

Sumerian Wisdom Text

TRANSLATOR: S. N. KRAMER

Man and his God

A SUMERIAN VARIATION OF THE "JOB" MOTIF

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 In spite of surface appearances to the contrary, therefore, there are no cases of unjust and undeserved human suffering; it is always man who is to blame, not the gods. But the truth of such theological premises and conclusions is by no means readily apparent, and in moments of adversity, more than one sufferer 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*,² composed this instructive essay.

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 favourable 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.

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.

² For a discussion of the Sumerian *edubba*, its faculty, student body and curriculum, cf. S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians*, pp. 229 ff.

³ The notion of a personal god was evolved by the Sumerian theologians in response to the feeling that the leading deities of the pantheon were too distant and aloof from the individual man, and that the latter should therefore have an intermediary, a kind of "good angel," to intercede on his behalf when the gods assembled (probably every New Year's Day) to judge all men and decide their fates; cf. especially H. and H. A. Frankfort, *et al.*, *Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, pp. 203-04. Just how these personal gods were selected by the individual or head of a family is uncertain, but we actually have the names of the "personal" deities of a number of Sumerian rulers from the second half of the third millennium B.C.

Structurally speaking, our poetic tract⁴ may be tentatively divided into five sections. First comes a brief introductory exhortation that man should praise and exalt his god and soothe him with lamentations (lines 1-g). The poet then introduces the unnamed individual who, upon being smitten with sickness and misfortune, addresses his god with tears and prayers (lines 10-20 plus). There follows the sufferer's petition which constitutes the major part of the poem (lines 26 minus-116). It begins with a description of the ill treatment accorded him by his fellow men—friend and foe alike (lines 26-55); continues with a lament against his bitter fate, including a rhetorical request to his kin and to the professional singers to do likewise (lines 56-95); and concludes with a confession of guilt and a direct plea for relief and deliverance (lines 96-116). Finally comes the "happy ending," in which the poet informs us that the man's prayer did not go unheeded, and that his god accepted the entreaties and delivered him from his afflictions (lines 117-129). All this leads, of course, to a further glorification of his god (lines 130-end).

Two pieces belonging to this composition were first published in *STVC*, Nos. 1 and 2, but the text was there assumed to be a collection of proverbs rather than a connected essay. Later I identified three other pieces, one in the University Museum, and two in the Istanbul Museum of the Ancient Orient, and these were published in *Supplement to VT*, m (1960), pp. 172-82, together with a transliteration and translation of the text, which could now be recognized as an essay concerned with the problem of human suffering and what to do about it. Still later, E. I. Gordon identified another small piece in the University Museum; this was published in *Bi. Or.*, xvii, pp. 149 ff., where the reader will also find a number of useful bibliographical details.

Let a man utter constantly the exaltedness of his god,
Let the young man" praise artlessly the words of his god,
Let the inhabitant of the straightforward land *moan*,
In the house [of] s[ong] let him *interpret ...* to his
woman-friend and man-friend,

Soothe [his *he*]art,

Bring forth ..., utter ...,

Measure out ...,

Let his lament soothe the heart of his god,

(For) a man without a god would not obtain food.

The young man-he uses not his strength for evil

in the place of deceit, (10)

(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 ...,

⁴ The primary poetic device utilized by the author is cumulative parallelism; cf., e.g., lines 1-9; 26-29; 31-36; 42-43; etc., etc.

⁵ "Young man" renders the Sumerian word *guruš* that has a semantic range equivalent to the Hebrew *gebher*.