the lack of kings as an *isinnum*, it may be because kings, by virtue of their office, impose labor on their subjects just as Enlil, the divine monarch, oversaw the oppression of the Igigi. This may imply, just as does the plot of *Atraḫasis*, that the imposition of labor is a central feature of kingship, and thus power. The labor in question would, as in *Atraḫasis*, be of the corvée type, yet would include, in the way of earthly kingship, military in addition to civilian service.[79] Interpreted thus, it would make sense for OB *Etana* to compare the absence of kings to a holy day (*isinnum*), just as *Atraḫasis* refers to the creation of humanity and the subsequent release of the gods from labor as the loosening of their yoke (*ulla paṭāru*) and establishment of their freedom (*andurāra šakānu*).[80]

There is only one other source of which I am aware in which the introduction of kingship is spoken of as burdening the population with labor. In the Hebrew Bible, just as in *Etana*, kingship is not part of the primordial order of things. Before the creation of Israelite kingship, God was ruler over his people, directing them through his prophets. Yet in 1 Samuel 8: 4-5, the elders of Israel come before Samuel and ask him to set a king over them for that king to judge them "like all the nations" (ככל הגוים). Samuel disapproves of the idea, yet God tells Samuel to grant the people their wish – albeit while informing them of what they shall suffer as a result (1 Samuel 8: 6-9). Samuel does so (1 Samuel 8: 10-21): he tells the people that the king will render their sons his warriors and farmers, their daughters his perfumers and cooks, their fields and orchards his servants' property; that he will put their servants to his own work, and take a tenth of their livestock for himself; and that, though they shall cry out in protestation of the king's action, God will pay them no heed.

Because there is little certainty as to exactly where, when, by whom, and why 1 Samuel 8 was composed,[81] no claim is made here as to the relationship between 1 Samuel 8 and OB *Etana*. For the present, it will only be pointed out that, if the interpretation here advanced regarding OB *Etana* is correct, both texts would frame the advent of kingship as a detriment to human happiness, and – in a way explicit in the former and implicit in the latter – describe that detriment as bound up with the imposition of labor. For such framing to arise independently would make sense, drawing as it does on the cross-cultural reality of kings' perpetual demands on their subjects' time, property, and very lives.

3.3 King as Counselor

Whether one interprets *ni-ši-ša* as "her people", "its people", or "for the people", it is clear from ll. 13-14 that it was the lack of *mitluku*, 'deliberation' that occasioned the descent of *šarrūtu* from heaven. This implies deliberation to be the purpose of kings. For *Etana* to evince such a view may have broader significance; as Speiser remarked:

> The term *mitluku*, "counseling, consultation" refers here to the function of the *māliku*, a cognate of the Hebrew word for "king". It is a significant commentary on the nature of kingship in Mesopotamian civilization.[82]

78 On labor in *Atraḫasis*, see recently Gabriel 2018, 186-92 and Helle 2026.

79 On corvée labor in the Old Babylonian period and the terms relevant to it – Sum. b a l a, 'term' and d u s u, 'basket' and Akk. *tupšikkum*, *dekûtum*, *ḫarrānum*, and *ilkum* ('basket', 'levy', 'path', and 'going' respectively) as well as *ḫarrān šarrim*, 'way of the king', likely referring to military service – see Stol 1995; on corvée in the Ur III period, Steinkeller 2013.

80 OB I 239: *apṭur ulla*(*m*) *andurā*[*ra*(*m*) *aš*]*ku*]*n*, "I have released the yoke, I have [establish]ed freedom"; the line can be confidently restored based on OB II vi 28. In *Enūma eliš* VI 49 (edition Heinrich 2021), the creation of humankind and the subsequent exemption of the gods from toil is likewise described as the establishment of freedom (*šubarrû*).

81 As is generally the case in biblical criticism, the compositional history of 1 Samuel 8 is contested. A Deuteronomistic background, along with a connection to Deut. 17,14-20, has received broad support – though a post-Deuteronomistic origin for part of the chapter has likewise been argued for. The literature on the chapter is enormous. For recent contributions also providing outlines of previous literature, see Nihan 2013a and 2013b; for an analysis of the view of kingship expressed in the chapter, Müller 2004, 119-47; on the chapter's putative connections to Deut. 17,14-20 and Judg. 8,22-3, and its composition possibly being a response to Assyrian imperialism, Wazana 2016.

82 Speiser 1955, 114 fn. 9.

e-ISSN 2036-5845

Three other mythological texts bear out Speiser's observation, since they likewise point to the perceived centrality of counseling and consultation in Mesopotamian kingship. The first is a text referred to in scholarship as "The Creation of the King". Likely composed in Assyria under the Sargonids,[83] it is known from two manuscripts: VS 24: 92, edited by Werner R. Mayer in 1987,[84] and STT 24, edited by Enrique Jiménez in 2013.[85] In the story, Ea commissions Bēlet-ilī to create the first king, described in VS 24: 92 as LUGAL *ma-li-ku* LU_2 (l. 33'). This much-translated phrase,[86] read with one exception, discussed below, as *šarru māliku amēlu*, has been interpreted in three ways, each having as its starting point a different interpretation of the participle *māliku*. The first is to interpret *māliku* in its usual sense, namely as denoting advising or deliberation, and translate *ma-li-ku* LU_2 for instance as "the counselor-man".[87] The second is to understand *māliku* in its West- and Central-Semitic, sovereignty-signifying sense,[88] and have for example "ein zur Ausübung von Herrschaft befähigter Mann".[89] The third is to analyze *māliku* as amenable to both counsel- and kingship-related interpretations, with the resulting renderings including "man the prince (or man of counsel)".[90]

Extant sources do not permit a conclusive decision between these three ways. At present, one may observe that the relative abundance of advice-related attestations of *malāku* vis-à-vis kingship-related ones militates against *ma-li-ku* LU_2 being wholly unrelated to counsel; and that in postulating polyvalence for *ma-li-ku* LU_2, the third way would presumably result in the greatest literary effect. Regarding what that effect may have been, one may quote Beata Pongratz-Leisten:

> In myth, the king's skill in decision-making is expressed by the participle form *māliku*, derived from the root *malāku*, "to give advice, to ponder, to come to a decision". *māliku* […] appears to function as a pun for *mal*(*i*)*ku* "king", derived from the West Semitic verb *malāku* "to reign". Thus, although both the king and the *lullû*-man belong to the same species (*awīlu*), the king is distinguished from the *lullû*-man by virtue of his being a *māliku* who is appointed to the office of ruler (*šarru*).[91]

In his edition of STT 24, Jiménez argues that in view of the spelling LUGAL *ma-lik* [LU_2] (STT 24: 5'), LUGAL *ma-li-ku* LU_2 could be construed as employing a genitive construction,[92] and "interpreted just as 'the king, the ruler of man(kind)', or, alternatively, as 'the counselor of man(kind)'".[93] Concerning LUGAL *ma-lik* [LU_2], he also writes: "It would be tempting to relate this phrase to the epithet of Enlil in OB *Atraḫasīs* I 43, *ilu mālik ilī* [The divine *māliku* of the gods]".[94] This brings us to our second text.

In *Atraḫasis*, and consequently in *Gilgamesh*, Enlil is described as the gods' *māliku*.[95] This role has conventionally been understood as "counselor".[96] In light of Enlil's being the king of the gods, it is tempting to suppose – taking after the second aforementioned path regarding LUGAL *ma-li-ku* LU_2 – that Enlil is rather described as the gods' ruler. However, that Enlil is meant to serve as the gods' counselor is indicated by his failing, and cataclysmically so, at this very role. As we are told, Enlil was he who

83 On this text, see Mayer 1987; Cancik-Kirschbaum 1995; Radner 2010, 26-7; Jiménez 2013; Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 208-10.

84 Mayer 1987.

85 Jiménez 2013.

86 For a useful compilation of past renderings of *šarru māliku amēlu*, see Jiménez 2013, 240.

87 Foster 2005, 497.

88 This sense, present for instance in Heb. מלך and Arab. مَلَكَ, is well attested, as demonstrated by Renger (1988) and Zaccagnini (1993, 56 n. 10), for *malāku* as well.

89 Cancik-Kirschbaum 1995, 17, with argumentation in 1995, 16-7.

90 George 2003, 448.

91 Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 209.

92 Though note factors acknowledged by Jiménez (2013, 241) as contraindicating an analysis of LUGAL *ma-lik* [LU_2] as a genitive construction.

93 Jiménez 2013, 241. In arguing for this new interpretation, Jiménez points to the expression *šarru mālikšunu*, found thrice in Sargon II's inscriptions (Frame 2021, no. 65: 202, 346; no. 82: v 68'), and translated by Jiménez as "the king, their ruler" (Jiménez 2013, 241). In his edition of STT 24: 5', Jiménez has LUGAL *ma-lik* [*a-me-lu*] (2013, 238). Yet VS 24: 92: 33' employs the logogram LU_2 for *amēlu* rather than spelling the word syllabically, and as shown in Jiménez's subsequent analysis and reflected in his rendering lugal *ma-lik* [*amēlu*/*i*] (2013, 241), there is no reason to suppose that LU_2 is here in the nominative rather than the genitive. Inferring from VS 24: 92, and preserving the ambiguity, the rendering LUGAL *ma-lik* [LU_2] is opted for here.

94 Jiménez 2013, 241.

95 In *Atraḫasis*, e.g., OB I i 8, 43; III viii 11; in *Gilgamesh*, SB XI 16. *Atraḫasis*, the text of which was edited in Lambert, Millard 1969 (reprinted 1999) and then supplemented by Al-Rawi, George 1996, is currently being edited for an up-to-date eBL edition, the first tablet of which has already been uploaded (Jiménez, Rozzi 2024). For an edition of *Gilgamesh*, see George 2022.

96 E.g., in Lambert, Millard 1969, 45; Jiménez, Rozzi 2024 (Trans. B. Foster).

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"did not consider, but brought about the Flood" (*lā imtalkūma iškunu abūba*).[97] Here as in the case of *mālik*(*u*) LU$_2$, a double meaning for *māliku* produces the richest sense. Enlil – the gods' counselor and sovereign both – neglects to deliberate within himself (*mitluku*), and so fails in his role as counselor and proves himself an incompetent king unworthy of the post-diluvian sacrifice.

The third text is *Erra and Išum*, in which Erra, god of violence and pestilence, decides to annihilate humanity because they hold him in contempt, yet is dissuaded at the last moment by Išum, a benevolent god of fire and protection.[98] In the fourth of the poem's five tablets, Išum expounds before Erra the world-threatening plans Erra had formulated to himself. These include the following scheme (IV 127): *ana šubat šar ilī lū'irma lā ibbašši milku*, "I will approach the dwelling of the king of the gods, so that no counsel come into existence". Here as in *Etana*, the non-being of kingship results in the non-existence of counsel.

These three texts indicate that, just as Speiser argued, the couplet at hand reflects a long- and broadly held Mesopotamian conception linking kingship with counseling and consultation. One suspects that this connection, to my knowledge not stressed to such a degree in other ancient cultures, was motivated not only by the actual duties of kingship but also by the double meaning of *malāku* as signifying both counsel and sovereignty.

The importance of deliberation and counsel, and hence the need for kingship, is also stressed, albeit implicitly, elsewhere in the preserved portions of *Etana*. As part of the tale of the eagle and the serpent, the eagle schemes to eat the serpent's young and then fly up to heaven, where he expects to be out of retribution's reach. One of his fledglings, young yet exceedingly wise, tries to dissuade him.[99] But the eagle pays his fledgling no heed. Later, when the snake is hiding inside the carcass of a wild ox, lying in wait for the eagle, the fledgling once again warns his father, this time that the snake is surely waiting within the carcass and the eagle should not descend onto it.[100] This warning is similarly disregarded. The eagle ends up with his wings broken. And one can only assume, though the story does not report so, that the fledgling starves to death along with his siblings for lack of a father to feed them (thus depriving the eagle of his children as he deprived the snake of his). Through this story, *Etana* cautions its readers not to follow the heart's foolish inclinations, but rather to listen to sage advice. The same message is conveyed by other Akkadian myths, such as the *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sîn*,[101] *Gilgamesh*,[102] and *Erra* – in which the world is saved by the intervention of Išum, Erra's *māliku*.[103]

The tale of the eagle and the serpent demonstrates the need for kingship in yet another way. This episode begins with the two predators swearing an oath of friendship to each other.[104] In SB (II 25-35), the friends follow up this oath by living out a mutually beneficial arrangement, taking turns to hunt for the other and his children. In OB (Susa 8-11) and MA (b+14-b+20), a different and one-sided arrangement is described, whereby the snake sustains the eagle and his young but seems to receive nothing in return. Regarding this change from OB and MA to SB, Jerrold Cooper remarked: "The symmetry is appealing as choreography, perhaps, but the dramatic effect of the eagle's subsequent treachery – he eats the serpent's young – is drastically reduced".[105] One can only agree, while also wondering why the snake agreed to the manifestly exploitative OB/MA arrangement in the first place. Perhaps the eagle's task was to keep watch over both sets of children while the snake was away, or the snake was just kind-hearted to the point of folly, and paid for his goodness just as the eagle suffered for his evil. Until further manuscripts are recovered to fill the lacuna afflicting both OB and MA at this point in the plot,

97 OB *Atraḫasis* III v 43 = SB *Gilgamesh* XI 170.

98 An edition and analysis of *Erra and Išum* can be found in Taylor 2017. An updated edition of the poem is under preparation as part of the eBL, with that of Tablet I already on the site (Jiménez 2023).

99 The fledgling's speech is fully preserved in SB, and warns the eagle that Šamaš would take him to task for violating the oath (II 45-50). In OB Susa 22-4, enough is preserved to show that the fledgling addresses his father, with the traces appearing to align with SB (see also Földi 2024, ad l. 24). The speech is not preserved in MA.

100 MA c+3-c+9 (partially preserved), SB II 98-100. While the message of the fledgling's MA and SB speeches is the same – the eagle should not descend onto the carcass – the MA speech is longer and more elaborate.

101 Finn 2017, 58-71.

102 Sonik 2020; Helle 2021, 164-81.

103 That Išum saved the world, and that it was in his role of *māliku* that he did so, is explicit in the poem's summary of its own plot (V 40-1): *ša erra īgugūma ana sapān mātāti u ḫulluq nišīšin iškunu pānīšu // išum mālikšu unīḫūšūma īzibu rēḫāniš*, "That Erra flew into a rage, and set out to lay waste the lands and wipe out their people // And Išum his counselor calmed him down, so he (Erra) spared (some) as a remnant". On Išum's role in the story, see George 2013, 47-65 and Wisnom 2020, 158-243.

104 The oath itself is preserved in neither OB nor MA, though extant in both is the stipulation whereby the violator of the oath would be overthrown (OB Susa 1-3/MA: b+1-b+7). Yet the oath is extant in SB II 8-9, where it is one of friendship (*rū'ūtu*).

105 Cooper 1977, 509-10.

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one can only guess. What one can be sure of is that the arrangement, agreed upon by two equal parties and enforced only by oath, broke down bloodily. Since this is precisely the type of arrangement that might hold society up in the absence of a king, its failure proves his necessity.[106] That it is through the intervention of Šamaš – with whom Mesopotamian kings were routinely identified – that the snake's children are avenged, and things end up for the better, may likewise demonstrate the utility of kings as punishers of oathbreakers and evildoers.[107]

4 Summary

This article reanalyzed two couplets in the Old Babylonian version of *Etana* while offering new solutions to two problems, one in each couplet. It then placed the couplets, newly interpreted, in broader textual context.

The first couplet is OB Morgan 5-6, and the problem confronted therein the nature of an *isinnum*, 'festival' which the text declares the Igigi to have ordained immediately before it notes them not to have set up kings. The couplet's earliest translators took this *isinnum* to refer to a limit set upon human life, yet this is philologically untenable. The vast majority of subsequent interpreters have opted for one of two routes: construing the *isinnum* as unrelated to kingship, which leaves open the question of why it is mentioned at all; and understanding it as a coronation festival, which leaves unclear why such a festival was ordained without kings being set up. Taking a different route, this article argued the *isinnum* to be the absence of kings, who by the nature of their office burden their subjects and so curtail their leisure and joy. Following this interpretation, the Igigi's decision to ordain a festival, and their decision not to set up a king among the people, would be one and the same, and both the mention of the *isinnum* and its existence in the absence of kingship be explicable in context.

The second couplet is OB Morgan 13-14, and the problem the identity of *nišīša*, for whom the text says that no *mitluku*, 'deliberation' existed in kingship's absence. The majority of scholars have analyzed *nišīša* as affixed with a singular feminine possessive pronoun. Yet they have diverged as to the identification of the pronoun's referent, with the two proffered candidates being Ištar and the land (*mātum*). Opting for the former raises considerable thematic and epigraphic difficulties. Opting for the latter does not. Yet opting for either runs against the absence of *ana*, 'for' before *nišīša*. This article proposed to construe *nišīša* as ending not with a singular feminine possessive suffix but with the Old Babylonian locative-terminative ending *-iša*(*m*). It therefore translated *nišīša* as "for the people", thereby sidestepping the problem of the unclear referent while obviating the problem of the missing *ana*.

It was argued that, taken together, the couplets may mean that the Igigi ordained for humanity a holiday-like state of kinglessness, but that this decision deprived the people of deliberation and so was promptly reversed. This article judged these events to evince an ambivalent yet ultimately affirming view of kingship as a necessary pain. It then put them in context: it was observed that *Atraḫasis* and *The Tamarisk and the Palm* have the gods behaving in similarly shortsighted fashion; that *Atraḫasis* also implies a connection between power and labor, and 1 Samuel 8 explicitly connects the advent of earthly kingship with the imposition of immiserating labor on the people; that the role of the king as counselor is likewise stressed in "The Creation of the King", *Atraḫasis*, and *Erra*; and that the importance of counsel, and thus of kingship, is implied by the tale of the eagle and the serpent elsewhere in *Etana* itself.

106 For an analysis of *Enūma eliš* likewise construing it as justifying kingship, see Gabriel 2024.

107 On royal self-identification with the sun god, see Vacín 2009; Charpin 2013; Frahm 2013, 99-101. According to Vacín's analysis (2009, 176-7), Amar-Suen (c. 2046-2037) was the earliest king known to have identified himself with Utu, referring to himself as "the sun god of his land" (^{d}utu-kalam-ma-na, Frayne 1997, E3/2.1.3.16: 11).

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