This “lamentation to a man’s god,” as the ancient author himself describes it, is an edifying poetic essay composed, no doubt, for the purpose of prescribing the proper attitude and conduct for a victim of cruel and seemingly undeserved misfortune. The Sumerians, like all peoples throughout the ages, were troubled by the problem of human suffering, particularly relative to its rather enigmatic causes and potential remedies. Their teachers and sages believed and taught the doctrine that man’s misfortunes were the result of his sins and misdeeds. They were convinced, moreover, that no man is without guilt; as our Sumerian poet-theologian puts it: “Never was a sinless child born to its mother.”1 This dogma was in line with the accepted world-view of the Sumerian theologian, according to which the gods in control of the cosmos planned and instituted evil, falsehood and violence as part and parcel of civilization; cf. S. N. Kramer, The Sumerians, pp. 125 ff.

The main thesis of our poet is that in cases of suffering and adversity, no matter how seemingly unjustified, the victim has but one valid and effective recourse, and that is to continually glorify his god and keep wailing and lamenting before him until he turns a favorable ear to his prayers. The god concerned is the sufferer’s “personal” god, that is the deity who, in accordance with the accepted Sumerian credo, acted as the man’s representative and intercessor in the assembly of the gods.3 To prove his point our author does not resort to philosophical speculation and theological argumentation. Instead, with characteristic Sumerian pragmatism, he cites a case: Here is a man, unnamed to be sure, who had been wealthy, wise and righteous, or at least seemingly so, and blest with both friends and kin. One day sickness and suffering overwhelmed him. Did he defy the divine order and blaspheme? Not at all! He came humbly before his god with tears and lamentation, and poured out his heart in prayer and supplication. As a result his god was highly pleased and moved to compassion; he gave heed to his prayer, delivered him from his misfortunes and turned his suffering to joy.2

The notion of a personal god was evolved by the Sumerian theologian, according to which the leading deities of the Sumerian pantheon were too distant and aloof from the individual man, and one must have been tempted to challenge the fairness and justice of the gods, and to blaspheme against them. It may well be that it was in an effort to forestall such resentment against the gods and to ward off potential disillusionment with the divine order, that one of the sages of the Sumerian academy, the edubba, composed this instructive essay.

The young man—he uses not his strength for evil in the place of deceit, (Yet . . . , sickness, bitter suffering . . . d him), . . . , fate, . . . brought . . . close to him, Bitter . . . confused its . . . , covered his . . . , . . . placed an evil hand on him, he was treated as . . . of his god, . . . in his . . . , . . . he weeps, . . . he directed a . . . .

1 This primary poetic device utilized by the author is cumulative parallelism; cf., e.g., lines 1-9; 26-29; 31-36; 42-43; etc., etc.

4 “Young man” renders the Sumerian word gurru that has a semantic range equivalent to the Hebrew gebel.