

Sumerian Proverbs as Wisdom Literature

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Abstract Sumerian proverbs are lists of sayings of various kinds – more than 25 such collections are currently recognized. In the past these sayings have been categorized as ‘Wisdom Literature’, with the understanding that they represent genuine proverbs that were used in every-day Sumerian and that encode the moral outlook of its speakers. This contribution argues that the wisdom embodied in the proverbs is the wisdom of the Old Babylonian scribal school where they were copied. This wisdom had less to do with moral teachings, and more with a deep knowledge of the Sumerian language, its writing system and its literary heritage.

Keywords Sumerian proverbs. Scribal school. Wisdom. Heritage. Analogical reasoning.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Proverbs and Wisdom. – 3 Proverbs and the Scribal School. – 4 Wisdom.

1 Introduction

Sumerian proverbs are known primarily from the Old Babylonian period, around 1800 BCE.¹ They are preserved on school tablets, either as collections of such sayings – one after the other – or on smaller round tablets (so-called Type IV tablets, or lentils) with just a single proverb.

1 For a brief but informative introduction to Sumerian proverbs and the various ways in which they have been interpreted, see Younger 2023.

I will start this discussion by quoting some random examples – not entirely random; I have chosen some that seem understandable, and I must admit that many proverbs are not.²

- 1.103 He who eats mightily – sleep will not come to him.
- 1.104 If one pours oil into a scepter, nobody will know.
- 2.31 A poor man chewing silver.
- 2.55 A barber who knows Sumerian.
- 2.70 Tell a lie; tell the truth – it will be considered a lie.

Sumerian proverbs have routinely been included under the umbrella term ‘wisdom literature’. Van Dijk, in his pioneering *La Sagesse Sumerio-Accadienne*, defined ‘wisdom’ in opposition to science.³ Knowledge produced by science, according to Van Dijk, is deductive or inductive; in the context of wisdom, knowledge has an existential and an esthetic aspect. He acknowledged that his definition of wisdom was a modern one and did not necessarily reflect an ancient understanding. In the mid-twentieth century when Van Dijk was writing his study, few of the Sumerian proverbs were accessible in scholarly publications. Van Dijk discussed some examples, but he did not try to harmonize the proverbs that he quoted with his definition of wisdom. A few years later, Edmund Gordon reconstructed multiple Sumerian proverb collections and produced a book and several articles on this material. Gordon published a lengthy review article of Van Dijk’s *La Sagesse*, entitled “A New Look at the Wisdom of Sumer and Akkad”.⁴ The article includes an overview of all the wisdom texts known at that time, including some 20 proverb collections. Gordon used a very broad definition of wisdom literature: “literary writings [...] whose content is concerned in one way or another with life and nature, and man’s evaluation of them based either upon his direct observation or insight”.⁵ Gordon’s reconstruction of Proverb Collections 1 and 2 appeared in his *Sumerian Proverbs: Glimpses of Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*.⁶ The importance of proverbs, according to Gordon, is that they give insight into the inner life of the people who use them.⁷

² In this article, the reference ‘1.103’ (or SP 1.103) means: Sumerian Proverb Collection 1, item 103. The numbering of the Old Babylonian proverb collections was first established by Gordon (1960) and further expanded by Alster (1997). The same numbering system is also employed by *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk> section 6.1) and has become the standard in Assyriology.

³ Van Dijk 1953, 3.

⁴ Gordon 1960.

⁵ Gordon 1960, 123.

⁶ Gordon 1959.

⁷ Gordon 1960, 1.

The one scholar who has contributed most to our current knowledge of Sumerian proverbs was Bendt Alster who reconstructed and edited all the collections known by then in his *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer: The World's Earliest Proverb Collections* (1997). Alster added additional material in multiple articles and books that came out between 1997 and his untimely death in 2012.⁸

Alster placed the Sumerian proverbs in the wider area of proverb studies or paremiology. He argued that the collections contained reflections of genuine sayings that derived from spoken everyday Sumerian. One may notice that the idea of proverbs originating in everyday life was already expressed in the title of Gordon's book. Van Dijk, similarly, believed that proverbs had their origin in popular wisdom.

All the authors mentioned above realized that not all the entries in the Proverb Collections may be called proverbs strictly speaking. Gordon differentiated between proverbs, maxims, truisms, and by-words, as well as taunts, compliments, fables, parables, and anecdotes.⁹ Alster provided a similar typology, but Jon Taylor essentially declared the attempt to categorize Sumerian proverbs under different headings a failure: the categories are too vague and our understanding of the Sumerian is usually too limited to come to meaningful results.¹⁰

2 Proverbs and Wisdom

The question that remains largely unanswered so far is: how do Sumerian Proverbs relate to 'wisdom'? To discuss that issue, let us first look at one section from Proverb Collection 2: SP 2.2-2.6.

nam-tar- η u ₁₀ ga-am ₃ -dug ₄ in-na-am ₃	I want to speak about my fate: it is an insult. I want to reveal it: it is contemptible.
pa-ga-am ₃ -e ₃ sulummar ₂ -am ₃	
nam-tar- η u ₁₀ nin η ₈ - η a ₂ ga-na-ab-	I want to speak to her about my fate in my neighborhood.
dug ₄ in-na ma- η a ₂ - η a ₂	One will heap insults on me.
a-a igi i-ni-in-bar nam-tar- η u ₁₀ ba-dib-ba	I looked at the water: my fate passing by.
ud nam-tar gig-ga-ka ba-tu-ud-de ₃ -en	She gave birth to me on a day of bitter fate.
nam-tar- η u ₁₀ gu ₃ -nam ama- η u ₁₀ mu-da-an-kur ₂	My fate is her voice: my mother can alter it.

⁸ See also Alster 2005 and 2007; Alster, Oshima 2006; and the overview of recently published proverbs in Alster 2011.

⁹ Gordon 1960, 17-19.

¹⁰ Taylor 2005.

The entries are united by the word ‘fate’ (*nam-tar* in Sumerian) and by a rather negative general feeling. It is hard to see any kind of wisdom in these lines, any attempt to reflect on life, death, nature, or anything else. While the hardships of life are referred to, there is no attempt to explain them, or to admonish someone to deal with those hardships in a particular way. It is not clear to me whether, in Gordon’s terminology, these lines would be categorized as maxims, adages, or truisms or anything else.

In discussions of Sumerian proverbs and Sumerian wisdom one cannot get around a composition that is called *The Instructions of Šuruppak*.¹¹ The earliest copies of this composition go back to the middle of the third millennium; the textual transmission continues well into the first millennium. The text has a proper introduction that places it in remote times when Šuruppak instructed his son Zi-usudra:

My son, let me give you instructions, you should pay attention!
Do not neglect my instructions!
Do not transgress the words I speak!
The instructions of an old man are precious, you should comply with them!

The body of the text involves actual advice about how to live, and how to behave (131-5):

At harvest time, at the most priceless time,
glean like a slave girl, eat like a princess.
My son, to glean like a slave girl, to eat like a queen, this is how it should be.

Insults pierce the skin; envy kills.

Such lines may well be classified under ‘Wisdom Literature’ in that they provide life lessons.

The Old Babylonian proverb collections, however, do not have introductions that place them in the mouth of an ancient culture hero or anything like that. They just begin. Proverb collections do include lines that can be understood as life lessons. Line 135 of *The Instructions of Šuruppak* is quoted in Proverb Collection 3.31: “envy kills”.¹²

Other life lessons, exhortations, and ethical concerns may be found throughout the proverb collections. In an article entitled “Moral

¹¹ Alster 2005, 31-220.

¹² Several other maxims from *The Instructions of Šuruppak* are quoted in Old Babylonian Sumerian proverb collections. See Younger 2023, 117.

Concepts within the Sumerian-Akkadian Proverbial Literature”, Josephine Fechner collected scores of examples of Sumerian proverbs that may be interpreted as having some moral implication.¹³ What such a compilation does not address, though, is the question: what to do with those sayings that do not seem to have any moral implications, do not reflect on life and death in any way and do not provide advice? In other words, while we may well find wise sayings in the proverb collections – how do we account for the unity of these collections? When characterizing Sumerian Proverb Collections as ‘Wisdom Literature’ we run the risk of highlighting those sayings that somehow fit that description and downplaying those that do not seem to have any wisdom implication.

3 Proverbs and the Scribal School

Unlike biblical proverbs, we know with some precision how Old Babylonian Sumerian proverbs were used. They were used in scribal education where they were positioned between lexical lists and literary texts. The reconstruction of the Old Babylonian scribal curriculum is a story that has been told many times, and I will therefore only summarize here.¹⁴ The sequence of exercises in the scribal school can be reconstructed by analyzing several hundreds of actual school tablets from the city of Nippur. These school tablets carry an extract from a new exercise on the obverse. This was a model text, with empty space to the right, where the pupil could write his copy of that exercise – erase and copy it again, until he (rarely she) knew it by heart. The reverse was used for an exercise that the pupil already knew by heart – in other words, the reverse exercise was introduced before the obverse exercise. Based on some 500 such tablets a clear picture of the Nippur curriculum emerges:

Sign exercises	Signs
Lists of names	Words (and expressions)
Thematic lists of (Sumerian) words	
Advanced lists	
Proverbs and Model Contracts	Sentences
Literary texts	Compositions

This curriculum was not enforced by any higher authority. There is plenty of evidence for variation, local and chronological, and there

¹³ Fechner 2015.

¹⁴ See Veldhuis 2014, 204-22 with further literature.

is no reason to assume that even a single teacher would necessarily do the same thing all the time. But there is an inner logic to this sequence of exercises that goes from mastering signs, to mastering words and nominal expressions, to brief sentences, to entire compositions. The Advanced Lists introduce more vocabulary, but also provide a place for teaching in a more systematic way about the writing system and its complexities and about the kind of analogical reasoning that played a large part in the scholarship of the time.¹⁵

The pupils who went through this curriculum presumably spoke Akkadian or some other vernacular such as Amorite. Sumerian was an ancient language to them, linguistically unrelated to their mother tongue, and this curriculum is designed to teach them the Sumerian writing system, Sumerian vocabulary, and finally, a Sumerian heritage as represented by the literary texts that form the capstone of their education.

With this in mind, it is quite easy to see how the proverbs, as relatively short bits of texts, fulfill a function between the lexical texts and the literary heritage. They make the students apply their knowledge of signs, sign values, and Sumerian words that they had worked so hard to learn.

In my review of Alster's edition of the proverb collections I suggested that what these collections introduce in the curriculum is grammar.¹⁶ They introduce Sumerian verbal forms – largely absent from the lexical lists, and they introduce proper syntax and morphology. Proverbs do not go through Sumerian grammar or morphology in any systematic way. We can go back to the brief extract from Proverb Collection 2 discussed above to see how grammar is introduced here. Concentrating on verbal morphology, in this short extract we find /ba/ and /mu/ prefixes – roughly equivalent to passive and active forms. In addition, we find the modal /ga/ prefix (first person cohortative), two different forms of the dative infix (first and third person), and the /da/ infix (comitative; here functioning as an abilitative).

But there are a few other things going on here. In order to demonstrate that I need to explain some technicalities of Sumerian. The reading and translation of SP 2.3 provided above is not the one that is found in recent editions. In the Old Babylonian period the Sumerian word for 'district' is usually written *nigin*₅ which is 𒀭𒌷 (LAL2. LAGAB). The sign that is used in this proverb, however, is 𒀭 (LAL2. SAR), which is commonly used for *usar*, meaning 'female neighbor'. In our proverb, however, reading *usar* and translating neighbor runs

¹⁵ Crisostomo 2019a; 2019b.

¹⁶ Veldhuis 2000. This position was firmly rejected by Alster, Oshima 2006. I agree that my point lacked nuance; see the overview of the 'paremiological' vs the 'curricular' approach to Sumerian proverbs in Crisostomo 2019b, 143-4.

into trouble, because the form *usar-ḡa₂* has a clear locative, which is ungrammatical, or at least odd. One does not speak ‘in’ a neighbor, but ‘to’ a neighbor and that is expressed with a dative. The dative is present in the verbal form (the *-na-* infix) but it is not expressed on the noun phrase, where one would expect *usar-ra* (to the neighbor), or *usar-ḡu₁₀-ra* (to my neighbor). We have five or six exemplars of this proverb and even though there are variants, all of them have this strange locative. The problem disappears when we read *nijin₈-ḡa₂* ‘in my neighborhood’ – and leave the person to whom the speech is directed implicit. Some students were apparently confused by all this – instead of *usar* or *nijin₈* they wrote *uku₂* (𒌦𒌶𒌵), which belongs to the same sign family, but means ‘poor’ and does not make sense at all.

Interestingly, the words *nijin* for district and *usar* for neighbor had swapped signs in the early Old Babylonian period, about two hundred years before these tablets were written.¹⁷ A proverb like this one provided a teachable moment, where, as an instructor, you might discuss and explain aspects of the history of these complex and fairly rare signs. There is good evidence that scholarly scribes of the period were interested in the history of their writing system, many arcane writings survived in the tradition of the sign lists even until the first millennium – and that includes the reading *nijin₈* for LAL.SAR and *usar₃* for LAL.LAGAB.

One may argue, therefore, that proverb collections not only introduced grammar and morphology, they also provided an opportunity to review and deepen the students’ knowledge of the writing system. One more example may further strengthen this point. The word *sulummar*, ‘contempt’, is a rare word, usually written syllabically *su-lum-mar*. Our proverb uses the writing KI.SAGnutillû.DU – that is the sign KI, followed by an unfinished SAG, followed by DU (𒀭𒀭𒀭𒀭𒀭). This is a rare word in a rare spelling.¹⁸ Students had encountered that word in this spelling in the list *Diri*, one of the advanced lists, and now they could practice it – its proper writing and meaning in a full sentence.

Another example connects a proverb to the word lists. There is a rather unlikely bird name in Sumerian – the Bilzazagubalaḡakargirzana bird. We are not quite sure what kind of bird this is – the first half of the name means something like ‘frog with the voice of a drum’. The

¹⁷ Powell 1974.

¹⁸ The Old Babylonian form of the sign is KI.SAGnutillû.DU = *sulummar₂*, in later orthography the regular SAG sign is used (KI.SAG.DU = *sulummar*). For KI.SAGnutillû.DU = *sulummar₂*, see Attinger 2021, 948. In Civil 2004, 26 (Old Babylonian Nippur *Diri* section 2:6) the entry [KI].SAG.DU = *ṭu₃-’pu¹-ul-lu* (to scorn) should be corrected to [KI].SAGnutillû.DU. The only source for this line is ISAC A30175 = 3N-T168; collated from a photograph generously provided by prof. Susanne Paulus.

bird appears consistently in thematic lists – lists of birds – from the middle of the third millennium all the way to the first millennium. Outside the lexical tradition this bird appears only once, in a proverb collection that is devoted to birds.¹⁹

Some proverbs may only be understood by translating them into Akkadian. SP 2.70 says: “Clever is the fox, the *šu-lu₂* bird is noisy”. Cleverness as an attribute of foxes is a well-known theme in Mesopotamian (and other) literature – but what is the *šu-lu₂* bird doing here? Much later lexical lists clarify that Sumerian *šu-lu₂^{mušen}* equals Akkadian *hazû* which is derived from a verb for ‘to hiss’. The students who remembered the proper Akkadian translation and its etymology would find such a proverb much more insightful than those who simply copied it.

Crisostomo uses this same example to show that Sumerian proverbs teach associative principles, both in their ‘vertical’ organization (how they are sequenced) and their ‘horizontal’ aspect – that is, how they are (implicitly) translated.²⁰ These same associative principles are at play in the advanced lexical lists that immediately precede the proverbs in the curricular arrangement.²¹

Proverbs are closely connected to literary texts – we find direct or indirect quotes in such different texts as *The Instructions of Šuruppag*, *The Curse of Agade*, *Gilgameš and Aga*, *Gilgameš and Hwawawa*, and several other compositions.²² Proverbs, in other words, provide a web of connections between everything that is taught in the scribal curriculum.

4 Wisdom

What about wisdom – can we entirely do away with it when thinking about Sumerian proverbs? And what about the contents of the proverbs? Isn't it reductionist to see in them only vehicles for studying morphology, grammar, words, and signs? I believe that is reductionist, indeed, and thus we may need to think again about what wisdom means.

In the last few decades, it has become increasingly clear that the Old Babylonian scribal school transmitted not just a set of practical skills, but a heritage. The curriculum worked towards the collection of Sumerian literary texts, texts about gods and kings of old, compositions with moral implications, but also compositions that simply

¹⁹ Veldhuis 2000, 392.

²⁰ Crisostomo 2019b.

²¹ See Crisostomo 2019a.

²² Younger 2023.

seem to make fun. This is the Sumerian heritage that ancient scribal pupils made their own. But this heritage also included a deep knowledge of Sumerian, the Sumerian writing system, and the history of both. Moreover, students were taught to find and discover complex relations between Sumerian and Akkadian words in a process that has been referred to as analogical reasoning.²³ If we define ‘wisdom’ in terms of our notion of dealing with life and death, morality, or the place of human beings in the universe we run the risk of reading that kind of wisdom into the often-opaque meaning of Sumerian Proverbs. If we define ‘wisdom’ in the context of the types of knowledge that we know were valued in Old Babylonian scribal circles we may discover that proverbs contained a lot of wisdom. Being wise, then, implied being a master of a heritage that included such unlikely words as the Bilzazagubalaṅakargirzana bird, the proper writing of *sulummar* (contempt) and similarities and differences between older and more recent writings for ‘neighbor’ and ‘district’, and the Akkadian translation of the Sumerian bird name *šu-lu*^{mušen}. Some proverbs may very well have taught a moral lesson – but that did not make the Proverb Collections into wisdom texts. Sumerian Proverb Collections are wisdom texts because they are located in the centre of a network that connected various types of knowledge taught in the scribal schools of the period.

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²³ Crisostomo 2019a.

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