**The Syro-Palestinian Wisdom of the Late Bronze Age**

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**Introduction**

The literary works that were unearthed in the archives of the Late Bronze Age (hereafter LBA) Levantine Crescent—of which the Syro-Palestinian cities are part—divide into two groups: works in Akkadian (+ bilingual works), whose origins are in Mesopotamia, and works in the local languages.[[1]](#footnote-1) The use of Akkadian as the lingua franca of the Near East for a millennium required the local scribes to develop expertise in that language, expertise that was attained at scribal schools by reading and copying imported Akkadian texts of various genres, including the wisdom literature. In addition, cultures whose scribes were skilled in writing of their local language, committed their vernacular works to writing too.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, unlike the finds in Akkadian, no genuine Syro-Palestinian wisdom works have been found so far, but rather only a few sayings embodied in the local literary texts.

 The present chapter thus seeks to survey both the Akkadian wisdom works and the vernacular wisdom sayings of the LBA Syro-Palestinian region. To date, while the former were found in the cities of Emar (Tell Meskene) and Ugarit (Ras Shamra), the latter were unearthed only in Ugarit. This finding does not necessarily indicate the absence of vernacular works in additional Syro-Palestinian cities yet to be unearthed, as Akkadian and vernacular works in various genres were unearthed northward in Hattusa (Boghazköy), the capital of the Hittite kingdom, and southward in Akhetaten (Amarna), the capital of Akhenaten’s Egyptian kingdom. Rather, the Ugaritic finding may serve as a representative of the vernacular compositions of the Syro-Palestinian culture as a whole.

Below, the LBA Mesopotamian wisdom works will be discussed according to the rubrics presented in table 1.

**Table 1**: LBA Mesopotamian wisdom works

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Wisdom Literature from Mesopotamia | Manuscripts at Ugarit | Manuscripts at Emar | The language of the work at Emar and Ugarit |
| **Practical Wisdom** |
| A Precepts Collection | 1 |  | Akkadian-Hurrian |
| The Fowler |  | 2 | Sumerian-Akkadian |
| Instructions of Shuruppak |  | 1? | Akkadian-Hurrian |
| **Critical Wisdom** |
| The Ballad of Early Rulers | 3 | 1 | Sumerian-Akkadian |
| Enlil and Namzitarra | 1 | 1 | Sumerian-Akkadian |
| Hear the Advice | 3 | 1 | Akkadian |
| **Disputation Poems and Fables** |
| The Date-Palm and the Tamarisk |  | 1 | Akkadian |
| Series of the Fox | 1 |  | Akkadian |
| The Fox, the Wolf and the Lion | 1 |  | Sumerian (-Akkadian) |
| **Righteous Sufferer Compositions** |
| A Hymn to Marduk | 1 |  | Akkadian |

Following each category, the associated vernacular wisdom sayings will also be examined. The existence of many bilingual texts, as noted in the table above, is due to two different circumstances: Sumero-Akkadian texts (including a third column of phonetic Sumerian) are related to the Mesopotamian heritage of the works, while Akkado-Hurrian texts are associated with the activity of local scribes.

Before we survey the compositions, we must offer three important remarks. The first relates to the definition of the wisdom genre. Certain Mesopotamian works that today would be considered as belonging to the this genre —some of which are listed in table 1—were copied together, on compilation tablets (*Sammeltafeln*) listed as a homogenous group in an Old Babylonian catalogue of literary works (ETCSL 0.2.11), and attributed as the compositions of a wise old man named Sidu (in the Neo-Assyrian text K 1870).[[3]](#footnote-3) While scholars disagree as to whether or not this evidence suggests a distinct emic Mesopotamian genre, modern scholarship counts such works, ab initio, as wisdom literature, because of their resemblance to certain biblical compositions, such as Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. The following survey and the cataloguing of the works under various modern rubrics (as in table 1) continue that common convention.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The second remark relates to the origin of the Akkadian wisdom texts found at Emar and Ugarit. Apart from the first and last works listed in table 1, versions of all the compositions were unearthed also in their homeland, Mesopotamia. Some of them are dated to the Old Babylonian period, prior to the finds from Emar and Ugarit, while others—due to present circumstances—have only a later copy. Despite the occasional differences between those versions and the significant adaptations some of them have undergone, there is no justification to argue for a Syro-Palestinian reworking, unless the grammar or the lexicography so indicate.[[5]](#footnote-5) As we shall see below, from all the works examined here, only the last one may reveal signs of local adaptation, manifested by unique lexicography uncommon in Akkadian.

The third remark emphasises the significance of the distinction between the Akkadian works and the vernacular ones. This distinction is not related only to their different origins (works imported from Mesopotamia *vs*. local works) and their languages (works in the lingua franca Akkadian *vs*. works in the local language) , but also to the chain of transmission associated with them. Since Akkadian was not the spoken language in Syro-Palestinian cities, the transmission, if at all, of themes and motifs from Akkadian works to the vernacular ones were limited to the guild of scribes. In contrast, the chain of transmission of vernacular works may have been both oral and textual, and their audience is likely to have been much broader. We will come back to this issue following our survey.

1. **Practical Wisdom**

Aphorisms and advice, anecdotes and instructions are all commonly catalogued under the rubric of practical wisdom, as all of them deal with human behavior in daily life and seek to guide the individual toward success. Since daily life includes a range of activities in a variety of areas, such as economics, religion, ethics, society, and the like, practical wisdom refers to all of these. The most basic unit —the independent advice or aphorism—could have been set in any genre, literary or non-literary, while only a collection of these is in fact categorised as a practical wisdom work. Nevertheless, in order to survey the practical wisdom disseminated in the Syro-Palestinian region as a whole, we will examine both collections of sayings and isolated sayings set in other genres.

1. **Akkadian Compositions**
2. A Precepts Collection

A small tablet from Ugarit (RS 15.10) comprises two instructions in Akkadian, each followed by a Hurrian translation. The small dimensions of the tablet suggest that it was a student’s exercise, extracted from a larger collection. The instructions deal with the requirement to make payment of a vowed amount and the requirement to be conscious of sin when addressing one’s god:

1-4Place the silver for (the payment of) the oath ceremony! You will receive it back from the god (…) He who swears by the river(-god), (but) holds on to the payment – his wife will not bear him a son forever and ever.

10-11Ignorant of (his) sin, he rushes to his god, he does not consider (his deeds), in haste he lifts his hands (in prayer) to his god (…).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Although no version or copy of these instructions has yet been found in Mesopotamia, their Mesopotamian background is clearly manifest by the identity of the god in whose name one swears: the river god. In the Hurrian translation of the first instruction, the Mesopotamian river god is replaced by the Hurrian moon god, who is apparently more appropriate for this task in the Hurrian culture. According to this translation, the same god in whose name one swears, i.e., the moon god, is the god before whom one should not pray in haste (cf. Eccl 5:1–6).[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. The Fowler

These fragmentary pieces of an anecdote, found at Emar (E 768–770), tell of an incident that occurred to a fowler. While the content of this anecdote is not clear—a Late Babylonian version of this is also fragmentary—its significance and categorisation as wisdom literature are indicated by its attribution in the Neo-Assyrian text to Sidu the wise (K 1870:11). A short aphorism set in a Neo-Assyrian collection, telling about a fowler who claimed to be able to catch fish with his net, may constitute a sort of synopsis of that anecdote.[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. Instructions of Shuruppak

The Instructions of Shuruppak is considered to be the earliest example of a collection of Sumerian instructions—its earliest manuscripts are dated to the 25th century BCE—and one of the most widely disseminated in Mesopotamia, both geographically and across time. It includes various instructions given by a father, the man of Shuruppak, to his son. Over time the son came to be identified with the flood hero Ziusudra, thus giving the text a status of antediluvian wisdom. During the second millennium, this piece was translated into Akkadian in various places independently. One of these Akkadian copies was probably imported into the Levantine Crescent and then translated into Hurrian (Private coll. in Alster 2005: 48ff.). Although only a fragment of it was found *ex situ*, its paleography and Hurrian language ascribe it to the LBA Anatolian or Syrian region. According to Bendt Alster, it belongs to the scribal school of Emar.[[9]](#footnote-9)

 The fragment preserves the end of the exposition, presenting the father who offers advice to his son, then continues with various kinds of advice and proverbs (paralleling entries 11–16; 60–67 of the Sumerian edition), such as:

Don't buy [a braving ass]; it will split [your yoke!]

Don't place [a well in your own field; people will do ha]rm to you.

[The slanderer] rolls [his eyes] like a spindle (…).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Apart from a few differences between this fragment and the versions unearthed in Mesopotamia, the order of the proverbs as well as their wording are very close. We may thus surmise that this is true also for the rest of approximately 200 sayings that the composition originally contained.

Significantly, three additional compositions written in the Instructions model were unearthed at Emar and Ugarit, making it a well disseminated category in the Syro-Palestinian region. However, because these three compositions have been integrated into a framework of critical wisdom, they will be discussed in the next section.

1. **Vernacular Texts**

The extant Ugaritic literature has no collections of proverbs and advice, anecdotes and instructions. Nevertheless, the content of a few expressions embodied in epic literature may attest to the existence of an oral Ugaritic wisdom tradition. The best example of this is set in Baal’s speech during a divine banquet (The Baal Cycle; *KTU* 1.4 III 17–21). The exceptional nature of the expression, regarding its content, language, and style, attests to its independent origin:

For two feasts Baal hates, (for) three—the Rider of the Clouds:

A feast of shame, and a feast of contention, and a feast of the lewdness of maids.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Although the exact meaning of this aphorism is vague—due to its linguistic register and lack of context—it appears to warn against inappropriate celebrations. Its close similarity to Prov 6:16 (“Six things YHWH hates, and seven are an abomination to him.”) and, inversely, to the Aramaic Ahiqar, ll. 187 (“Two things are beautiful, and three beloved by the sun god.”) strengthen its classification as a wisdom saying.

 An additional text, set in the Legend of Kirta, suggests a unique use of the Instructions model, i.e., advice delivered from father to son—and in particular from a king to his crown prince—in a reversal of roles: instead of the king, Kirta, instructing his son Yaṣṣib, the son rebukes his father for neglecting of his moral and legal obligations (*KTU* 1.16, VI 41­­–50):

Hear now, O noble Kirta, Hearken, alert your ear:

You’ve let your hand fall to vice; You don’t pursue the widow’s case,

You don’t take up the wretched’s claim; You don’t expel the poor’s oppressor.

You don’t feed the orphan who faces you; Nor the widow who stands at your back.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Interestingly, Kirta’s illness, which compelled him to cease performing his royal tasks, broke out after he was late in paying off his pledge to the goddess Athirat. Since offspring were born to him despite his sin, it appears that the Ugaritic author did not regard infertility as a punishment for non-payment of a pledged amount—as inscribed in the Akkado-Hurrian precepts above—but rather a major illness would be that punishment.

1. **Akkadian Proverbs in Letters**

The letters that were sent by the Syro-Palestinian vassal rulers to the kings of Egypt, found at Akhenaten's capital, were replete with metaphors, sayings, and proverbs.[[13]](#footnote-13) As these letters were written in Akkadian, it is difficult to ascertain whether these expressions are of Mesopotamian heritage or whether these are accurate translations of the Syro-Palestinian ruler’s citations. Here are two examples:

The saying “My field is like a wife without a husband for lack of cultivator” appears in four letters of Rib-Hadda, the ruler of Byblos, as a complaint about his city’s difficult situation (EA 74; 75; 81; 90).[[14]](#footnote-14) The saying’s original meaning is revealed in a Mesopotamian bilingual collection, which cites together several proverbs whose purpose is to prove the necessity of leadership:

A people without a king (is like) sheep without a shepherd.

A people without a foreman (is like) water without a canal inspector.

Laborers without a supervisor (are like) a field without a plowman.

A house without an owner (is like) a woman without a husband.[[15]](#footnote-15)

At first glance, it seems that the Rib-Hadda’s saying is another version of these, composed of the second half of each of the last two proverbs. However, the context in which the saying is set in Rib-Hadda’s letters suggests that the scribe/ruler did not use the proverb in its original meanings; rather, he simply compared Byblos’ abandoned fields to a woman without a husband.[[16]](#footnote-16)

An additional proverb, “When ants are smitten, they do not just curl up, but they bite the hand of the person who smote them”, is set in the letter of Labaya, the vassal ruler of Shekhem (EA 252). It emphasises the absurdity of the king’s demand to protect the hostile conquerors of his cities. Although other versions of this aphorism are not known in Mesopotamian or other Near Eastern texts,[[17]](#footnote-17) and thus its provenance is unknown, it appears that the ruler/scribe uses it successfully in order to illustrate Labaya’s feeling without contravening the king’s order.

1. **Critical Wisdom**

The Mesopotamian compositions counted in this category criticise the positive worldview reflected in the practical wisdom, according to which if a person would only act as advised, he would succeed in all his endeavors. The most nihilist compositions state that since human life is so short, and death is infinite, there is no value to any advice. Significantly, while this pessimistic view is dominant in three Akkadian compositions found at Emar and Ugarit, two of them reverse it, toward the end of the composition, into a motivation for enjoying the short life as long as possible, *à la* *carpe diem*, or into a motivation for moral behaviour. Sayings that emerge from a pessimistic point of view can be found, sparingly, in the Ugaritic epic literature as well.

1. **Akkadian Compositions**
2. The Ballad of Early Rulers

Of this work, of about twenty lines, one fairly complete version was preserved at Emar (E 767+) with two fragmentary duplicates from Ugarit (RS 25.130; RS 23.34 (+) 23.484 + 23.363), and an additional version was preserved fragmentarily at Ugarit (RS 25.424). The Ballad begins with a few statements on the futility of the short life in contrast to one’s eternal stay in the netherworld. As an example of those statements, the work lists several Mesopotamian legendary kings and heroes—such as Etana, Gilgamesh and Enkidu— who lived thousands of years and did mighty deeds, but eventually died in spite of their fame. It concludes with the question: “Life without light—how can it be better than death?” Three different answers to this question are given in the various versions of the work; one in the Sumerian version from Mesopotamia of the Old Babylonian period, and two in the bilingual versions from Emar and Ugarit.

The Old Babylonian version regards the question as a rhetorical one, to which the answer is negative—this short life is indeed no better than the long death—and thus it remains true to the original essence of the work. The two LBA versions, on the other hand, respond to the question affirmatively by interpolating additional lines at the end of the work. One of them, of which three manuscripts have been found, states that because a life without light is indeed no better than death, a young person should rejoice, and thus the burden of his life will be lightened. A comparison of the closing lines shows how the later version was developed from the earlier one:[[18]](#footnote-18)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| LBA version (from Emar)  | Old Babylonian version (from Sippar)  |
| 19Life without light—how can it be better than death? | 19Life without light—how can it be better than death? |
| 20Young man let me [teach you] truly what is (the nature of) your god. |  |
| 21Repel, drive away sorrow, scorn silence! |  |
| 22Instead of one [day of j]oy, let pass a time [of silence] lasting 36,000 (years).  | 20Instead of one day of joy, a time of silence lasting 36,000 years will surely come. |
| 23May [Siraš (the Wine Goddess)] rejoice over you as if over (her) son! | 21[Lasting life] was given to the gods. [Where is the man] who seeks life? |
| 24This is the fate of humanity. | 22This is the fate of humanity, [*those*] *who lives in the house of the young man*. |

The development marked in the conclusion of this LBA version (which differs in other matters from the Old Babylonian version), in comparison to the older one, is significant for understanding the entire work; beginning as a nihilistic text that regards the short human lifespan as purposeless, it transforms—by adding three more sentences—an optimistic work that encourages joy in human life. While no Mesopotamian equivalents exist for this interpolation, the *carpe diem* approach by itself is reflected in other Old Babylonian compositions, such as Nothing is of Value, named for its first line—“Nothing is of value, but life is good”—and in Siduri’s speech embodied in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Since these compositions share further ideas and expressions with The Ballad of Early Rulers (Nothing is of Value was also copied on a compilation tablet together with The Ballad), they appear to have originated in a closely related literary school.

The second LBA version of The Ballad updates the negative ending of the older version in a different way. Following the original conclusion of the old Babylonian version, which, as mentioned, replies in a pessimistic manner to the fateful question, “Life without light—how can it be better than death,” this LBA version repeats the three opening lines of the work, which deal with the fate of human beings, then cites a series of moral instructions—whose main point is that a person does not know the length of his life or his fate, therefore he should not behave with hostility toward others—and concludes with the same three opening lines, as a sort of a framework. According to this addition, so it appears, the moral behaviour is the reply to the original pessimist composition.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Two Mesopotamian equivalents may have implications for the origin of the latter interpolation. A Sumerian fragment from the Old Babylonian period, which cites identical sayings, suggests that this section was part of an independent Mesopotamian composition before being joined to this version of The Ballad of Early Rulers. A bilingual fragment from the library of Assurbanipal, quoting a similar framework with different instructions in between, reveals another variant of the same literary development.[[20]](#footnote-20)

1. Enlil and Namzitarra

A well preserved copy of this work, of about thirty lines, was found at Emar (E 771 (+) E 772 (+) E 773 (+) E 774 (+) E 592), and another very fragmentary copy—at Ugarit (RS 22.341 + RS 28.053A). Most of the work is a dialogue between the god Enlil, the head of the Sumerian pantheon, and a man named Namzitarra. While only a few words of the exposition are extant, the missing lines are reconstructed according to the Sumerian version of the Old Babylonian period. It indicates that the two protagonists met when Namzitarra was leaving Enlil’s temple for home. Upon their encounter, after Namzitarra revealed Enlil’s identity, the god offered him gifts of silver and precious stones, cattle and flocks. Namzitarra, however, spurned those gifts, saying, “The day of mankind is approaching, so where does your wealth lead?”[[21]](#footnote-21) From that point, the two versions—the Sumerian from the Old Babylonian period and the bilingual from the LBA—diverge.

In the Old Babylonian version, Enlil answers that in place of a one-time gift, Namzitarra’s sons will be endowed with a priestly gift forever. Namzitarra is apparently appeased, as the work ends there. It thus appears that although the work is replete with wordplay and sapiential sayings, and was copied on a compilation tablet together with another wisdom work—all these indicating scribal reworking—it originally served as an etiological story, telling how the descendants of Namzitarra were given priestly gifts.

The LBA version ends completely differently. Rather than justifying the privileges afforded to Namzitarra’s family, the later scribe developed Namzitarra’s answer into a statement about the brevity of life that makes material gifts valueless (Sec. B: 18'–26'):

To where will I take your silver, your lapis-lazuli gems, your cattle, your sheep? The days of mankind are near, day after day— so it will diminish; month after month—so it will diminish; year after year—so it will diminish. 120 years—such is the limit of mankind’s life… from that day until now as long as mankind lived.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In this version Enlil does not grant anything to Namzitarra or his offspring, but rather the narrative ends with the same first three lines with which it had opened, telling about Namzitarra going home. The protagonist’s skeptical speech indicates that the wisdom adaptation of this etiological story—the first signs of which are already discernable in the Old Babylonian version—has been intensified over the years. Like the Old Babylonian author of The Ballad of Early Rulers, here too the later scribe was frustrated by the worthless short human lifespan.

It may be, however, that an additional scribe updated the negative ending of the LBA version into an affirmative one, in a manner reminiscent of the second LBA version of The Ballad. Following the end of Enlil and Namzitarra, which—as mentioned—repeated exactly the three opening lines of the text, a series of advice, such as “(You should not speak) disgracefully against whoever,” ordered by a dead father to his sons on his way to the netherworld, is inscribed. Most scholars held it as a kind of appendix with a slight, if any, connection to the preceding composition. However, the LBA version of Enlil and Namzitarra may in fact had originally ended with the skeptical speech of Namzitarra, while the first three lines of the work that follow this speech were added only in a later stage, together with the series of independent didactic advice, as its framework.[[23]](#footnote-23) By its interpolation after the speech of Namzitarra, the later scribe thus appears to identify the protagonist, who passed up the material gifts and went home, with the dead father who goes to the netherworld—his eternal home—and offers affirmative advice to his sons in their brief lives.

1. Hear the Advice

This long composition, of about 150 lines, is the sole example of a wisdom work that was found not only in Ugarit (RS 22.439; RS 94.2544+; RS 94.5028) and Emar (E 778–80), but also in Hattusa (KUB 4.3+KBo 12.70). Unlike the compositions above, it was composed initially in Akkadian (at Hattusa it was also translated into Hittite), as is attested by its Akkadian title in an Old Babylonian literary catalogue (ETCSL 0.2.11). The composition is divided into two parts: practical advice given by the father Shūpê-Amēli to his son and the son’s response. As in the Instructions of Shuruppak, here too, after a short introduction, the father gives his son advice, such as:

60As much as your strength is of a king, do not grapple with a strong(er) man.

61-61Do not jump over a wide canal; you will hurt yourself and you will have a wound.

65-66Do not open your heart to your beloved woman; “submit!” (she will say).[[24]](#footnote-24)

In the last thirty lines of the work, the son unexpectedly answers the father, presenting his own nihilistic view. According to him, since one’s lifespan is so short, compared to the everlasting death, there is no point in all that advice (ll. 140'–42'):

Few are the days in which we eat (our) bread, but many will be the days in which our teeth will be idle. Few are the days in which we look at the sun, but many will be the days in which we will sit in the shadows. The netherworld is teeming, but its inhabitants lie sleeping.

The son’s response does not seem to relate the advice given in the first part of the composition, but to the very existence of practical wisdom. It appears, therefore, that in composing the son’s reply, the author was criticising the instructions category as a whole.

Unlike The Ballad of Early Rulers and Enlil and Namzitarra, the available Mesopotamian version of Hear the Advicecannot be of assistance regarding the question of reworking.[[25]](#footnote-25) However, in light of the essential difference between the father’s advice and the son’s reply, it is assumed that the present composition comprises an original work and a concluding interpolation as well. In this case, the interpolation wishes to update the affirmative instructions into a nihilistic and skeptical conclusion, which upends the initial meaning of the original work.[[26]](#footnote-26) It is reminiscent of Namzitarra’s observations about the vanity of possessions in a person’s short life, and of the speaker in the early version of The Ballad, but unlike the adaptation of The Ballad, which ends with a call to rejoice or to behave ethically, and unlike the adaptation of Enlil and Namzittara, whose very end apparently also suggests behaving with integrity, Hear the Advice could not be adapted in such an affirmative manner, since these are precisely the principles rejected in the son’s words. This composition is, therefore, the most extreme of the three compositions counted among the critical wisdom category that served Syro-Palestinian scribes.

1. **Vernacular Texts**

Some vernacular sayings embodied in the Ugaritic epic literature are close in their view to the Mesopotamian critical wisdom texts mentioned above, although no discernable genetic connection between them exists.[[27]](#footnote-27) One of them, which contrasts the eternal life of the gods with the short lives of human beings, is set in the speech of Aqhat (the protagonist of the work bearing his name), who mocks the goddess Anat for offering him eternal life in exchange for his mighty bow (*KTU* 1.17, VI 34–38):

Don’t lie to me, girl, your lies are despicable to a real man;

A mortal—what future can he attain? What hereafter can a mortal attain?

(In my death) glaze will be poured on (my) head; Plaster on my crown.

[I] will die the death of everyman; I will die like any mortal.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Although Aqhat’s speech does not refer to the vanity of life, but simply ridicules the possibility of granting an eternal life to a mortal being, it appears to emerge from the same frustration revealed in the Mesopotamian works over the brevity of human life and the inevitability of death.

1. **Disputation Poems and Fables**

To this category belong two types of compositions that tell about non-human entities who behave like human beings.

The Disputation Poems focus on dialogue between a pair of entities, such as animals, plants or metals, each of which argues for its superiority over the other. Since the rivals stand in as prototypes, the prologue of the earlier Disputation Poems sets the action in the time of Creation. Following the disputation section, a judge—a god or a king—determines the victor of the disputation. Composing the Disputation Poems required familiarity with the characteristics of each rival and expertise in the rhetoric of disputation. Such skills were apparently valued among Mesopotamian scribes, as the genre of Disputation Poems existed from the Old Babylonian period—initially in Sumerian and later in Akkadian—to the end of the cuneiform culture. While no vernacular texts of that sort have been found at Ugarit, the influence of the Mesopotamian Disputation Poems may appear in contemporaneous Egyptian literature, as well as in first millennium works, such as Aramaic Ahiqar (ll. 101–102) and Hellenistic texts.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The term Fables refers to compositions in which there are more than two—usually animal—figures, and whose plot is much more complex than the dialogical structure of the Disputations. Given that the extant Mesopotamian compositions of this category are all in very fragmentary form, and only a few of them are known to date, it is difficult to ascertain whether this type of works seeks to teach something about human nature by using animals, as is common, for example, in contemporaneous Hurrian (KBo 32.12; 14) and later biblical (such as Judg 9:7–20) fables, or whether it serves another purpose. In the Ugaritic literature, no closely related texts have been found.

**Mesopotamian Compositions**

1. The Date-Palm and the Tamarisk

This composition was found at Emar on thirteen fragments forming one tablet (E783–784). Composed in Akkadian, it opens with a prologue describing how the gods at the beginning of time decided, in their love for humans, to give them a king. This generic king planted in his garden the Date-Palm and the Tamarisk. During a feast, the trees began to debate which one of them is more beneficial to gods and humans. While the Palm argued, for example, that it bears fruit for consumption, the Tamarisk argued that it provides wood for construction. Each tree added arguments for its superiority over six round, until finally—in the third section of the composition, which was not preserved in the Emarite or in any of the other Mesopotamian extant manuscripts—the judge (probably the king), decided in favor of one of the trees.[[30]](#footnote-30) Since this part is broken off, it is unknown which of the trees won the debate. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that, like other Sumerian Disputation Poems, this one too does not compare the material superiority of the tree to moral superiority, nor does it draw a parallel between the trees and famous kings, as do the biblical fables of Jotham (Judg 9:7–20) and Jehoash (2 K 14:9–10). It rather simply lists the advantages of each tree, choosing the most accomplished in the conclusion.[[31]](#footnote-31)

1. Series of the Fox

This Akkadian composition, whose (Series of the) Fox title is recorded on Mesopotamian catalogue tablets, was very popular in Mesopotamia, and was distributed widely over more than a thousand years, until the last quarter of the first millennium BCE. Among the many manuscripts of this composition, the fragment discovered at Ugarit is the earliest, but it is plausible that like the other works that made their way to the Syro-Palestinian realm, this composition was also composed in the Old Babylonian period.

The content of Series of the Foxis not clear, since all the tablets known to date are very fragmentary and only about 300 non-consecutive lines of the original 1500–1800 lines have come to light. Nevertheless, based on the composition’s title and in light of its opening and closing telling of Fox’s deeds, it appears that Fox is its main protagonist. Alongside him are mentioned Wolf, Fox’s rival who occasionally cooperates with him; Dog, a rival by himself of the two opponents; Lion, who apparently accuses Fox and Wolf of stealing his flock; and other mute animals. In the fragment found at Ugarit (RS 25.526A), whose place in the plot sequence is unclear, one character—apparently Fox—runs to a particular destination, perhaps fleeing from Dog, and a second figure—perhaps Fox’s wife—greets him. The story continues by telling of Fox entering his den and arguing against Dog, who guards outside.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The large number of participants and the rich plot reflected in the various Mesopotamian fragments suggest that this was a kind of folkloristic work, its features quite similar to later animal fables. Thus, Fox is called ‘wise,’ ‘crafty,’ and ‘thief’; Dog is the guardian, who protects the city, the flock and finally also the dens of the fleeing Wolf and Fox; and Lion is the privileged character. Nevertheless, the work’s *Sitz im Leben*, its messages and the question of its relationship with characteristics modern scholars associate with the wisdom genre still need further clarification.

1. The Fox, the Wolf, and the Hyena

This composition (RS 86.2210) was preserved in Ugarit only in Sumerian, but in light of the other compositions found in the Syro-Palestinian region, it had almost certainly had an additional Akkadian column, which had been the main reason for its presence in the Ugaritic scribal school.[[33]](#footnote-33) The text from Ugarit, as well as the two additional Sumerian copies from the Old Babylonian period, are all very fragmentary and apparently are of three different versions.[[34]](#footnote-34) The story tells of Enlil, disguised as a merchant, who sails on the Euphrates from Nippur to Larsa. On his way he meets Fox, who later meets Dog, and both run away. Later, Fox goes into the den of Hyena, who mocks him; his words are quoted in the Ugaritic fragment. The rest of the plot is unknown.

1. **Righteous Sufferer Compositions**

Compositions assigned to this category inquire into the reason of human suffering: whether caused by a sin the individual has committed or perhaps by a god’s arbitrary whim. Scholars have often related prayers and confessions to that category too, despite their occasional lack of sapiential features, apparently due to their supposed similarity to the biblical book of Job. Nonetheless, given the priority of Mesopotamian Righteous Sufferer compositions in the form of a prayer or a confession, they might be considered as the initial stage in the formation of this genre, and thus they bear significance.

**Mesopotamian Compositions**

A Hymn to Marduk

A fragmentary tablet from Ugarit (RS 25.460) inscribed with a thanksgiving prayer to Marduk, the main god of the city of Babylon, represents this genre in the Syro-Palestinian realm. Neither theological questions nor theodicy occur in this prayer, either because those were recorded in the broken opening or closing of the prayer, or because they never appeared in it. It was in fact only its striking similarity to the later Babylonian composition *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, which in turn is reminiscent of the biblical Job, that led scholars to assign this prayer to the present category.[[35]](#footnote-35) From the extant lines it appears to be a prayer of a dying person—his relatives had even begun to bewail his demise—whom Marduk eventually healed, and ever since he is grateful to the god of Babylon. At the end of the prayer, the erstwhile sufferer expresses Marduk’s control over life and death:

28'-29'I praise, I praise the deeds of my lord, [the deeds of] Marduk I praise (…)

38'He cast me aside but picked me up again.

39'He threw me down but raised me up.

40'He saved me from death’s/Mūtu’s mouth;

41'He raised me from the netherworld.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Although no copy of this prayer has been found in Mesopotamia, it is difficult to cast doubt on its Babylonian provenance, given its dedication to Marduk, the god of Babylon, and its close ties with the later Babylonian composition *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* (some have even argued that this is a forerunner of *Ludlul*), as stated above.

Nevertheless, unlike the works surveyed above, the footprints of a local adapter appear to be reflected in the vocabulary of the prayer. As had already been argued, West-Semitic roots such as *r-z-y* and *b-d-q* were apparently integrated into the Akkadian text, thus indicating the identity of a local scribe.[[37]](#footnote-37) In addition, the image of Marduk rescuing the sufferer from death (l. 40' above) seems to be based on a local phraseology. At first glance, the “death’s mouth” (*pī mūti*), from which the sufferer was rescued, sounds like a mere figurative expression; however, this expression does not occur in any other Akkadian texts. In West-Semitic literary texts, on the other hand, it was common to figure the god of the netherworld, Môt, as a hungry god who devours human beings in his huge mouth, thus bringing about their death. As described in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle (*KTU* 1.5 I 4–8; 14–22; II 2–6; 1.6 II 15–23), echoes of that occurring in the biblical literature as well (Isa 5:14; Hab 2:5), the descent into Môt’s throat was compared to the way into the netherworld. In light of this, the word *mūtu* in l. 40' should not be analysed as the Akkadian common noun for death, but rather as the Ugaritic name of the Levantine god of the netherworld, Môt, into whose mouth people, animals and gods enter on their way to the world of the dead. The sufferer then gives thanks to Marduk for having taken him out of Môt’s mouth, and thus raised him up from the netherworld.

**Conclusion and Relation to Biblical and Extra-Biblical Literature**

This chapter seeks to gather all the wisdom compositions that have been found in the Syro-Palestinian region of the Late Bronze Age and to provide information regarding the sort of adaptations they have undergone. Among all the archives of the western reaches of the cuneiform world unearthed so far (including Hattusa and Akhetaten), those of Emar and Ugarit were the richest in Akkadian wisdom compositions. It is thus surprising to find out that, to date, no independent vernacular compositions of wisdom literature have been discovered in the LBA Syro-Palestinian region. One may suggest that Ugaritic wisdom works have yet to be discovered, but in light of the fact that at Hatti, too, no such vernacular works were unearthed, it might be cautiously posited that the local scribes, who produced various compositions of other genres, refrained for some reason from composing wisdom works, despite their close familiarity with the genre.

Since the Akkadian language was used in the LBA Syro-Palestinian region only by scribes, acquaintance with the Mesopotamian compositions was limited to this group, who learned Akkadian by reading and copying them. Therefore, when Akkadian ceased to serve as the lingua franca of the Near East, toward the end of the second millennium BCE, schooling in Akkadian outside Mesopotamia discontinued. In light of this, one can presume that the affinity between the Syro-Palestinian compositions of the first millennium BCE—such as the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, Ahiqar and Sirah—and the Mesopotamian compositions presented in this chapter, does not reflect their reception by the LBA local population. Rather, it originated through a renewed encounter of the Hebrew and Aramaean scribes with the Mesopotamian literature of the first millennium BCE. Then, perhaps for the first time in the history of the Syro-Palestinian realm, genuine vernacular compositions of the wisdom genre began to be written down, drawing from the ancient local-oral traditions and from their current neighboring ancient Near Eastern written literature.

1. For a definition of the geographical and cultural boundaries of the “Levantine Crescent,”, see Itamar Singer, “The Hittites and the Bible Revisited,” in *“I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times”: Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Aren M. Maeir and Pierre de Miroschedji (Winona Lake, IN, 2006), 2: 744. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For the Mesopotamian curricula of the scribal schools at Ugarit and Emar (and Hattusa), see Yoram Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age*, ed. Andrew R. George, WAW 34 (Atlanta, 2013); Matthew T. Rutz, *Bodies of Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia. The Diviners of Late Bronze Age Emar and Their Tablet Collection*, AMD 9 (Leiden, 2013). For discussion of a putative local curriculum at Ugarit, see Robert Hawley, “On the Alphabetic Scribal Curriculum at Ugarit,” in *Proceedings of the 51st Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale held at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, July 18–22, 2005*, ed. Robert D. Biggs, Jennie Myers and Martha T. Roth, SAOC 62 (Chicago, 2008), 57–67. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a recent discussion, see Yoram Cohen, “Why ‘Wisdom’? Copying, Studying, and Collecting Wisdom Literature in the Cuneiform World,” in *Teaching Morality in Antiquity*, ed. Takayoshi M. Oshima, ORA 29 (Tübingen, 2018), 41–59, and further bibliography therein. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, e.g., Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford, 1960) (hereafter: *BWL*). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This issue is much discussed among scholars. For the opposing views, see Maurizio Viano, *The Reception of Sumerian Literature in the Western Periphery*, Antichistica 9/Studi Orientali 4 (Venezia, 2016), 299–313. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The translation from Akkadian follows Cohen, 208–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the Hurrian translation, see Meindert Dijkstra, “The Akkado-Hurrian Bilingual Wisdom-Text RS 15.010 Reconsidered,” *UF* 25 (1993), 157–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For the Emarite text, see Daniel Arnaud, *Recherches au pays d’Aštata, Emar VI.4: Textes de la bibliothèque, transcriptions et traductions*, Synthese 28 (Paris 1987), 365–67. For the Late Babylonian version, see *BWL* 221. For the Neo-Assyrian aphorism, see *BWL* 217, ll. 42–43. While some (like Viano, *The Reception*, 313–14) link this anecdote also with a Sumerian text entitled The Fowler and His Wife, others (such as Rutz, *Knowledge*, 272) negate this connection. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For an extensive discussion of the various versions of the Instructions of Shuruppak, including the present version, see Bendt Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer* (Bethesda, 2005), 31–220, and Wilhelm’s comments there (204–8) on the Hurrian translation. Manfred Krebernick, “Fragment einer Bilingue,” *ZA* 86 (1996), 170–76, attributed the fragment in question to the whole Syro-Anatolian region. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The translation follows Alster, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The translation follows Edward L. Greenstein, “Wisdom in Ugaritic,” in *Language and Nature. Papers Presented to John Huehnergard on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday*, ed. Rebecca Hasselbach and Na’ama Pat-El, SAOC 67 (Chicago, 2012), 73. For further discussion and bibliography, see ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The translation follows Greenstein “Wisdom,” 74–75. For Kirta as a wisdom text, see Herbert Niehr, “Weisheit in den Königsepen aus Ugarit,” in *Teaching Morality in Antiquity*, ed. Takayoshi M. Oshima, ORA 29 (Tübingen, 2018), 71–78. Note that the son’s words here particularly resemble the instructions works from Egypt (cf. *The Instructions for King Merikare*, ll. 46–49). For fulfilling these “neglected” obligations by Aqhat, see *KTU* 1.17 V 7–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In fact, most of the Amarna expressions collected by scholars (see, e.g., Cohen, *Wisdom*, 226–28; Greenstein, *Wisdom*, 71) are mainly similes, such as “I am situated like a boat in the midst of the sea”, “I have become like a copper cauldron in pledge because of the Suteans”, and “Like a bird which is caught in a trap, thus I am in Byblos,” and do not necessarily belong to wisdom literature. The two examples presented below are exceptional. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The translation of this proverbs and the following, follows Anson F. Rainey, *The El-Amarna Correspondence: A New Edition of the Cuneiform Letters from the Site of El-Amarna Based on Collations of All Extant Tablets*, ed. William M. Schniedewind and Zipora Cochavi-Rainey (Leiden/Boston, 2015), 455 and elsewhere, 1023, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *BWL* 228, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In this sense, Rib-Hadda’s saying might be closer to the similes in Judg 14:18; *Instructions of Ptahhotep* ll. 325–30; and others. For claiming of local Levantine elements in this saying, see David Marcus, “A Famous Analogy of Rib-Haddi,” *JANES* 5 (1973), 281–86. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The sagacity of the ant is mentioned in biblical proverbs as well (Prov 6:6, 30:25). However, they focus on the ant’s hard work in anticipation of winter, rather than on how it protects itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The translation follows Jacob Klein, “The Ballad about Early Rulers: Eastern and Western Traditions,” in *Languages and Cultures in Contact. At the Crossroads of Civilizations* *in the Syro-Mesopotamian Realm. Proceedings of the 42th RAI*, ed. Karel van Lerberghe and Gabriela Voet, OLA 96 (Leuven, 1999), 203–16. For further discussion see ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cf. Nili Samet, “Religious Redaction in Qohelet in Light of Mesopotamian Vanity Literature,” *VT* 66 (2016), 133–48. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For the Sumerian (CBS 13777) and the bilingual (K 6917 + K 13679) fragments, see Alster, *Wisdom*, 323–26, 320–22, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Some scholars posit that this question is in fact asked by Enlil. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The translation follows Cohen, *Wisdom*, 154–55. Regarding 120 years as the human lifespan, similarly to Genesis 6:3, see Jacob Klein, “The ‘Bane’ of Humanity: A Lifespan of One Hundred Twenty Years,” *ASJ* 12 (1990), 57–70. While the latter suggested that it is a Syro-Palestinian motif, it in fact fits well the sexagesimal system common in Mesopotamia. For discussion, see further Viano, *The Reception*, 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Its independent nature is concluded by its exposition (“Let me praise your old father, for the advice he gave to his sons…”) and its monolingual Akkadian, in contrast to the bilingual work. While Thomas R. Kämmerer, *Šimâ milka. Induktion und Reception der Mittelbabylonischen Dichtung von Ugarit, Emār und Tell el-ʿAmarna,* AOAT 251 (Münster, 1998), 116–17, posits that it was added by a local scribe, Viano, *The Reception*, 312–313, assumes that it is all a work by a Mesopotamian scribe. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The translation follows Cohen, *Wisdom*, 98–99. For the development of these sayings in later Syro-Palestinian collections of instructions, see Noga Ayali-Darshan, “The Sequence of Sir 4:26–27 in Light of Akkadian and Aramaic Texts from the Levant and Later Writings,” *ZAW* 130 (2018), 436–49; idem, “‘Do Not Open Your Heart to Your Wife or Servant’ (Onch. 13:17): A West-Asiatic Antecedent and Its Relation to Later Wisdom Instructions,” in *Teaching Morality in Antiquity*, ed. Takayoshi M. Oshima, ORA 29 (Tübingen, 2018), 95–103. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The Neo-Assyrian copy was identified and provided with a preliminary partial edition a few years ago by Rim Nurullin, “An Attempt at Šima Milka (Ugaritica V, 163 and Duplicates): Part I: Prologue, Instructions II, III, IV,” *Babel & Bibel* 7 (2014), 175–229. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Note that among the contemporaneous Egyptian instructions literature, at least one composition concludes as well with a son’s negative answer to his father the instructor (The Instructions of Ani 22:13 ff, whose earlier manuscripts are dated to the 19th dynasty). Here, however, the father in turn replies in anger to his son and thus uproots the skeptics to the very end. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In contrast, for the possible influence of the Mesopotamian critical wisdom literature upon contemporaneous Egyptian literature through Syro-Palestinian mediators, see Noga Ayali-Darshan, “II. Literature: Egyptian and Levantine Belles-Lettres – Links and Influences during the Bronze Age” in *Pharaoh’s Land and Beyond: Ancient Egypt and Its Neighbors*, ed. Pearce P. Creasman and Richard H. Wilkinson (Oxford, 2017), 203–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The translation follows Greenstein, *Wisdom*, 73. For the question of a mortal death in the Legend of Kirta (mentioned above), lacking, however, sapiential features, see *KTU* 1.16 I 2-23 *et* *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For the Disputation Poems in Mesopotamia and their contemporaneous and later parallels, see Enrique Jiménez, *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*, CHANE 87 (Leiden, 2017), 128–32, and further bibliography ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For the text, see Cohen, *Wisdom*, 180–90. For a recent discussion of the various versions, see Jiménez, *Disputation Poems*, 29–39. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For the suggestion that the talmudic expressions in bSukkah 28a: “the speech of palm trees” and the “fox fables” refer to The Date Palm and the Tamarisk and Series of the Fox (to be discussed below), respectively, see Erica Reiner, “At the Fuller’s,” in *Vom Alten Orient zum Alten Testament. Festschrift für Wolfram Freiherrn von Soden zum 85. Geburtstag am 19. Juni 1993*, ed. Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz, AOAT 240 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1995), 407. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For the text from Ugarit, see Daniel Arnaud, *Corpus des textes de bibliothéque de Ras Shamra-Ougarit (1936–2000): en sumérien, babylonien et assyrien*, AuOrSupp 23 (Barcelona, 2007), 186–89. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cf. Viano, *The Reception*, 332; Jiménez, *Disputation Poems*, 54–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For the text from Ugarit, see Daniel Arnaud, “6. Textes de bibliothèque”, in Marguerite Yon and idem (ed.), *Études Ougaritiques 1. Travaux 1985–1995,* Ras Shamra-Ougarit 14 (Paris 2001), 333–34; idem, *Corpus*, 189. For corrections and a comparison with the two Old Babylonian texts, see Viano, *The Reception*, ibid; Jiménez, *Disputation Poems*, ibid. For the supposed relation of this text to the Series of the Fox, see idem.grammatically this is fine but is the reference incomplete? [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Cf. Moshe Weinfeld, “Job and its Mesopotamian Parallels: A Typological Analysis,” in: Walter Claassen (ed.), *Text and Context: Old Testament and Semitic Studies for F.C. Fensham* (Sheffield 1988), 217–26. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The translation follows Cohen, *Wisdom*, 168–69. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Cf. Takayoshi Oshima, *Babylonian Prayers to Marduk*, ORA 7 (Tübingen, 2011), 205–15; Cohen, *Wisdom*, 174. According to the latter, these verbs can, with some difficulty, be understood as Akkadian roots as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)