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."3 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 individual who, upon being smitten with sickness and misfortune, addresses his god with tears and prayers (lines 10-20). There follows the sufferer's prayer 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 26-35); 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).

Let a man utter constantly the exaltedness of his god,
Let the young man praise artlessly the words of his god,
In the house [of] s[ ong] let him
Let a man utter constantly the exaltedness of his god,
(For) a man without a god would not obtain food.

Let 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 sweeps,
he directed a . . .

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. 129 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. 261-84. 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. Structural speaking, our poetic tract 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 laments (lines 1-9). 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 26-35); 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).

2 Two pieces belonging to this composition were first published in STFC, 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, n° 11 (1960), pp. 172-85, 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. 1. Gordon identified another small piece in the University Museum; this was published in B. O., xvii, pp. 149 ff., where the reader will also find a number of useful bibliographical details.

3 The primary poetic device utilized by the author is cumulative parallelism; cf. e.g., lines 1-9: 26-29: 31-35: 42-43; etc., etc.

4 "Young man" renders the Sumerian word guru; that has a semantic range equivalent to the Hebrew gebher.
Speaks [tearfully] to him of his suffering . . .
. . . in his . . . wrath,
. . . s . . .
(approximately 5 lines destroyed)

“...I am a young man, a discerning one, (yet) who
respects me not,8 My righteous word has been turned into a lie,
The man of deceit has covered me (with) the Southwind, I (am forced to) serve him,
Who respects me not has shamed me before you.

You have doled out to me suffering ever anew,
I entered the house, heavy is the spirit,
I, the young man, went out to the street, oppressed is
the heart,
With me, the valiant, my righteous shepherd has become
angry,? has looked upon me inimically,
My herdsman has sought out evil forces against me who
am not (his) enemy,
My companion says not a true word to me,
My friend gives the lie to my righteous word.
The man of deceit has conspired against me,
(And) you, my god, do not thwart him,
You carry off my understanding,
The wicked has conspired against me
Angered you, stormed about, planned evil.
I, the wise, why am I bound to the ignorant youths?
I, the discerning, why am I counted among the ignorant?
I, the wise, why am I counted among the ignorant?
Food is all about, (yet) my food is hunger,

The brother . . . quarrelled, planned [evil],
[He . . . s] my . . .
, . .
Raising up . . .
Carries off . . .
Writes on clay . . . the wise . . .
Seeks out the . . . of the journey,
Cuts down like a tree the . . . of the road,
. . . s the supervisor,
. . . s the steward.

My god, I would stand] before you,
Would speak to you, . . . , my word is a groan,
I would tell you about it, would bemoan the bitterness
of my path,
[Would bewail] the confusion of . . .

Let the wise . . . in my plans, lament will not cease,

I . . . to my friend,
I . . . to my companion.

Lo, let not my mother who bore me cease my lament
before you,
Let not my sister [utter] the happy song and chant,

Let her utter tearfully my misfortunes before you,
Let my wife voice mournfully my suffering,
Let the expert singer bemoan my bitter fate.

My god, the day shines bright over the land, for me the
day is black,
The bright day, the good day has . . . like the . . .
Tears, lament, anguish, and depression are lodged
within me,
Suffering overwhelms me like one who does
(nothing but) weep,
(The demon of) fate in its hand . . . s me, carries off
my breath of life,
The malignant sickness-demon bath[es] in my body,
The bitterness of my path, the e[vil] of [my . . .],
. . . s the kindly . . .
. . . s the unsettled . . .

I who am not the . . . of the . . .
I who am not the . . . of the . . .

[Like . . . before you,
(lines 80-94 largely destroyed)
. . . I weep not.

My god, you who are my father who begot me, [lift up]
my face,
Like an innocent cow, in pity . . . the groan,
How long will you neglect me, leave me unprotected?
Like an ox, . . .
(How long) will you leave me unguided? (100)

They say—the sages—a word righteous (and)
straightforward:
‘Never has a sinless child been born to its mother,
. . . a sinless workman has not existed from of old.’

My god, the . . . of destruction which I have . . . d
against you,
The . . . of . . . which I have prepared before you,
Let them not . . . the man, the wise; utter, (my god),
words of grace upon him,
(When) the day is not (yet) bright, in my . . . , in
my . . . , make me walk before you,
My impure (and) my lack-justre . . . —touch their

Utter words of grace upon him whom you . . . d on
the day of wrath,
Whom you . . . d on the day . . . —pronounce
joy upon him. (110)

Vol. 107, No. 16, pp. 483-85.

8 Literally: “the wise men of valor.”
My god, now that you have shown me my sins...
In the gate of..., I would speak...
I, the young man, would confess my sins before you.

May you rain upon the assembly... like a cloud,
May you... in your chamber my groaning mother...
Me, the valiant, may you... in wisdom my... groaning..."

The man—his bitter weeping was heard by his god,
When the lamentation and wailing that filled him had soothed the heart of his god for the young man,
The righteous words, the artless words uttered by him, his god accepted,
The words which the young man prayerfully confessed,

Pleased the..., the flesh of his god, (and) his god withdrew his hand from the evil word,
... which oppresses the heart,... he embraces.

The encompassing sickness-demon, which had spread wide its wings, he swept away,
The..., which had smitten him like a..., he dissipated,
The (demon of) fate, who had been placed (there) in accordance with his sentence, he turned aside,
He turned the young man's suffering into joy,
Set by him the... good... spirit (as a) watch (and) guardian,
Gave him... the tutelary genii of friendly mien.

[The man uttered] constantly the exaltedness of his god,
Brought forth..., made known..., (lines 132-137 destroyed)

"... may he return for me,
... may he release,
... may he set straight for me."

The antiphon of the lamentation to a man's (personal) god.¹⁰

¹⁰ It is quite uncertain which of the preceding lines formed the antiphon.