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The Limit of Transmission
Babylonian Wisdom Literature and Wisdom in Non-Cuneiform Literatures

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Abstract This essay discusses the limits of transmission of Babylonian literature to other non-cuneiform literatures. It will ask can a limit be set as to what is Babylonian, specifically Babylonian Wisdom Literature, in non-cuneiform sources. Three interconnected issues will be addressed: who speaks words of wisdom? Who is the conveyor of wisdom, that is, who is the chief carrier of knowledge which is considered as wisdom? What words of wisdom are spoken? What wisdom themes are expected to be met upon the transmission route and how are words of wisdom spoken? How can genre instruct us to identify a structure typical of Babylonian wisdom literature which can be traced elsewhere? Examples from major works of Babylonian Wisdom Literature will be cited throughout.

Keywords Babylonian Wisdom Literature. Wisdom Literature of the Eastern Mediterranean basin. The Book of Qohele. The Epic of Gilgameš. The Babylonian Theodicy. Jotham's Fable.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Who Speaks Wisdom? – 3 What Words of Wisdom Are Spoken? – 4 How Are Words of Wisdom Spoken? – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

This essay discusses the limit of transmission of Babylonian literature to other non-cuneiform literatures.[1] It will ask can a limit be set

[1] For an overview of Babylonian wisdom literature, see Cohen, Wasserman 2021.

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as to what is specifically Babylonian Wisdom Literature (as far as it can be identified) in non-cuneiform sources. The term limit intends to place an essential bar above which the question of transmission becomes almost non-tangible, in other words, that there are no limits to be placed, and, hence, anything anywhere can be related, and, explained by transmission. Thus, this essay investigates what is the limit that needs to be defined in order to identify, at least as a hypothesis, transmission, and reception, or the context and function at the receiving end. Three interconnected issues will be addressed:

Who speaks words of wisdom? Who is the conveyor of wisdom, that is, who is the chief carrier of knowledge which is considered as wisdom; what words of wisdom are spoken? What wisdom themes are expected to be met upon the transmission route; and how are words of wisdom spoken? How can genre instruct us to identify a structure typical of Babylonian wisdom literature which can be traced elsewhere.

The aim of this essay is not to arrive at a definite conclusion or to bring proof of a transmission of one example of a specific piece of work to another non-cuneiform work, but to define as precisely as the opportunity allows the limits of what can be called transmission.

2 Who Speaks Wisdom?

As is known, traditional wisdom is attributed to figures of authority, such as old man, father, or king. Although seemingly obvious, the question is why? In Babylonia, wisdom is called *ḫasīsu*, literally, the 'ear', which involves a semantic shift to 'intelligence'. A person or deity possessing wisdom achieves the appellation or title *atar ḫasīsa*, 'super wise' or *bēl hasīsi* 'endowed with wisdom' (for a god); or he can be called as possessing *ḫasīsa palkâ*, 'wide ears'. Another term, synonymous of *ḫasīsu*, 'ear', 'wisdom', is *uznu/uznā*, 'ear, ears', which also means 'wisdom'. The expression *rapaš uzni*, 'wide of ear', or possessing *uzna/uznātu rapšātu*, 'wide ears', means 'endowed with wisdom'. The gods can also *uzna ruppušu* – 'widen one's ear', or 'grant wisdom'.

However, the notion of why 'ear' necessarily is 'wisdom', or 'intelligence' and what has 'wide' or 'broad' to do with wisdom needs further comment, as the semantic shift between the 'ear' and 'wisdom' had not been adequately explained before.[2] I risk providing my own explanation, although it rests on an assumption which cannot be definitely proven.

In the human body, the ear is the only tissue organ which consistently grows even after adulthood (in a prominent way; the nose is

2 E.g. Westenholz 2014.

another organ). The older one grows the bigger one's ear is. Evidently, big ears or wide ears are traits of old or older people. Hence, it is of no surprise to find *yashish* in Hebrew as 'old man', cognate with Akkadian *hasīsu*. In pre-modern days or preindustrial societies, a person with utterly big ears, that is old, was lucky enough to have survived, outliving his age group. Of course, in ancient societies, such as Mesopotamia, luck had nothing to do with it, rather the fact that the person was loved by the gods who granted him longevity. The reason he was granted longevity was because he was rewarded for his piousness and moral living. Hence, *hasīsa palkâ* and *uzna/uznātu rapšātu* 'wide ears' were taken as a metaphor for the archetypical wise person. And when the gods 'widen one's ears' they grant one old age, experience or wisdom. Of course this is not to deny the cognitive aspect of the ear as an agent of hearing, but to sharpen the imagery behind the otherwise implicit 'wide-eared'.

The wise person's configurations in wisdom literature can take the form of an exceedingly old person, like Atra-ḫasīs, who was granted eternal life, or a father-figure, like Šuruppak, who is necessarily older, hence more wise and experienced, speaking wisdom to his son. The same is seen in additional compositions. The wisdom composition called *šimâ milka*, or *Šūpû-amēlu* (Most Illustrious Man), in which Šūpû-amēlu gives advice to his son; the Old Babylonian composition called *The Scholars of Uruk*, where the father-figure chides his son; similarly in the *Dialogue Between a Father and His Son*; and, most probably, in the *Counsels of Wisdom*, where wisdom is delivered from a father to his son, or a father-like figure to a son-like figure, such as from a senior official to his junior.[3]

In Mesopotamia this traditional position of old man or father can be expanded or replaced by the figure of the king, as the wisest alive. This happened in literature, such as in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (cf. *ša naqba īmuru*, 'He [i.e. Gilgameš] who saw the 'deep''), and as in *The Instructions of Šuruppak*, whose speaker of wisdom, i.e. Šuruppak, was regarded as king in the Mesopotamian literary tradition, although his instructions are not necessarily related to courtly life and manners.[4] Consider also the *Counsels of Ur-Ninurta*, a composition of instructions that were seemingly issued by king Ur-Ninurta of the first Dynasty of Isin (ca. twentieth-nineteenth centuries BCE).[5] But the attribution of wisdom to royal figures was reflected also in real life, when, for example, King Assurbanipal was equated with Adapa. Additional wise kings were Šulgi and Nabonidus. In the context of courtly life,

3 Cohen 2013, 81-128; George 2009, 78-112, no. 14; Foster, George 2020; Lambert 1960, 96-107, 311-15, 345-6; Lenzi 2018.

4 George 2003, 1: 444-5; Alster 2005, 31-220.

5 Alster 2005, 221-64.

expressed apocryphally, the *Uruk List of Scholars and Kings* (without entering to the question of the time of its composition) wished perhaps to re-establish the position of the wise (and traditional) sage as the indispensable advisor of the royal figure.[6]

Similar configurations in non-cuneiform wisdom literature are evident in the *Book of Proverbs*, where traditional wisdom is conveyed by father and mother to son ("Attend my son to your father's instruction [מוסר], and do not reject the teaching [תורה] of your mother").[7] But, as in Mesopotamia, wisdom taught by one's 'father and mother' is appropriated by the figure of King Solomon. Thus the book opens: "The proverbs of Solomon son of David king of Israel, to know wisdom and instruction [מוסר]".[8] The artificiality of the opening verse is blatant, when a few lines down of the very same opening chapter we hear about parental wisdom.

Traditional wisdom conveyed by an elder figure to his younger kin is seen in the *Story of Ahiqar*. Of course, Ahiqar was no father to Nadin, but his uncle. Such a change was required by the narrative (i.e. the good uncle vs. the wayward nephew). But in the narrative Ahiqar was also placed in a high position of a sage or counselor (of Kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon), as dictated by the Babylonian perception of kings and their scholars.

Father and/or king, scholar or vizier as conveyors of wisdom to their juniors are also commonly used to frame the *sebayit* instructions in the Egyptian wisdom literature: Ptahhotep, an official, to his son, King Cheti to his son Merikare, King Amenhotep I to his son Sesosteris I, and Amenemope the scribe to his son.[9]

But there are also alternatives to father/king/scholar as speakers of wisdom. In the *Epic of Gilgameš* Siduri is an interesting case to consider. Her name means 'woman', 'young girl' in Hurrian, keying Siduri in the ears of the Mesopotamian audience as a female captive or prisoner of war. This Siduri works as a bar-keeper of a brothel, and she lives at the end of the world. As a liminal figure, on the crossroads of mortal life and the eternal life of the gods, non-representative of traditional Mesopotamian perceptions, she conveys words to wisdom to Gilgamesh. Her wisdom is unconventional. Rather than be a heroic king – like Sargon and Naram-Sin, upon whom the literary figure of Gilgamesh is modeled, she says to Gilgameš,

> "O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?
> The life that you seek you will never find.

6 Lenzi 2008.
7 Prov. 1:8.
8 Prov. 1:1.
9 E.g. Adams 2020.

When the gods created mankind, death they dispensed to mankind,
Life they kept for themselves.
But you Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
Enjoy yourself always by day and by night!
Make merry each day,
Dance and play day and night.
Let your clothes be clean,
Let your head be washed, may you bathe in water,
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,
Let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace.
For such is the destiny of [mortal men]".[10]

With Siduri, heroism is reversed. Better to be home than chasing windmills. Thus, her words reminds one of a similar negative or nihilistic wisdom theme, the 'vanity theme' or the *carpe diem* theme. Great deeds are useless because even the greatest died, for death was bestowed to all mankind, so best to live life to its fullest.

Siduri's wisdom, however, is quickly appropriated. Siduri appears as a wisdom figure in the Old Babylonian Gilgameš version. In the Standard Babylonian version, however, it is Utnapišti who now speaks similar themes to Gilgamesh. In the Standard Babylonian version, Siduri steps out of the limelight, and becomes a cut-out character. Utnapišti as sage-king is now the one who advocates wisdom, telling Gilgamesh that the life of mortals is limited, in a vein not unsimilar to Siduri's.[11]

Perhaps there were other Siduri-s, now lost to us.[12] We heard of the wisdom (תורה) of the mother in the *Book of Proverbs*, but she also has disappeared – Solomon was now the wise king. Other 'wise women' may have been erased out of literary history, with a few fleetingly mentioned, such as the 'wise woman' of Abel Beit Maacah.[13] Šērū'a-eṭirat, the eldest daughter of Esarhaddon and sister of the 'twin'brothers, Assurbanipal and Šamaš-šumi-ukin, resurfaces in *Papyrus Amherst* 63, as Sryṭrh or Saritrah, a woman counselor and diplomat.[14] Regardless of her role in history, it is interesting to note that in Aramaic literature, a place is given to the counselor queen. This can be of significance as further consideration is given to speakers of wisdom in non-cuneiform literature.

10 *The Epic of Gilgameš*, "Sippar" Tablet (Old Babylonian; George 2003, 276-86).

11 Tablet 10, ll. 293'-322'; George 2003, 696–9.

12 Consider the comparison between Siduri and Achilles' mother, Thetis, by Viano, Sironi 2022.

13 Camp 1981.

14 Holm 2020.

Consider Aesop – a complete reversal of the archetypical ancient Near Eastern conveyor of wisdom, although acknowledged as a stranger, coming from Phrygia and as a prisoner of war, of physical defects. What was the intention of such a portrayal? A reversal of the Babylonian or other ancient Near Eastern traditions of the wise king, although adopting ancient Near Eastern literature (to a certain extent) through proverbs and sayings?

A figure which invites more discussion than can be given here is the *aluzinnu*, the 'jester' or 'buffoon', who transposes and ridicules perceived wisdom and knowledge.[15] Hardly a star of Mesopotamian literature, he appears in one badly preserved composition, where he mocks the entire profession of Babylonian medicine and magic (which came hand in hand), by a display of pseudo-incantations. Was the *aluzinnu* adopted to the Greek world in a similar role as the *alozon*, the 'boaster' or 'clown'?[16] There, regardless of a shared etymology real or false between Akkadian *aluzinnu* and Greek *alozon*, he rose to fame, or at least moved to center stage. And if so, was the *aluzinnu*'s Babylonian 'wisdom' the blueprint of the exploits of the *alozon* in Greece, as a man whose wisdom is all pretense? In this context, one is reminded of the 'wise' servant in the *Dialogue of Pessimism* (aka *Arad Mitguranni*) or Gimil-Ninurta, the protagonist in the *Poor Man of Nippur*, who despite their low status outwit their superiors.[17] They too, like the *aluzinnu*, can be seen as jester archetypes, finding a later reflection, directly or not cannot be known, with other non-cuneiform literatures of the Mediterranean basin and Mesopotamia.

Reversal of roles can also be recognized in Babylonian disputation literature (which will be discussed below in *How Are Words of Wisdom Spoken?*), where figures of wisdom are ridiculed – to be portrayed by insignificant critters. The *Series of the Spider*, for example, lifts up quotations from the *Babylonian Theodicy*, *Gilgameš*, and other 'worthy' works, to be spoken by rodents or insects. The comparison with the Greek *Battle of Frogs and Mice* is inevitable, as is the question of transmission.[18]

15 A translation of the text is found in Foster 2005, 939-41. There is no modern edition.

16 Griffith, Marks 2011; Veldhuis 2006; Rumor 2017.

17 The *Dialogue of Pessimism* is structured as an exchange between a master and his slave. Whenever the master wishes to embark upon a task (hunting, marrying, conducting business, starting a revolt), the slave supports his intentions with words of instructive wisdom, such as in proverbs and instructions. But when the master reneges on his words, the slave, in order to buttress his master's desires, brings about negative or pessimistic wisdom, for which see the section below "What Words of Wisdom are Spoken?"; Lambert 1960, 139-49. *The Poor Man of Nippur* is a folktale about a poor man although a trickster, who takes his revenge on a figure of authority; Foster 2005, 931-6; Ottervanger 2016.

18 In the *Series of the Spider* two insignificant animals (insects?) argue in front of the spider over who is more worthy (Jiménez 2017, 291-323). The use of poetic language

To conclude this discussion, when speaking of transmission, it should be asked who in the eyes of the ancients conveys this wisdom. And in the process of transmission, was the conveyor of this wisdom maintained (wise king or ruler, such as Solon) or rather inverted (e.g. Aesop and the *alozon*), in order to create a contrastive or polemic narrative framework, which, nonetheless, is willing to accept Babylonian wisdom traditions? Or perhaps, as Babylonian disputation literature hints, the inversion of accepted roles was already conventional in that ancient literature tradition, paving the path for alternative conveyors of wisdom? And were women as speakers of wisdom conventionally silenced only to resurface in alternative narratives, nowadays almost completely lost?

3 What Words of Wisdom Are Spoken?

One of the most common and enduring themes of wisdom literature is the 'vanity theme', which expresses, in a similar way to Siduri's words seen above, the futility of life in face of coming death. It is expressed most pointedly in the Babylonian *Ballad of Early Rulers*, where the poet sings of the many illustrious heroes, who in spite of their heroic deeds, are now dead and gone. He goes on to recommend the listener to have a good glass of beer (in the tavern no doubt), and enjoy life as much as he can. The theme is echoed in many literatures, where it is sometimes identified as the *ubi sunt* motif. As shown in a previous study, although the vanity theme may seem as too diffuse to claim a shared heritage, the list of dead rulers now in the netherworld appended to the 'vanity theme' can be recognized as a distinct literary device. Since it is found in the Babylonian *Ballad* but also throughout various literatures (Greek, Arabic, Egyptian, Syriac), this may bring one to speak of transmission of a motif of Babylonian wisdom literature in non-cuneiform literatures. A few examples are provided:[19]

All life is but the wink of an eye,
Life of mankind cannot last forever,
Where is Alulu who reigned for 36,000 years?
Where is Entena who went up to heaven?

and quotes from the *Babylonian Theodicy* elevates the level of satire and ridicule. The *Babylonian Theodicy*, quoted in the *Series of the Spider*, is a wisdom dialogue between the sufferer and his friend who contend on the problem of divine retribution; Oshima 2013. It was one of the best-known and much studied works in Babylonia, as it is today.

19 Discussion and full references in Cohen 2017.

> Where is Gilgameš who sought (eternal) life like (that of) [Zius] udra?
> Where is Hu[wawa who…]?
> Where is Enkidu who [proclaimed] (his) strength throughout the land?
> Where is Bazi? Where is Zizi?
> Where are the great kings of which (the like) from then to now
> Are not (anymore) engendered, are not bo[rn]?
> Life without light – how can it be better than death?[20]

> Where are the princes of the heathen become, and such as ruled the beasts upon the earth; They that had their pastime with the fowls of the air, and they that hoarded up silver and gold, wherein men trust, and made no end of their getting? For they that wrought in silver, and were so careful, and whose works are unsearchable, They are vanished and gone down to the grave, and others are come up in their steads.
> The Agarenes that seek wisdom upon earth, the merchants of Meran and of Theman, the authors of fables, and searchers out of understanding; none of these have known the way of wisdom, or remember her paths.[21]

> A king was Xerxes, the one who claimed to share everything with god.
> Yet he crossed back the Lemnian water with a single oar.
> Blessed was Midas, thrice-blessed was Kinyras,
> But what man went to Hades with more than an obol?[22]

> Where is Khosarow? Where is Caesar? Where is who joined money with more money, so that it became plenty? I have already seen time destroying one group of people after another. No rich man stays (forever rich), neither a poor one. Where is who claimed to be superior in richness of the world and was proud? I wish I knew what would come after what I see.[23]

The next set of examples will demonstrate how another literary devise of Babylonian wisdom literature is used to propel the idea of the 'vanity theme'. It does so by introducing the human life versus animal life motif, or, in the view of the nihilist, the lack of difference between human life and animal life. Man despite his toil is no better than beast.

20 *The Ballad of Early Rulers* (Old Babylonian period, ca. 1700-1500 BCE).
21 *The Book of Baruch* (ca. 200-100 BCE).
22 *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus* 1795 (second century CE).
23 Abu al-ʿAtāhiyya 748-828 CE.

In the Babylonian Wisdom composition *šimâ milka*, the wise father (Šūpû-amēlu) advises his son to build a house for himself, amass wealth, raise a family and by doing so be considered a success in the eyes of society of humans and gods. The son replies that all life is of no point, because all die at the end (the 'vanity theme'). Hence, father's advices are useless. To argue his point the son says the following:[24]

anenna summatu dāmimtu iṣṣūru murtappittu
ša alpi danni alê bīssu
[*ša dam*]*dammatu anenna mārūšu*

"Where is the moaning dove – the bird that is always on the move?
As for the strong ox – where is its household?
[As for the ma]re mule – where are its children?"

The questions that the son asks go unanswered but their implication is clear. Look at the animals of the wild and the field. They have no permanent houses, they amass no wealth in the granary, they even do not have children. In what way do they fare worse than us? In what way are we better? Both we and they will die.

The theme or motif is also found in the *Babylonian Theodicy*. A dialogue-structure between the so-called Pious Sufferer and his friend brings the two opposing view of wisdom: the Sufferer representing nihilistic wisdom (of the kind the son in *šimâ milka* expresses) and the friend, representing traditional 'fatherly' or positive wisdom.

As the Sufferer complains of his cruel fate, his friend, the wise sage, urges him to pray to the gods for salvation. The Sufferer, however, rejects the friend's advice, turning to the animal versus human metaphor, saying:[25]

[*a*]*kkānu serrēmu ša iṭpupu šumuḫ šamm*[*i*]
ak-kabtî pakki ilī uzunšu ibši

aggu lābu ša ītakkalu dumuq šīri
ak-kimilti iltî šupṭuri ubil maṣḫassu

"The onager, the wild ass, that had its fill of lush wild grasses,
Did it have a care for the weighty wisdom of the gods?

The savage lion that fed himself from the choicest meat,
Did it bring its flour offerings to appease a goddess's wrath?"

24 Ll. 122'–124'. See above fn. 3.

25 Ll. 48-51. Lambert 1960, 72-5; Oshima 2013, 11, 19; Heinrich, Jiménez, Mitto, forthcoming.

As before, the condition of man is similar, if not worse than those of animals. The animals are neither pious nor hold to traditional values, but regardless live well and survive. Like in *šimâ milka*, traditional wisdom (praying to the gods, being pious etc.), is rejected because it is useless.

The *Sargon Birth Legend* is the next composition to use this device. The *Sargon Birth Legend* is a well-known literary work, categorized under the genre of *narû*-literature, which while criticizing royal power imitates Mesopotamian royal inscriptions, in particular of Sargon and Naram-Sin.[26] The *Sargon Birth Legend* tells how Sargon was born to an *entu*-priestess who placed him in a bitumen-covered casket. The casket was carried down the river, but Sargon was saved by a gardener, and from lowly beginnings he arose to become the world's greatest emperor. The rest of the composition, which is very poorly preserved, suffers from a break with the main story, and therefore its contents have not been properly understood. There is a gap of some fifteen lines in the text, but sense arrives, however, if the human versus the animal motif is considered. Hence, a re-reading of the final lines can provide us the sense of the whole composition.[27]

u šūru [...]
irtappud laḫru ina ṣēri ammēni la [...]
u ṣabītu israt šāri lulima [...]

iṣṣūru qadû ša iltassû mušīta
ina šisītišu mīna utter

illak šāru ayya bīssu
iltassum serrēmu ayyak[*a illak*] [var. *irtappud serrēmu ibît ina ṣēri*]
išū' arû ana mannīšu

ša parû lāsimu ayyinni mārūšu
ul išēṭ barbaru dāmi [...]

nēšu ākil dāmi [...]

The wild bull [...]

The ewe ran about in the steppe, why does it not...? [...]
And the gazelle driven by the wind, the stag ... [...]?

26 Lewis 1980.

27 Ll. 50-62. On the basis of Westenholz 1997, 44-7, supplemented by Jiménez, Mitto forthcoming.

> The owl that always hoots at night,
> What does it achieve with its speech?
>
> The wind blows thither – where is its home?
> The onager runs about, where does he [go?] [var.: The onager runs about, he spends his nights on the steppe].
> The eagle flies – but to [aid] one of his own?
>
> The swift mule, where are its children?
> Didn't the wolf miss … the blood … ?
>
> The lion-eating bloody-flesh.[28]

The passage from the *Sargon Birth Legend*, as badly as it is preserved, consists of the motive already encountered.[29] It can be surmised with all due caution that the glory of Sargon is probably questioned by the vanity theme, expressed by the device of asking what difference is there at the end of the day between man and beast. Sargon achieved so much – but what is it worth? The animals roam about, the wind is homeless, the onager runs about the steppe, with no home. The owl hoots at night, but to what use, because, with everybody asleep, who can hear him? And the eagle flies high in the sky, without tending his family. The swift mule is sterile and therefore has no offspring. And yet they pretty well survive, without conquering the world. What is challenged here is the conventional narrative of world domination. (And consider above the words of Siduri to Gilgameš). The critical outlook on the exploits of the mighty and famous is not foreign to *narû*-literature. The very essence of the genre of *narû* is to question the limits of power.[30]

Indeed, it is to be recalled that from a Mesopotamian point of view, the very suggestion that humans and animals are the same challenges one of the basic tenets of Mesopotamian religion, which is that gods and humans stand in one category, as opposed to the category of animals, or in the general sense, the natural world. Gods and humans

28 The rest of the text is very poorly preserved.

29 The point was already partially realized by Westenholz 1997, 36: "Column ii [i.e. the lines considered here] poses many problems, since it contains no narrative but a series of rhetorical questions. These questions are also addressed to an implied audience. The seemingly obvious message to be read out of the text is a commentary on the futility of all human effort. The relationship of this section to the story of Sargon is unfortunately not clear. It could contain his reflections at the end of his life. On the other hand, it may describe a tragic cataclysm at the end of his reign. Though most unlikely, it is also possible that col. ii contains an unrelated composition, traditionally copied on the same tablet as the 'Sargon Autobiography'."

30 Schaudig 2019.

are the same but for their immortality. In this respect, it is interesting to note that no poem of Babylonian literature ever celebrated an animal, and no song was composed on the beauty of a snowy mountain.

The discussion of the human vs. animal motif leads one to consider a few passages from the *Book of Qohelet*.

The speaker of the *Book of Qohelet*, an unnamed 'son of David', articulates the 'vanity theme' throughout many passages in composition.[31] Perhaps this passage[32] is the closest articulation found of the ideas recounted in Babylonian compositions, such as *šimâ milka* or the *Ballad*

> What point for man is there who toils and strives in all his heart as he toils under the sun? All his days are constant pain, and anger is his concern also at nighttime, his heart rests not – this is vanity also. Hence there is nothing better for man than to eat and drink, and to enjoy himself, even when in toil. I have learnt this too – because it is dictated by God.

Qohelet then continues in a later pericope[33] to discuss the fate of the just and unjust, for he has seen how justice is meted. It matters not, he says, whether one is just or wicked.[34] Thus, he is critical of positive wisdom, similar in his point of view to the Sufferer in the *Theodicy*.[35] He comes to the conclusion that man's actions are of no relevance to his fate, hence man and beast are alike.[36]

> The case of humans and beasts is alike: as one dies so does the other, they draw the same breath. Is man different from beast? No. All is vanity. Everything reaches the same place: everything was dust and to dust it will return. Can anybody know if humans' breaths goes up while beast's breath goes down to the netherworld? And I understood – man must enjoy his doings, because that is his lot. Who will bring him to know what will be after he dies?

31 On the relationship between the *Book of Qohelet* and ancient Near Eastern literature, long acknowledged, see Samet 2015, the most important discussion in recent years, because it takes into consideration the newly discovered or newly assessed Babylonian 'vanity theme' wisdom compositions. Worthy of mention is Gianto 1998, who was among the first to point out the thematic relationship between Qohelet and the *Ballad* and *šimâ milka* and Keefer 2022, 188, who points out to the thematic similarity between *šimâ milka* and Qohelet. The English translation of the *Book of Qohelet* brought here rests on the *New English Bible*.

32 Qoh. 2:22-25.

33 Qoh. 3:16-22.

34 For the *carpe diem* motif in this passage, see Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2011, 284-7.

35 Shields 2006, 146-9; Seow 1997, 175-6.

36 Qoh. 3:19-22.

Qohelet judges mankind and animals to be alike, their fate not different.[37] All die, despite man's deeds, whether good or bad. Nothing promises a blessed afterlife. Who ever said that the spirit of beasts goes to the netherworld while that of man's to heaven?[38]

It is interesting to note how the 'vanity theme', both in the Babylonian wisdom compositions and in the *Book of Qohelet* brings into play the human condition versus the animal condition. For the Mesopotamian authors the animal world is brought to prove the point that although animals do not toil, amass fortunes, or behave piously towards the gods, they go about and live as much as man does. For Qohelet, man's deeds are of no relevance as regards his fate: either good or bad, who can know man's fate. Thus, mankind's case and the beasts' case are the same: all will die. And after death, man will not know what worth were his doings.

To conclude, a notion of negative or nihilistic wisdom which introduces a comparison between human and beast can be recognized. It was identified as a literary motive in Babylonian wisdom compositions which introduce the 'vanity theme'. They include *šimâ milka*, the *Theodicy*, and the *Sargon Birth Legend*. A similar device used to argue that man's fate after death cannot be known was found in the *Book of Qohelet*. Common to the Babylonian compositions and to Qohelet is the argument that the human and animal condition is of no difference. Thus the argument demonstrates the invalidity of the claims of accepted wisdom of the fathers or wise men, encouraging whoever encounters it to question established truisms and platitudes. But there is more to consider. The speaker of Qohelet is a prince, "son of David", a figure of power and authority, a figure who is modeled, so one can assume, on the representation of the royal *persona* in the ancient Near East. And yet, Qohelet acutely observes from a position of power that all is vanity, hence ultimately criticizing his very own. The same outlook by way of the teller is taken in the *Birth Legend of Sargon*: the mighty king's power is criticized as valueless in face of impending death.

4 How Are Words of Wisdom Spoken?

The last issue to be discussed is that of genre – or, how are words of wisdom spoken within a given literary frame. Is genre enough to test the limit of transmission? A recent volume (2020) edited by Enrique Jiménez and Catherine Mittermayer set about to examine

37 Longman 1998, 129.

38 For Qohelet's critique of apocalyptic ideas, perhaps prevalent in the author's days (through Greek-Hellenistic influence?), see Fischer 1998 and Krüger 2004, 93.

critically the genre of disputation literature in the *Near East and Beyond*, with 'beyond' extending to Syriac literature, Arabic, Medieval Spain, Iran and so on. The underlying assumption of the volume was that in some way or the other the genre of disputation literature has had its origins in the Babylonian disputations. Another dimension can be added to the discussion that moves beyond the question of genre. This can be done by looking at a specific discourse in this type of literature.

The main and shared characteristic of disputation literature is that of two 'non-human' *personae* disputing between themselves who the more beneficial is. So much is clear. But in the disputes there is more. The dispute runs along the divide of the human and the divine. The question which is argued is who is more beneficial to gods and humans, with each protagonist emphasizing his or her traits and features in both domains. Two Babylonian compositions can demonstrate just that, the *Date-Palm and the Tamarisk*, and the recently reconstructed composition, the *Date-Palm and the Vine*.[39] In the *Date-Palm and the Tamarisk*, the Tamarisk says:

> "I am the exorcist priest, I renew the temple…
> Behold: aren't my surroundings full of resin? Are they not full of incense?
> The priestess collects the 'water' of the tamarisk, and then praise is given and a festival performed".

The date palm responds by saying that its fronds are also used in purification rites, as well as of course as feeding everybody.

> "In the offering place, when o[ffering to Sin the prin]ce,
> Without myself being present,
> The king cannot perform libation.
> My purification rites are performed through all corners of the world,
> My fronds are dropped to [the ground] and a festival is celebrated. […]
> I am considered a replacement for grain for a period of three months […]
> The orphan, the widow, the pauper […]
> They eat food which never diminishes. My dates are good"[40]

And in the parallel composition the *Date-Palm and the Vine*, the Palm-tree says,

39 Cohen 2013, 177-98; Jiménez 2017, 231-87.

40 *The Date-Palm and the Tamarisk* (Old Babylonian; eighteenth-sixteenth centuries BCE).

> "I am [Palm, the …],
> I am tall in stature […]
> I am suitable in my crown, like the cyprus itself […]
> In my luscious fruit humanity exults,
> Lavishly do I supply the table of the gods and provide them with perfect oblations.
> Without me the exorcist casts no spells,
> With my produce he carries out every hand-washing ritual."
> The vine, not to be undone, replies as follows,
> "I am wine, the purifier of everything, the mountain tipple!
> In the cup of Šamaš, at the divine table, I blend the tithe
> [And], as for Šamaš, the bond of the people, the sun of humanity,
> I make his heart expand, I light up his face …
> It is after my name [i.e. *karānu* 'wine'] that [humanity] names libation drinks [*kurunnu* 'libation']…
> I heal the sick person whom fever afflicts,
> [And] bring back from the Netherworld the sick [and] dying,
> He whose life has faded from his breast,
> And death has covered it [sc. his breast], bearing him towards the grave,
> On his deathbed I spare his life!"[41]

Can we trace a similar discourse in non-cuneiform literatures? The tension between human and divine sphere is also found in the Syrian *Dialogue between the Vine and Cedar*, and the Parthian composition named as the *Babylonian Tree*, which features a disputation between the Palm-tree and the goat.[42] In the Syrian *Dialogue between the Vine and Cedar*, the Vine says,

> "It is I who give forth wine, which gladdens the heart of humans.
> The one short on wine has no life, [neither do] the rich without luxury.
> For kings exult in [my] produce, and sadness is overthrown.
> Rulers delight in my necklaces, and children rejoice in my clusters.
> My leaves give healing, and my tendrils [give] every sweetness […]
> In the holy cup it is mixed, and it is offered with sacrifices.
> Small and great love me. Who therefore is equal to me?"[43]

In the *Babylonian Tree*, the goat speaks,

41 *Date-Palm and the Vine* (date unknown; only first millennium copies).

42 Butts in Jiménez 2017, 462-73; Brunner 1980, and further discussion, Cohen 2021.

43 *The Dialogue between the Vine and the Cedar* (Dawid bar Pawlos; eighth-ninth centuries CE).

> "For the almighty creator, radiant kind Ohrmazd
> for the pure religion of the Mazdeans, which kind Ohrmazd taught,
> one cannot do worship without me, who am the goat.
> For from me they make milk offerings [...] in the rites of the gods
> [...] the efficacy is from me."[44]

The tension of a plant species serving either man or god, as one can call it, is found in the *Fable of Trees*, which Jotham delivers in Judges 9.

> "The trees searched for someone to be king over them. They said to the Olive: reign over us! But the Olive replied: Shall I halt my fruits with which gods and folk partake? [...]
> The trees said to the Vine; go thee – reign over us! But the Vine told them: Shall I stop my wine which delights gods and folk?, and go to be king among the trees?"

The value of the trees in the fable is measured according to the benefit each brings to gods and humans. The *crux interpretum* of Jotham's fable lies in the worth of the thorn, called to rule over the trees, but this question lies outside the scope of our discussion.[45]

To conclude, if the limit of transmission is to be defined, genre by itself may not be sufficient. The deep structure investigated here supplies genre with a meaning: the disputation is not just a literary game of wit and erudition, as many times it has been displayed, but rather a discourse into an existential problem of the believer: what or who is of greater value not only to mankind but also to the divine domain? While in some disputations the winner is proclaimed, in others the question remains deliberately, so it seems, open.

5 Conclusion

Three parameters by which the discussion on Babylonian wisdom literature and non-cuneiform literature can be expanded were introduced. They were meant to set the limit of transmission, that is to say, when can one begin to identify transmission. First, emphasis was placed on the changes one can expect in the course of transmission, when speakers of wisdom were changed or adapted. Secondly, a discussion into the strategies developed around a single wisdom theme – the 'vanity theme' – was offered. It was demonstrated how the list of long dead figures or the human versus animal

44 *The Babylonian Tree* (Parthian; Middle Persian).

45 Tatu 2006.

motif provided the metaphor for carrying the 'vanity theme'. Thirdly, the question of genre in the transmission of wisdom literature was raised. The case of disputation literature showed that genre by itself is rather insufficient to provide the foil against which transmission can be argued. The underlying structural element which creates the tension in the disputation must also be taken into account.

It is hoped that the three parameters brought into discussion be considered when talking about transmission, as the quest for the reconstruction of lost literatures, across centuries, languages, religions and cultures continues.

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