Wisdom Between East and West:
Mesopotamia, Greece and Beyond
edited by Francesco Sironi and Maurizio Viano

From Dialogue to Debate
Argumentative and Epic Discourse in Mesopotamian Literature Between II and I Millennium BCE

Simonetta Ponchia
Università degli Studi di Verona, Italia

Abstract Dialogical structures in the wisdom debate of the *Babylonian Theodicy* and in the epic of *Erra and Išum* are analysed comparing both the stylistic level and the main moral and theological issues the texts bring to the fore. Rhetorical and dialectical means appear to be deployed as tools for articulating subtle reasoning and arguments. They allow myth to be subjected to renewed reflection and reworking, deeply transforming epic narrative. This scenario suggests the emergence of a new figure of sage and *literatus*, particularly versed in the art of debate.

Keywords Babylonian Theodicy. Babylonian literature. Dialectics in Assyro-Babylonian texts. Dialogue and debate. Erra and Išum.

1 Introduction

In Mesopotamian myths direct speech and its repetitions are a major narrative technique, used especially for characterising the protagonists and moving the action from one scene to another, and illustrate temporal sequences and the consequences of the first enunciation of wishes, intentions, claims, etc. This gives a dramatic character

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Antichistica 36 | Studi orientali 13
e-ISSN 2610-9344 | ISSN 2610-8828
ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-776-0 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-777-7

Peer review | Open access
Submitted 2023-11-24 | Accepted 2024-03-04 | Published 2024-07-09

DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-776-0/010

to the narrative and can be compared with the style of epic texts of different epochs and provenance that in general largely deploy this instrument.[1] This narrative structure also takes the form of a dialogue, although often a rather schematic and limited one, in which various actors address the same question to the protagonist to obtain the same answer.[2]

Dialogical structure is exploited to its full potential in the disputations genre, where the assertions of the contenders are articulated, their characteristics fully analysed and illustrated vis-à-vis the world in which they usually occupy complementary positions.[3] Thus, instead of moving from one stage of the plot to another, a detailed presentation of values is pursued here through the intensified exchange of propositions. The contenders interrelate at the logical level, picking up on the adversary's arguments to oppose them with a rejoinder and a counter-discourse. Introductory formulae of direct speech, such as the basic formula: *x pâšu īpušma iqabbi/ana y amāta izakkar* 'x made his mouth and spoke/said/saying a word to y', or more redundant variations, are used both in the epic/narrative texts and in disputations, to distinguish the speakers and mark the beginning of their discourses; they can be easily ranged among literary devices, in some occasions also transformed into a parodic version. The Sitz-im-Leben of the study and transmission of disputations was the school curriculum, where they contributed to the training of linguistic competence, argumentative skills and reflection on values, even when styled into parody,[4] or compositions of satirical flavour revealing that wisdom is a controversial matter.[5]

The repertoire that could be referred to in order to find and compose the arguments of discussions was wide and included texts belonging to the scribal curriculum and dealing with didactic and wisdom themes, such as proverbs and *historiolae* of mythical setting.[6]

In the present contribution the analysis is mainly devoted to the formal aspects of discourse and to the deployment of rhetorical means typical of wisdom literature in the creation of a new form of epic narrative.

1 For a general survey referring to various statistics see Archi 2009.

2 See for instance the Sumerian tale of *Inanna's Descent into the Netherworld*, or sections of *Gilgamesh*.

3 For a recent overview see Jiménez 2017, with previous bibliography.

4 Jiménez 2017, *passim* in chap. 1.4 and 1.5 on parody. Specifically on the parody of *Babylonian Theodicy*, see Jiménez 2018.

5 See Foster, George 2020.

6 Cohen 2018 for a presentation of the compositions we might label as wisdom texts and their use in the scribal curriculum and the efforts to collect them in series. Cooper 2017 for updates to the short tale of Enlil and Namzitara. For a recent general overview of Mesopotamian wisdom literature see Cohen, Wasserman 2018.

2 Dialectics and Wisdom

These procedures were the basis for articulating reflection also on moral issues and the major questions of human life, as attested by the *Babylonian Theodicy*, in which the structure of the disputations is adapted to different actors and aims. This text, traditionally attributed to the end of the second millennium BCE, was widely known and commented on during the first millennium BCE.[7]

The reflections of the two scribes[8] or sages that confront each other in this highly sophisticated text draw inspiration and arguments from common experiences and popular wisdom, but also from the traditional patrimony of mythological and devotional literature, in order to discuss a crucial point, the principle known as 'Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang', or the principle of divine retribution for human behaviour.[9] This can be viewed against the background of the didactic and wisdom literature that imparts precepts of correct behaviour and religious devotion. J. Haubold has recently examined the poem *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* from this perspective and proposed that the text is not a simple demonstration of the validity of traditional faith, but rather reveals a deeper religious sensibility and a new awareness: what the sufferer "can do, after conventional wisdom has failed, is to feel Marduk's hand upon his body – and that in turn gives him access to what unfolds in Marduk's heart".[10] And the final restoration of the sufferer to health and prosperity shows: "not just an individual act of mercy but also the order of Marduk's universe, an order

7 A synthesis of the chronological issue is in Oshima 2014, XIV-XVII. The traditional attribution, known from literary catalogues, to the time of Nabuchadnezzar I (1126-1105 BCE) or Adad-apla-iddina (1069-1048 BCE) could be compared with inscriptions of the first king, known from copies from Ashurbanipal's library (RIMB 2.4.5, 2.4.9, and 2.4.10), that narrate the abandonment of Babylon by Marduk and the return of divine favor thanks to the righteous and pious attitude of the king. Nabuchadnezzar is taken from his situation of suffering and allowed to march victoriously against Elam and recover the statue of the god, whose return to Babylon is a symbol and guarantee of the god's care for his town.

8 On the identification of the sage with the scribe in the commentary on the *Theodicy* see Jiménez 2018, 125: "In fact, the equation 'sage' means 'scribe' is given no fewer than five times in the commentary: BM 66882+ obv 3 and rev 9′ (*mūdû*, 'sage'), 12′ (*emqu*, 'wise'), 17′ (*palkû*, 'wide-open', referring to the intelligence), and 19′-20′ (*kitmusu*, 'heaper'). Compare also rev 10′: 'fowler' (*usandû*) means 'scribe'". It can also be observed that the emphasis on the dialogical structure is preserved in the Biblical book of Job.

9 See Oshima 2018, 189 with bibliography. A detailed discussion of the topic is provided by Cohen 2015. He critically revises some major relevant studies that adopt an 'evolutionary or progressive' perspective on the theme – attributing to the *Theodicy* the criticism of tradition – and look for historical circumstances that might have induced change, and more pessimistic and disenchanted views of the relations between gods and men.

10 Haubold 2019, 217.

which we grasp not despite the limitations of our own embodied existence, but because of them".[11]

In the case of the *Babylonian Theodicy*, the texts and studies cited above sound as warnings against too simplistically considering it as a reaction vis-à-vis the traditional view.[12] In fact, the value of wisdom precepts appears also to be questioned in other texts,[13] and the critique of the principle of divine retribution can already be identified in texts earlier than the Kassite or first millennium BCE periods, nor is the *Theodicy* to be considered fruit of contingent difficulties that show the limits of the principle of divine retribution that was cardinal in wisdom precepts. In any case, it cannot be denied that it is the scribal and wisdom tradition that is further meditated upon and elaborated in this text, although this tradition is not monolithic, but can rather be viewed as a complex horizon of interpretation.

As has often been recognized the *Babylonian Theodicy* with its strophic architecture hinged on the acrostic is also a highly sophisticated piece of literature; we might say that it reached the *acmé* of the scribal art, in which stylistic devices are used to find a new explanation for an old problem. Despite some large textual gaps, it is possible to observe a progression in the use of rhetorical methods and in the attitudes of the discussants, as revealed by some key-sentences.[14]

The sage who takes the part of the sufferer starts with the observation of personal conditions in strophes 1 and 3,[15] considers principles of acknowledged wisdom, echoing proverbial sentences in strophe 5,

11 Haubold 2019, 218. As in the case of *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*, Oshima reads this poem as representing not a rebellion against orthodox dogmata but a submission to the ultimate authority and power of divine rule and justice: "the sufferer has finally realized that he has suffered maltreatment from others, not because of any lack of divine justice but because of his own lack of respect for the divine order and his own lack of piety towards the gods" (2014, 142). Thus, both poems employ the figure of the "righteous sufferer" as a theological motif, "not to assert the sufferer's innocence or to encourage people to reject the gods, but rather precisely to teach people the justice of divine rule, however inscrutable, and to urge them to submit themselves without questioning to the gods' authority" (76). As didactic texts for the learned, both texts facilitated the contemplation of Marduk's godhead.

12 See bibliographical references in footnotes 6 and 9 above.

13 See the Old Babylonian dialogue between *A Father and his Son*, in Foster, George 2020, 39, l. 8: NUN.ME-ˈ*lu-tum*!?ˀ *ša-lu-tum* ˈ*ù*ˀ *mi-ši-tum* (Being a sage is captivity and oblivion). In this light it may be questioned whether the sentence: "It was commanded, they say, from Enlil's own mouth: 'Father should love son'. Why was 'Son should love father' not commanded among things destined to be?" (41, ll. 59-62) is to be simply interpreted with regard to family relations, or whether it emphasizes that change is a natural process vis-à-vis the image of conservative wisdom.

14 A detailed formal analysis was proposed in Buccellati 1972.

15 In strofe 1 he laments being an orphan and without protection and in strophe 3 poverty, enfeeblement, and grief. The other sage answers in strophe 2 that prayers provide divine protection and wealth, and in strophe 4 that after prayers gods show mercy and favor.

and openly replies to the sage's answers, saying that a corresponding reward is bestowed on neither the pious nor the wicked, in strophe 7.[16] The sage has to implicitly admit that experience contradicts the divine retribution principle, since he answers that divine plans cannot be understood, but that ritual correctness must be respected anyway. After a large textual gap, in strophe 13, the sufferer appears to choose another rhetorical tactic and provokes his friend by putting forward the proposal of abandoning his correct behaviour and living like a robber. This declaration might reveal the use of a paradoxical procedure, to induce a change of perspective and solicit further reflection by the other contender: what would you object, if I were to choose the attitude of the rascals?[17]

The following strophes are badly damaged and it is impossible to determine how the argumentation is conducted. It seems that in strophes 17-20 the arguments concern the instability of fortune, and in strophes 20 and 22 the sage again proposes the argument of devotion and faith in a final divine reward: only piety and devotion warrant true stability (strophe 22). He seems to discard the arguments of the sufferer as not cogent enough to undermine the current view that recommends devotion to obtain divine favour and prosperity.

Strophe 23 combines the sufferer's main arguments based on the observation of the lack of coherence and lack of stability in human experience. The sage also returns to a key argument he has already expounded in strophe 8: people cannot understand divine thought and plans.[18] Actually he seems to use fundamentally the same arguments, although varied in their expression, implying that the sufferer's propositions do not invalidate his own positions – although

16 In strophe 5 the sufferer remarks that the impious (metaphorically represented by wild animals) are fortunate and rich. To which the sage opposes that in the end they are punished. In strofe 6 the sufferer objects that the pious suffers from poverty and has a low position in society. The sentence *gana luqbīka* (come, let me tell you), l. 1 and 47, is also attested in disputations (Jiménez 2017, 89-91), where it is perhaps an allusion to the *Theodicy*. See also Jiménez 2014, 102-3 for a restoration of ll. 46-51 on the basis of a new fragment.

17 Oshima 2014 understands the passage differently and concludes: "At closer look, one sees that the friend never really acknowledged the sufferer's innocence; on the contrary, he attributes both the sufferer's refusal to accept his sinfulness and his doubts about the divine order to the lies and deceit innate in human nature. And rightly so, the criminal intentions and impious thoughts expressed by the sufferer on multiple occasions in the poem show that he was hardly as righteous as he claimed to be. Thus, it is not the sufferer who wins the argument, but rather the friend who convinces the sufferer of his guilt. This explains why the sufferer, in the end, after acknowledging his sinfulness, begs for divine mercy and leniency. He apparently realizes that, through their compassion, the gods alone can ease his plight and adversity (i.e. divine punishments). And this is precisely what the friend has repeatedly insisted upon".

18 Strophe 24: "The mind of a god is as remote as the centre of the heavens, comprehending it is very difficult; people cannot understand".

here, perhaps significantly, he omits the exhortation to piety. Thus his view practically coincides with that of the sufferer, although he attributes to humans limited understanding of the apparent incongruities in life experience.

At this conclusion, the sufferer comes back to the original problem, individual suffering, in this case caused first of all by prevarication and injustice in human relations. Having established that divine plans cannot be understood, but that what the sufferer maintains is true, in strophe 26 the sage has to admit that injustice is the fruit of the wicked nature the gods have given to mankind (for whatever reason in their inscrutable plans). As in the case of strophe 13, this might be a concession made to provoke a further step in the reasoning, quite a paradox from the perspective of the sage: let's admit this, and then what would you say? Thus, strophe 26 seems to finally accept the arguments of the sufferer, but actually suggests that this leads to a logical and practical aporia: if the gods have given a deceitful nature to humankind, human discourse is devoid of validity and social relations are condemned to the law of the stronger or wealthier. But the dialogue does not lead to such an aporia, and it is the sufferer who has to accept the point of view of his adversary. Strophe 27 concludes the debate with an invocation:

> May the gods who forsook me grant me help,
> May the goddess who d[eserted me] show mercy.
> May the shepherd, my Sun, care for the people like a god.[19]

Two fundamental conclusions are implicitly expressed in the last strophe, as results of the various steps of the dialogue: 1. since divine designs are not understandable, there is no reason to suspend devotion and correct behaviour, although the human world is not a perfect one; 2. since there is no causal link between suffering and sin, the righteous sufferer merits mercy and help, thus again demonstrating that correct behaviour and piety are the right attitude.

And mostly, although experience appears contradictory, there is no contradiction in adhering to traditional principles. Wisdom, far from proposing a 'revolutionary' model – even exploring new dialectical strategies – claims its role in promoting human solidarity and traditional piety.

19 Oshima 2013, 26, ll. 295-7: "May (the) gods who forsook me establish help (for me). | May (the) goddess who d[eserted me] have mercy on me. | May the shepherd (i.e. the human king), my Sun, gui[de back] the people to the god". Discussion of the last line in Oshima 2014, 373.

3 Dialogue, Dialectics and Narrative

These aspects and the same or similar rhetorical methods are implemented in a work of wider design, the epic of *Erra and Išum*. The central problem expressed in the *Theodicy* is summarized in a sentence of the passage that expresses god Erra's destructive purposes – extended to the complete disruption of human, family and social principles: "Troncherò la vita del giusto, che intercede benevolo, il malvagio, che recide le vite, porrò ai primi posti" (tablet III A 7-8, in Cagni's 1969 translation). It appears as one of the means to achieve destruction, which is variously described after it has occurred and an attempt is made to stop it by soothing the god's rage: "O eroe Erra, il giusto tu hai ucciso. | L'ingiusto tu hai ucciso. Chi peccò contro di te hai ucciso. | Chi non peccò contro di te hai ucciso".[20] Human experience of sorrow and misfortune is here included in the apocalyptic description of the world devastated by the wrath of Erra, the god of war; perspective is shifted from the human to the divine level and debate becomes part of a mythical scene. The narrative of this catastrophic event is connected to a reinterpretation of the nature and origin of the cosmos as known from other texts, and in particular the conceptualisation of the creation that had been defined in *Enuma eliš*. Of its complex relations with the latter text, it is here only cursorily mentioned that a fundamental question is posed: whether the perfect order of the cosmos created by Marduk as described in *Enuma eliš* can be subverted.[21] And therefore whether order can be maintained, re-established, restored or renewed, and at what cost and by what means.[22] On the other hand, *Erra and Išum* also illustrates that the apparently irrational divine wrath is regulated by a perfect rational discourse and has the final purpose of guaranteeing human respect for and veneration of the gods.

Partly reversing the model of *Enuma eliš* – where the power of the word is represented as a creative force – and developing its use as a rhetorical instrument,[23] in *Erra and Išum* the negative and positive

20 The passage includes various categories of people (tablet IV 104-11) and continues with Išum quoting the words of Erra expounding the purposes of destruction that guided his action (IV 112-27).

21 For the interpretation of the poem as counter-text of *Enuma eliš* see Frahm 2011, 348; see also Haubold 2013, 58-61.

22 It seems that the poem considers that the creation tale admits that the germ of fighting and destruction is inherent to the cosmos as the energy capable of regeneration and that the fundamental problem it poses is how to keep this energy under control, how to stop it when it has been released, avoid total conflagration and collapse, and re-establish and protect righteousness and piety.

23 For the last aspect see the recent detailed analysis in Haubold 2017a, who emphasizes the highly rhetorical efficacy of the passage in which Ea calms down the angry Anu (*Enuma eliš* II 49-56), a situation that is parallel to that of Erra in his dialogue with Išum.

potentials of discourse are explored in detail. From a formal perspective, mythology becomes the substance of an ambitious experiment: the text largely employs direct speech, monologues and dialogues, as narrative techniques. It is an expansion of the epic code and has the effect of extensively transforming almost the whole narrative into an enunciation of what one will do and a report on what one has done. In some passages, the narrative also echoes lamentation texts, in a structure that at the very end is comprehensively defined as a chant in praise of Erra (*zamāru* 'song' V 49, and *tanittu* '(hymn of) praise', V 39). Hymnic passages as expressions of praise, invocation, and exhortation develop into a persuasive discourse – and, significantly enough, in some points the boundaries between the two forms of speech are blurred.[24] Hymnic insertions have the function of describing the personages by extolling their qualities and at the same time of making the reader/listener part of the plot by voicing praise of the gods, as executor of the *zamāru*, a discourse addressed to the gods.

The first tablet opens with a hymnic introduction that glorifies Išum as a warrior. Erra is represented in his seat, according to the disposition of Marduk in *Enuma eliš*.[25] The process that leads the gods to abandon their position and stance, causing a cosmic disaster, is ignited by and developed through persuasive speeches. These are the means that enable putting plans into action and make orders effective. In the first tablet the orders imparted by Išum to prepare for battle (ll. 7-9)[26] are reversed by those of Erra (ll. 17-18), who is debating with himself but not convinced to take action (l. 16).[27]

On the other hand, speech has creative power, as well known from *Enuma eliš* and here illustrated in the following lines that present the other protagonists: the Sibitti. They are described by quoting the words of Anu who decrees the destiny of and gives instructions to each one of them. Their violent nature, however, does not manifest itself immediately in terms of action, but as a persuasive discourse

24 See Ponchia 2016 for a general analysis of these sections and details on formulae and structure of dialogues.

25 Cf. *Erra and Išum* I 5: *Erra qarrād ilāni inušu/inūšu ina šubti* (Erra the hero of the gods tremble/becomes weak in the seat) with *Enuma eliš* VI 143-6 in which Marduk is the one "Who distributed the heavenly stations between Igigi and Anunnaki, Let the gods tremble at his name and quake on their seats (*linušu ina šubti*)" (Lambert 2013, 119).

26 *ītami/itammi ana kakkēšu liptatā imat mūti* (He says/said to his weapons: Smear yourself with mortal venom); *ana Sibitti, nandiqa ana kakkēkun* (To the Sibitti, warriors unrivalled: let your weapon be girded); *iqabbi ana kâša lūṣima ina ṣēri* (He says to you: I'll go out to the steppe/field).

27 *iqabbi ana libbišu* (He says to himself: Shall I get up or go to sleep?); *itamma ana kakkēšu ummedā tubqāti* (He says to his weapons: Stay in the corners!); *ana Sibitti ana šubtīkunu tūrāma; Ai Sibitti* (Go back to your dwellings!).

addressed to Erra (I 46-91).[28] Various rhetorical devices, such as questions, similes, exhortations, are used to articulate their arguments, and the function of discourse is clearly emphasized: *qurādu Erra niqabbikumma atmûni* [*li*]*mruṣ elīka mindēma attā šemāta amātni* (Hero Erra to you we speak: let our discourse become oppressive. [...] Certainly you should listen to our word) (I 78-80).

Their discourse is effective and provides Erra with the arguments that induce him to action, as is demonstrated by the fact that Erra uses them, when the situation is reversed and Erra replies to Išum who exhorts him to refrain from violence (I 106-23). The repetition of arguments (the heroic and violent nature of Erra, and the risk that men show contempt for and neglect the gods) serves the purpose of increasing their weight and transforming them into compelling instances. Due to the ambiguity at the beginning of the text between Erra and Išum and the image of Erra debating with himself, it cannot be excluded that the whole passage is to be interpreted as a continuation of the protagonist's reflection before taking his final decision.

This consists of inducing Marduk's rage (I 123) and convincing him to leave his seat that guarantees cosmic stability to have his apparel refurbished and restored in order to fully impose his divine authority on humans who are growing disrespectful. Again the power of discourse is emphasized. But Marduk opposes counterarguments, narrating the devastating effects that would result if he were to abandon his position. A series of theological questions are posed by Marduk that demonstrate his role of pillar of the cosmos who guarantees protection from returning to the original chaos (I 170-7). To this preoccupation Erra answers that he will maintain the government of heaven and earth. Violence and destruction are not denied, but the role of Marduk is acknowledged.

After Marduk has been persuaded to temporarily abdicate his role of guarantor of cosmic stability, Erra unleashes violence and perpetrates destruction, as a consequence of his nature that the persuasive force of discourse has moved into action from its previous quiescent status.

Tablet II is particularly difficult because of unfortunate textual gaps, that hinder the interpretation of some crucial points in which discourse appears blocked.[29] Of Erra it is said that *agugma ul iqāli ana mamma*(?) (he is angry and pays heed to no-one) (II C 5/iii 33′), rather: *iqāl ana ramānušu ina šipri šâšu | raumma libbušu ul ippala*

28 They stress the contrast between inactivity and weakness and the manly and valorous attitude of the warrior; it is also their contention that if the god of war does not show his strength men and animals might become disrespectful.

29 Partial integrations are provided by the copy discovered in Tell Haddad (al-Rawi, Black 1989), the numbering of which is indicated here following that of Cagni's edition.

qi[*bītu*] *iša'al ana šâšu qibī*[*ssuma*] (he takes counsel with himself on this matter, but his heart is upset and gives him no answer) (II C 9/iii 37′). The last part of the tablet contains the utterance of Erra's destructive purposes, that are illustrated in the following tablet III. Last sentence and catch-line with tablet III is *ul iqāl ana mamma* (he pays heed to no-one), that icastically concludes the image of the interruption of any dialogue and of the communication with human beings by not accepting their prayers and sacrifices. Erra declares he will enjoin the king of the gods: *ē tamḫura suppēšu* (do not accept their prayers) (II C 22-3/iv 10-11).

It is again discourse and the dialogue with Išum, Erra's herald and alter ego, that induces the god of war to relent, pacify and re-establish stability, thus finally complying with his promise to Marduk to preserve cosmic order. This is in fact an argument that Išum uses when he asks why Erra has conceived evil against men and gods (*minsu ana ili u amēli lemutta takpud*, 'Why have you conceived evil against gods and men?', III C 36). Erra justifies his actions affirming that once Marduk had abandoned his seat, the bond between god and man had been undone (III 40-56), thus allowing destruction. Išum retorts not only accusing Erra of disregarding Marduk's word, but also adding a sentence that sounds like a paradox: *ilūtka tušannima tamtašal amēliš* (your divine nature you have changed and become like a man) (IV 3). Pursuing destruction means disregarding Marduk's command and therefore can be equated with the disrespect for divine orders and rites that men had been accused of at the beginning of the tale. Both attitudes threaten the bond between gods and men which is the fundament of cosmic order. As in the *Babylonian Theodicy*, divine responsibility in admitting the principle of disorder – and, as one of its manifestations, indiscriminate violence against righteous and wicked alike – is not denied, but devotion is part of and functional to an ordered cosmos. The discourse that in the epic soothes the divine heart is analogous to, and may be considered the model for, the prayers for pacifying the gods, well known from devotional practice. Persuasion in the end succeeds in reconciling the god of destructive violence and transforming him into a protective force; thus discourse, that finally succeeds in stopping violence, fulfils a task in all analogous to Marduk's role as pillar of cosmic stability.[30] Violence is redirected against the forces that menace civilized society and the seats of devotion, where the bond between

30 George 2013 stresses the value of this conclusion as a pacifist message and upholds that the apotropaic function of the poem is to be read as a message for all times: "The claim has a less tangible implication, but one that resonates more strongly outside Babylonian culture. The greater the audience for poetry that denounces war, the wider will its message spread: the vain but irrepressible hope that less war will be waged".

gods and men is kept (IV 136-43) and divine reason re-establishes order and prosperity (V 25-38).

J. Haubold[31] maintains that in *Enuma eliš* it is the consensus of the gods which is represented and emphasized, both when Marduk is invested with the role of champion of the gods in the fight against Tiamat and as the final result of theomachy and cosmogony. Taking up this perspective we might consider the possibility that the epic of *Erra and Išum* proposes a controversial interpretation of the image of the divine consensus on Marduk's role and demiurgic work, introducing the hypothesis that instability and disruption are possible since the energy of the primordial world is still alive. It therefore imagines a follow-up, in which the consensus is broken and conflict erupts. However, it is not solved by a new theomachy for taking the throne of the supreme power, but by acknowledging the inner reason of order. A possible implication is that the cosmos is ruled by a dynamic, not a static, principle; this is not an immobile god, but the inner reason Marduk represents and that follows dialectical schemes and can overcome critical points.

Trying to combine this view with the *Theodicy*, we might recognize that divine decisions – also manifestations of wrath that target humankind as a whole with devastating effects – do not alter the final stability of the cosmos and do not preclude the re-establishment of the bond between gods and humankind. The text is revealed (*ušabrišu* V 43) to its author directly by the god, to be recited in the sanctuary of the learned as a means to pacify the angry god, save the devotees from destruction, and re-establish stability. The knowledge of the learned, through revelation, is founded on – and, we might add – uses methods that in all mimic the expression of divine reason. The name of the author, Kabti-ilani-Marduk, 'Marduk is the foremost of the gods', expresses faith in the order of the cosmos, guaranteed by the pre-eminence of the god who is the pillar of stability over all forces – that, even through the experience of disruption, is finally acknowledged. And it seals the reference to *Enuma eliš* and its image of the cosmos, condensing in the name of the author the final part of that epic and the fifty names that had been given to Marduk by the other gods to exalt his role.

31 Haubold 2017b.

4 Further Questions

The two literary works examined here share some formal techniques, irrespective of their different overall structure, adhering to the disputation style in the *Babylonian Theodicy* and to mythological narrative in *Erra and Išum*. Both deploy dialogues and the confrontation of contrasting positions with the final aim of finding the solution to a fundamental problem, and to reconcile two opposing views. Another salient feature is the identification of some main basic arguments that are variously treated, illustrated, confuted, supported, and also transformed into narrative throughout the development of the text: instability of fortunes and lack of coherent reward are the main arguments brought forth and discussed in the *Theodicy*; the violent nature of the divine protagonist and human disrespect of the gods are the justifications variously presented in *Erra and Išum*. The development of this shared dialectic procedure suggests a first question: whether they can be placed in the same intellectual and, at least roughly, chronological frame.

The topic of the dialogue and the clue provided by the 'author''s name, (E)saggil-kinam-ubbib, in the acrostic of the *Babylonian Theodicy* suggest placing the text in the last centuries of the second millennium BCE. The period appears to be recalled as quite prolific in later texts and collections, whose origin is traced back in the editorial activity devoted especially to texts of divination and wisdom. Moreover, in the second half of the second millennium BCE, literary and wisdom texts from the west show the reinterpretation of Mesopotamian lore. Excellent examples of wisdom themes are the prologue of the *Gilgamesh Epic* found in Ugarit,[32] which predates by centuries the classical version from Nineveh and emphasizes the role of the hero of knowledge, or the *Instructions of Šupû amēlu* and the 'vanity theme', that is the quite pervasive motif of life's brevity that appears in various texts as a counter-argument vis-à-vis moral precepts.[33] In Babylonia, Nebuchadnezer I appears to have been particularly keen to interpret the theme of the righteous sufferer, whom he himself personified.[34]

The matter of the *Babylonian Theodicy* can therefore be confidently dated to the period of the II Dynasty of Isin. The possibility cannot be excluded, however, that the text we know from first millennium BCE copies is a more recent elaboration explicitly referring to

32 George 2007 with previous bibliography.

33 For an overview see Cohen, Wasserman 2018 with bibliography. On *Šupû amēlu* see most recently Viano 2023 with previous bibliography.

34 See footnote 7 above.

tradition, but also transforming it according to new developments in the dialectic technique.[35]

First millennium BCE scribes resorted to various techniques that allowed innovative interpretations of traditional concepts and texts, and even to transform literary motifs, such as that of the gods taking counsels and decisions, into a debate or a dialectical confrontation, as well illustrated in the *Erra and Išum* epic. Due to the popularity of these texts, it can be gauged that these hermeneutical strategies were shared and spread in scribal circles. Comparing the final exhortation to honor and repeat the text included both in *Enuma eliš* and *Erra and Išum*, it appears that the latter particularly emphasizes the place of the scribe and the *ummânu*.[36] We wonder therefore if this is a sign of the change from the cultic contextualisation of *Enuma eliš* – which was recited during the major New Year feast of *akītu* – to an audience for which the salvific function of prayer was closely connected to the study and interpretation of mythical and theological works.[37]

A final question is whether the acknowledged role of dialectical techniques fostered the emergence of the author, although under fictitious and evocative names, as the image of a new personality of scribe and wise man, a new *ummânu*, successor to the mythical *ummânus* that are confined in the Apsû – after Marduk's attire have been restored the first time – and bearer of a new form of knowledge, as the conclusion of the *Erra and Išum* epic suggests. This descends from the creative knowledge of the first *ummânu*s, but consists of the interpretive techniques that the dialogical form of the debate allows to be illustrated.

35 This hypothesis may be supported by the particular use of literary genres, such as the case of disputations mentioned above and that of the *Dialogue of Pessimism* between master and slave. It bears witness to the interest in dialectic methods and their potentially disruptive effects, by showing that positions with a purpose and its opposite appear equally justifiable. That no choice is practicable in logical terms is equivalent to a death sentence, but the slave – whom the master proposes to kill – is able to demonstrate that if this is the only choice, then the master must die too.

36 See tablet V 49-61 and in particular ll. 55-6 where scribe (*ṭupšarru*) and sage/scholar (*ummânu*) are mentioned after god, king and cultic singer.

37 In his comparative analysis of Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Enuma eliš,* Haubold (2017b) stresses the importance of interpreting them in the context of their reception and maintains that the Greek poem "takes ancient Mediterranean cosmogony and establishes its connections to heroic epic. *Enūma eliš*, by contrast, adapts the same genres to Babylonian cult and its associated traditions of learning".

Bibliography

Al-Rawi, F.N.H.; Black, J.A. (1989). "The Second Tablet of 'Išum and Erra'". *Iraq*, 51, 111-22. https://doi.org/10.2307/4200299.

Archi, A. (2009). "Orality, Direct Speech and the Kumarbi Cycle". *Altorientalische Forschungen*, 36, 209-29. https://doi.org/10.1524/aofo.2009.0012.

Buccellati, G. (1972). "Tre saggi sulla sapienza mesopotamica III. La Teodicea: condanna dell'abulia politica". *Oriens Antiquus*, 11, 161-78.

Cagni, L. (1969). *L'epopea di Erra*. Roma. StSem 34.

Cohen, Y. (2015). "The Problem of Theodicy – The Mesopotamian Perspective". Durand J.-M.; Marti L.; Römer T. (éds), *Colères et repentirs divins = Actes du colloque organisé par le Collège de France* (Paris, 24-25 avril 2013). Göttingen, 243-70. OBO 278.

Cohen, Y. (2018). "Why 'Wisdom'? Copying, Studying, and Collecting Wisdom Literature in the Cuneiform World". Oshima, Kohlhaas 2018, 41-59.

Cohen, Y.; Wasserman, N. (2018). "Mesopotamian Wisdom Literature". Kynes, W. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Wisdom and the Bible*. Oxford, 121-40. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190661267.013.8.

Cooper, J.S. (2017). "'Enlil and Namzitara' Reconsidered". Feliu, L.; Karahashi, F.; Rubio, G. (eds), *The First Ninety Years: A Sumerian Celebration in Honor of Miguel Civil*. Berlin; Boston, 37-53. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501503696-003.

Foster, B. (2005). *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. Bethesda.

Foster B.; George, A.R. (2020). "An Old Babylonian Dialogue Between a Father and his Son". *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 110, 37-61. https://doi.org/10.1515/za-2020-0004.

Frahm, E. (2011). *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries. Origins of Interpretation*. Münster. GMTR 5.

George, A. (2007). "The Gilgamesh Epic at Ugarit". *Aula Orientalis*, 25, 237-54.

George, A. (2013). "The Poem of Erra and Ishum: A Babylonian Poet's View of War". Kennedy, H. (ed.), *Warfare and Poetry in the Middle East*. London; New York, 39-71. https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755607969.ch-002.

Haubold, J. (2013). *Greece and Mesopotamia: Dialogues in Literature*. Cambridge. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511863240.

Haubold, J. (2017a). "From Text to Reading in Enūma Eliš". *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 69, 221-46. https://doi.org/10.5615/jcunestud.69.2017.0221.

Haubold, J. (2017b). "Conflict, Consensus and Closure in Hesiod's Theogony and Enūma eliš". Bassino, P.; Canevaro, L.G.; Graziosi, B. (eds), *Conflict and Consensus in Early Greek Hexameter Poetry*. Cambridge, 17-38. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316800034.002.

Haubold, J. (2019). "Embodied Teaching: *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* and the Babylonian Didactic Tradition". Canevaro, L.-G.; O'Rourke, D. (eds), *Didactic Poetry of Greece, Rome and Beyond: Knowledge, Power, Tradition*. Swansea, 205-24. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvd58tb5.11.

Jiménez, E. (2014). "New Fragments of Gilgameš and Other Literary Texts from Kuyunjik". *Iraq*, 76, 99-121. https://doi.org/10.1017/irq.2014.2.

Jiménez, E. (2017). *The Babylonian Disputation Poems. With Editions of the Series of the Poplar, Palm and Vine, the Series of the Spider, and the Story of the Poor, Forlorn Wren*. Leiden. Cultures and History of the Ancient Near East 87.

Jiménez, E. (2018). "An Almost Irresistible Target: Parodying the Theodicy in Babylonian Literature". Oshima, Kohlhaas 2018, 124-33.

Lambert, W.G. (2013). *Babylonian Creation Myths*. Winona Lake. MC 16. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781575068619.

Oshima, T.M. (2013). *The Babylonian Theodicy*. Winona Lake. SAACT 9.

Oshima, T.M. (2014). *Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers. Ludlul Bel Nemeqi and the Babylonian Theodicy*. Tübingen.

Oshima, T.M. (2018). "When the Godless Thrives and a Wolf Grows Fat: Explaining the Prosperity of the Impious in Ancient Mesopotamian Wisdom Texts". Oshima, Kohlhaas 2018, 189-215.

Oshima, T.M.; Kohlhaas, S. (eds) (2018). *Teaching Morality in Antiquity. Wisdom Texts, Oral Traditions, and Images*. Tübingen.

Lambert, W.G. (2013). *Babylonian Creation Myths*. Winona Lake. MC 16.

Ponchia, S. (2016). "Expressive and Reflective Strategies in the Poem of 'Erra and Išum'". Corò, P. et al. (eds), *Libiamo ne' lieti calici. Ancient Near Eastern Studies Presented to Lucio Milano on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends*. Münster, 567-85. AOAT 436.

RIMB 2 = Frame, G. (1995). *Rulers of Babylonia: From the Second Dynasty of Isin to the End of Assyrian Domination (1157-612 BC)*. Toronto; Buffalo; London. The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia 2. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442657052.

Viano, M. (2021). "Representations of Wisdom in Mesopotamian Cuneiform Sources". Anthonioz, S.; Dogniez, C. (eds), *Représentations et personnification de la sagesse dans l'Antiquité et au-delà*. Leuven; Paris; Bristol, 43-58. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1q26w14.5.

Viano, M. (2023). "The Third Column of *Šimâ milka*: A New Attempt". *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 75, 75-92. https://doi.org/10.1086/725219.