persed under pressure of conquest and assimilation to alien cultures, when the system works well the careful memorization of a text seems to guarantee a higher degree of fidelity in transmission than can be the case in a chain of copying. This is demonstrated by the transmission of the Vedas, by the transmission of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, and by the transmission of the Avesta.” The distinction between oral and written texts is only functional in the prophetic and esoteric traditions, where the living word, which embodies the divine truth open only to the chosen ones, is opposed to the written text, which is accessible to all. This would be equally true of the Hebrew prophets (Grottanelli); of Zoroastriansm (Nahed); of the Christian Gnostics (Strohmaa, Markheis), and at a later stage of the Jewish Kabbalah (Halbertal).

In all the different cases surveyed, the text’s transmission through various education systems has proved to be essential. This central place in education, perpetuated by various social tools and means of communication (Canak, Vardi, Strohmaa) is, we suggest, the most salient characteristic of foundational texts in both ancient and modern societies. At the same time, “society” is far from being a monolithic entity, and canonization is not perpetuated automatically. Although some authors have paid due attention to this fact (see especially the contributions by Vardi and Markheis), a careful comparative analysis of the sociological background of the processes of canon-making seems to be an urgent desideratum for future research. In particular, the focus of the inquiry should move to the specific agents and recipients of these processes and to their motivation. Beyond various mechanisms of canon-making, it is the whole production of meaning in ancient societies that should be analyzed, at its various stages and in the dialectical relationships between different functions of written texts and oral traditions, public space and esoteric teachings, intertexts and hermeneutics. In other words, while this collection of essays does not claim to present a full-fledged theory of ancient canons, it does hope to suggest a new impetus for the comparative study of ancient cultures.

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MESPOTAMIAN CANONS

NIER VELDHIUS

1. Introduction

Literature in ancient Mesopotamia has a history that spans more than two and a half millennia. Literary texts in Sumerian appear shortly before the middle of the third millennium B.C.E., several centuries after the invention of writing. I will come back to this corpus later on. For now, it may suffice to say that these earliest Sumerian texts are very difficult to understand. The most obvious reason for this difficulty is the nature of the writing system in this period. Writing was invented for administrative use. There was no need to represent all the morphological elements of the Sumerian verbal and nominal system. Syntax in an administrative text is largely determined by the structure of the administrative operation itself. Or, to put it otherwise, though the early administrative texts used language for their communication system, they were not meant to represent language as such. In the early literary texts the lack of morphological and syntactic explicitness greatly hampers understanding. We must assume that the texts were known before they were written or read. They were aids de mémoire, rather than the actual carriers of information. The only texts that we can read with some confidence are those that were transmitted to later periods of cuneiform.

The end of Mesopotamian literature is traditionally positioned around the beginning of the common era when cuneiform dies out. This position is heavily challenged today, and for good reasons. Cuneiform is a writing system that is almost exclusively used on clay, much

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less on stone. Clay tablets were kept in private or official archives or (in the first millennium) in libraries. Cuneiform archives or libraries were preserved when the building in which they were kept was destroyed. They were hidden below the debris and may even be baked in case of fire. Other tablets were simply thrown away, to be found by archaeologists among other garbage. Whatever other writing there was in Greek, in one of the many variants of Aramaic, or in other languages we hardly know. The leather or papyrus on which such texts were written perished long ago. Nowadays, those scholars who can read cuneiform generally know little about Arabic, Syriac or Greek and vice versa. There may well be much more of a continuity in literature and in culture in general than we can see within the confines of narrow academic specialties. The study of the transmission and continuity of Mesopotamian culture beyond the Persian and Hellenistic periods is one of the important recent developments in Assyriology and Ancient History.

Before we can start discussing 2500 years of Mesopotamian literary history we need to pay attention to the concept 'Mesopotamia'. This concept, according to one author, 'has the disconcerting ability to dematerialize completely.' Mesopotamia is the name of a Roman province, referring to the lands between the Euphrates and the Tigris. In ancient times we are, in fact, talking about at least two very different entities: Babylonia in the South and Assyria in the North. Babylonia is a loose collection of cities with their surrounding country sides, supported by an agriculture that heavily depends on irrigation. From times immemorial the cities are the centres of commerce, culture, religion, and political power. Assyria, less dependent on irrigation, is more evenly populated, centred around a single royal city. Babylonian gods live in their cities, Ninurta in Nippur, Nanna in Ur, Ishtar in Uruk, Marduk in Babylon. Their position in the pantheon is related to the political strength of their respective home cities. In Assyria the god Assur is the single head of a divine hierarchy.

This contribution deals with two periods in the history of this non-existing Mesopotamia: the Old Babylonian period, around 1800 B.C.E., and the Neo Assyrian period, around 700 B.C.E. Babylonian culture in the Old Babylonian period is indeed very Babylonian and has little to do with far-away Assyria, about which we are ill-informed anyway. For first millennium Assyrian history, however, the concept Mesopotamia may be useful to some extent. At least from the Assyrian point of view it was important to see a cultural continuity between the North and the South. Culture, in the sense of cultural capital, as a means to be a cultivated person, was very much Babylonian culture. Literature in Assyrian palace libraries is mainly composed in an artificial and archaising literary Babylonian dialect. Even the royal inscriptions by Assyrian kings, boasting about their campaigns in foreign countries, are not in Assyrian but rather in Babylonian. Whatever second millennium literature found its way to first millennium Assyria is Babylonian in origin and sings the glory of Babylonian heroes and gods such as Gilgamesh and Ninurta. In times of war between Babylonia and Assyria, among the treasures that Assyrian kings brought home as precious booty were tablets with Babylonian inscriptions.

2. Old Babylonian Literature

Old Babylonian literary texts are written in Sumerian and come in great majority from Nippur in central Babylonia. They constitute a major element in scribal education. By this time Sumerian was a dead language, a language mainly used for scribal and ritual purposes. Literary texts are used to introduce beginning scribes to this

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2 Another medium for writing cuneiform was the wax board: a wooden board covered with wax. In the first millennium wax boards were used for library texts. S. Parpola, "Assyrian Library Records," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 42 (1983), 1-30. These writing boards shared the fate of the Greek and Aramaic literature of the time.

3 Paradoxically, tablets in buildings that were not destroyed followed their regular lifecycle and had very little chance to end up in a modern museum.


7 Babylonia, however, should not be taken in an essentialist way. The country was ruled by the time an Amorite dynasty and several minority groups are known to have existed.

8 Nippur was the most important religious and academic centre in Babylonia until the last quarter of the eighteenth century.
language and to the culture that came with the scribal profession. Old Babylonian Sumerian literary tablets belong to the same corpus as lexical and mathematical exercises.9

Sumerian literature has a broad variety of complexity, topics, styles, and genres. There are adventurous stories about legendary rulers of the past, such as Gilgamesh, Lugalbanda, and Enmerkar as well as narrative texts about gods. There is a large body of hymnic literature, praise of gods, kings, and temples. There is a group of so-called city-laments, poetic descriptions of the destruction of a city, its temples and its inhabitants, in most cases ending with a positive note about their subsequent restoration. The label 'wisdom literature' has often been used to include the widest variety of texts. I wish to restrict this term to those compositions that clearly intend to give practical or ethical instructions about various ways of life. It includes a large body of proverbs, and a few longer texts such as 'The Farmer's Instructions' also called the Sumerian Georgics, and 'Sumerian God's Instructions to his Son'. Finally there is a variety of light-hearted literature. This last category includes debate poems between animals, seasons, or tools (Bird and Fish; Summer and Winter; Hoe and Plough), as well as hilariouts descriptions of life at school, involving a lot of name calling, obscenities and spitting.

Before I start discussing this corpus, let me clarify one more point. It is well nigh impossible at this point to present an all-encompassing overview over Old Babylonian Sumerian literature. Several compositions are available only in old and unreliable editions, others have not been edited at all. This particular problem is being remedied at a high speed by a web-based project of the Oriental Institute in Oxford. With broad international co-operation they have managed to put out a significant portion of the corpus of Old Babylonian Sumerian literature and they are determined to bring this project to completion in the near future.10 Even so, however,

9 There is a large literature on Old Babylonian schools. See N. Veldhuis, "The Conform Text as an Educational Tool", Dätch Studerur ur Nue Eratc Languqes and Cultures 2 (1996), 11-26 and most recently K. Volk, "Edubba'a und Edubba'a-Literatur: Rätsel und Lösungen", Zeitschrift für Assyriologie 90 (2000), 1-30, with references to earlier literature.

10 J.A. Black, G. Cunningham, E. Rohoon, and G. Zölyomi, The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, http://www-etd.orient.ac.uk/ (Oxford, 1998). This site may be consulted for editions, translations, and bibliographic data for all the Sumerian compositions referred to in this article. The main contribution of the Oxford web site is to provide an entire overview over the known Sumerian literature at a single place, accessible to specialists and non-specialists alike. The absence of decision to justify choices of translation and interpretation may give the impression that the translations are reasonably certain and uncontroversial. The opposite is true: Sumerian is relatively badly known, both lexically and grammatically, so that any translation is bound to be controversial. See J. A. Black, Reading Sumerian Poetry (London, 1998), Chapter 2 for various aspects of this problem and its repercussions for the modern consumption of Sumerian literature.

11 The corpus of literary texts that was recently found in Tell Haddad (ancient Maran) may illustrate the point (A. Caviguone and F. N. H. Al-Rawi, "New Sumerian Literary Texts from Tell Haddad (Ancient Maran): A First Survey", JCS 55 (1995), 91-105). The tablets have significantly added to our knowledge of the Sumerian Gilgamesh narratives, in particular Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven (A. Caviguone and F. N. H. Al-Rawi, Gilgamesh et taureau de cel [Sul-mek-kum] [Textes de Tell Haddad IV], Revue d’Assyriologie et d’archéologie orientale 87 (1993), 97-129) and Gilgamesh Death (A. Caviguone and F. N. H. Al-Rawi, Gilgamesh et le mort. Textes de Tell Haddad VI was as apprendre sur les textes littéraires sumériens [Cuneiform Monographs 15, Groningen, 2000); and N. Veldhuis, "The Solution of the Dream: A New Interpretation of Gilgamesh’s Death", Journal of Cuneiform Studies 52 (2001), 133-148). The pieces from Nippur that were known previously differ in many details from the Tell Haddad versions, so that we now have at least two incomplete versions of both narratives.

12 The five independent Sumerian Gilgamesh narratives are to be distinguished from the so-called Gilgamesh epic in Aхидад. See below.

13 See in general B. Alter, "Epic Tales from Ancient Sumer: Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Other Cuning Heroes", in: J. M. Sasson (ed.), Civilization of the Ancient Near East (New York, 1993), 213-232. We have no contemporary inscriptions of these kings. They are known, for instance, from the Sumerian King List (Assyriological Studies 11, Chicago, IL, 1959). This list is the reconstruction of Sumerian literature will never be complete. Clay tablets are almost always broken. Most literary tablets do not contain an entire composition, but an extract of between 15 and 60 lines. In modern research Sumerian compositions must be pieced together as jigsaw puzzles. Few compositions may be reconstructed in their entirety. The future will no doubt bring more tablets and fragments to our knowledge, bridging ever more gaps in the reconstruction of the corpus. Yet, chances that this will lead to a complete picture are virtually nil. Quite to the contrary: new tablets will produce new variants and new versions of known compositions, and thus add to the awareness of the many versions and variants that did not survive the ravages of time.11 How does Old Babylonian literature relate to its own past? The Ur III period, approximately the last century of the third millennium, is probably responsible for the creation of the heroic narratives around Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh,12 legendary or semi-legendary kings of Ur.13 The Ur III dynasty originated in
Urak. The ancient and legendary kings of Urak played an important rôle in the royal legitimation of the time. Šulgi, the most important king of this dynasty, calls himself brother and friend of Gilgames. We have very few actual manuscripts from the Ur III period for these narratives. The dating of these compositions to the Ur III period proceeds mainly on contents. The few literary Ur III fragments we have include a Lugalbanda story and two Gilgamesh texts. The Lugalbanda piece is related to the Old Babylonian Lugalbanda story, but in a rather loose way. One of the Gilgamesh fragments corresponds to the narrative Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven. The Old Babylonian Nippur version of this story is known only in a very fragmentary fashion. Comparison with versions from other places reveals that the Ur III fragment represents a version of its own. The second Ur III Gilgamesh fragment does not seem to relate to any of the known narratives from later periods. Tentatively, we may conclude that the corpus of Ur III literary texts was transmitted, though selectively and without a clear concept of a fixed composition. This picture is confirmed by the fact that the narrative Gilgamesh and Huwawa, in which Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the monster Huwawa in the cedar forest, is known in Old Babylonian Nippur in two rather different versions. We may describe the heroic narratives of the legendary kings of Urak as the foundation myths of the Ur III empire, but we must keep in mind that this did not prevent those stories from being in flux. Also, asserting that the Sumerian Gilgamesh narratives go back to Ur III original we must concede that we do not have the faintest idea what these Ur III period versions looked like. Moreover, we must acknowledge that the Ur III period knew Gilgamesh stories not present in the Old Babylonian record. The corpus of Ur III heroic narratives around the early Urak kings is, therefore, largely a matter of guess work.

Another group of texts that may elucidate the relation between Ur III and Old Babylonian Sumerian literature is the royal hymn. Royal hymns in Sumerian praise the king mainly for his piety, his building activities, his maintenance of the canal system, his wisdom, his scribal, musical and athletic skills. They may refer to martial skills and accomplishments in war, but such themes seem not very important. In volume royal hymns form one of the most important groups of literary texts. We have more than twenty hymns to king Šulgi lesser numbers for the other kings of this dynasty. There are almost thirty hymns extant for Enme-Dagan, a king of the early Old Babylonian Isin dynasty. Other kings were less extravagant, but the tradition of composing such hymns continued at least until the times of Abi-Iluh in the late Old Babylonian period. Jacob Klein pointed out in some detail that some of the hymns to Enme-Dagan extensively use themes, structures, and expressions found in hymns to Šulgi. A hymn commemorating the construction by Šulgi of a ritual boat for the goddess Ninlil is mirrored by a hymn for Enme-Dagan commemorating the construction of a ritual chariot for Enlil. Enlil and Ninlil are the divine couple presiding over the Sumerian pantheon. The Šulgi hymn describes the boat part by part in florid, metaphoric language:

Your timber is a fium serpent, crouching on its paws.
Your punting-pole is a dragon, sleeping a sweet sleep in its lair.
Your oars are zigzag snakes, their bellies pressed upon the waves.
Your floor-planks are the flood of the pure Euphrates, sparkling altogether.

The translation is uncertain in many details, but the poetic strategy is clear enough. Such a part by part description with praise in metaphoric language is a known device in Sumerian poetry.
same device is used in the description of the chariot in the Ilme-Dagan hymn:

Your sudin is a thick cloud, embracing the horizon all over.
Your rope-fastened pegs are a great net, laid out over heaven and earth.
Your rope-box is a whip and a goad, which rouse up the donkeys.
Your pole-pin is a wide-open net which does not let the evil-doer escape.

Again, there are a lot of uncertainties here. The sudin, in the first line of the translation, is literally a bat. We do not know what part of the chariot was called ‘the bat’, perhaps it is a mere homonym. Anyway, an allusion to the flying bat is used in the comparison with the dark cloud that covers the horizon.

The use of this kind of enumeration is not restricted to the two hymns compared here. Still, the syntax by which the metaphors are expressed and the general context of a large number of structural similarities between the two hymns proves that this is not a coincidental similarity. Steve Tinney, in a reaction to Klein’s analysis, has maintained that the Ilme-Dagan hymns do not merely copy their predecessors. They express an ideology that is different. Where Šulgi cast hist net widely, Ilme-Dagan’s interest are primarily centered on Nippur and its deities. The hymnic tradition was actively used in the production of new texts with new contents and a new relevance. Ilme-Dagan’s court poets knew their classics and used them for their own purposes.

Ur III literature was transmitted to the Old Babylonian period but not in a wholesale fashion. Some compositions were handed down rather faithfully, even preserving particularities of Ur III orthographics. Other texts were reworked, survived in various versions, or remained in a constant flux. Still other texts were forgotten. Some of the new compositions use the inspiration of older examples. This is a living literature. A literature that reflects on its own past not so much by preparing faithful editions or by writing commentaries but by adaptation and new production.

There is a small corpus of texts that preserves a tradition that goes back all the way to the very beginning of Sumerian literature. This corpus includes a collection of proverbs, a collection of sayings by Šuruppak to his son, a hymn to the temple of Kesh, and a number of lexical texts. The relation between the Old Babylonian copies and their earlier versions is in need of a thorough investigation. It is complicated by the fact that over the centuries orthography and the writing system itself changed so much. At least some of these compositions in their Old Babylonian versions are provided with either Akkadian translations, or with glosses explaining the archaic orthography, or with both. Here we have traces of an academic interest in transmitting ancient texts, in understanding their contents, and in preserving the knowledge of ancient orthography.

The ancient texts are marked by a temporal distance. They were not adapted to the needs or the taste of the present. As such this corpus represents an awareness of history. This is the literature of an irrevocable past. The Ur III literature that was used, expanded, and adapted in the Old Babylonian period is a literature that is preserved and read and used, serving to indicate how literature proper is to be written. The two corpora thus display very different relations.

tions to the past. Both may be called ‘canonical’, though in very different senses of the word. The ancient corpus answers our expectation of a text that is faithfully transmitted over many centuries. Two of these compositions—The Instructions of Sururpak and The Kel Temple Hymn—entered the regular Old Babylonian school curriculum and are, therefore, known in numerous copies. There is no indication that their contents were more authoritative—in a moral or religious sense—than other compositions read in school. The corpus that was transmitted from the Ur III period is not ‘canonical’ in the sense of a closed canon that invites interpretation. It is rather a literary canon, defining what literature is and how new literature is to be produced. As an educational canon it serves to define a class of people. Scribes were identified by their knowledge of Sumerian. As an Old Babylonian proverb says: a scribe who does not know Sumerian, what kind of a scribe is that? The cultural competence expected from a scribe included knowledge of this corpus of literary texts.

3. First Millennium Literature

First millennium literature is known to us primarily through libraries, the greatest and most famous of which is that of the Neo Assyrian king Assurbanipal at Nineveh. This enormous collection of learning happened to be the very first major find of cuneiform texts in the middle of the nineteenth century. One and a half century later we are still far removed from a comprehensive publication of these finds, let alone a full publication of its contents. Yet, some things have become sufficiently clear. The library mainly consists of traditional scholarly and ritual texts. Divination, including the rituals to avert predicted evil is the single most important group. In addition to the library texts the excavations in Nineveh brought to light an important body of letters and reports, written by scholars for the king. These letters and reports deal with the interpretation of celestial phenomena and other divinatory matters. 26 It has been argued that Assurbanipal collected his tablets in order to remove power from the hands of [...] consultants and retain it himself. His ability to check preventive advice from [...] willfully misrepresenting the scholarly tradition, and it therefore gave him independence from whims and plots in the court. 27 Literary texts, such as the famous Gilgamesh epic, have attracted a large amount of scholarly and public attention, but play a subordinate role in the library at large. 28 These literary texts are mainly in Akkadian, 29 though some are Sumerian-Akkadian bilinguals. The literature we find here is not Neo Assyrian strictly speaking. As I have emphasized above, the cultural background of this literature is predominantly Babylonian. We find copies of the same texts at various places in both Babylon and Assyria over a period of several centuries.

The first millennium body of literature is very different from the Old Babylonian Sumerian corpus. Most of Sumerian literature was lost. A few texts survived the centuries and are found in first millennium libraries in bilingual fashion. The Sumerian Gilgamesh narratives had been reworked and integrated into an Akkadian Gilgamesh epic as early as the Old Babylonian period. Over the millennia the psychological make-up of Gilgamesh changed considerably. 30 The hero of the Sumerian tales is a hero indeed. He goes out to fight enemies and monsters and appears as the victor almost as a matter of course. In the Old Babylonian Akkadian version Gilgames is more of a tragic hero. Hints to his tragic character may already be found in the Sumerian stories, in particular in the narrative that relates Enkidu's death. But now, in the Akkadian epic, we have a continuous story that starts out with a heroic quest and ends with the unavoidable acceptance of death in relation to the meaning of life. In the first millennium, finally, Gilgames' Odysseys turns out to be a quest for

26 For the authors of letters and reports to the king we owe the important study by D. Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology* (Cuneiform Monographs 18, Groningen, 2000), in particular Chapter 1. Brown argues that the extraordinary importance of celestial divination in the Neo Assyrian period, and the special place of the astrological specialists in the entourage of the king brought about the paradigmatic shift that eventually led to mathematical astronomy.


29 The term ‘Akkadian’ is used as a collective for the Assyrian and Babylonian dialects of the main Semitic language written in cuneiform.

wisdom. It is the tale of an adventurer king in search of immortality who eventually resigns and realizes that the only immortality available is a textual one. It is the tablet box with the tablets that narrate his quest that will make him immortal.31

The Gilgameš epic thus reflects on its own textuality. It is not the only literary composition to do so. I will discuss two more examples. First, the Erra narrative relates the wars and the destructive powers of the plague god Erra.32 In its closing paragraph it says:

The one who assembled the composition about him was Kâkit-Bani-Marduk, the descendant of Dāhhi.
It was revealed to him in the middle of the night; and when he recited it upon waking, he did not leave anything out;
he did not add a single word;
Erra heard and approved it.

What the last sentence means becomes clear when we look at the manuscripts of Erra, the actual clay tablets. Some of them are amulets—the tablet itself—the physical object—has become a protective tool.

Texts claiming divine inspiration are rather rare in Mesopotamia, though our example is not entirely unique. The famous so-called Catalogue of Texts and Authors provides authorial names for a number of compositions.33 Most of these authors are human beings, some of them are gods, in particular Ea, the god of wisdom and cunning. Up to the first millennium Mesopotamian literature had been an anonymous literature—with very few exceptions. Authors still play a minor role in the textual reception and consciousness. Where a text is referred to in a letter or in a learned composition, it is always by first line, or incipit, never including an author’s name. Yet, the fact that we find names of authors and compilers—real or imaginary—of such texts as omen compendia, the bilingual Ninurta tales Lugale and Angus, the Gilgameš epic, and the Erra narrative is important enough. An author has authority over the text he has composed. A traditional text is owned by whoever is part of this tradition. A text with an author has a proper form and an erratic one. The proper form is the one as conceived by the author. The erratic one deviates from that standard. To be sure, we do not necessarily need an author for the concept of a good, original text. My point goes the other way round: the emergence of authors’ names demonstrates that something has changed in the concept of a text.

Reflection on textuality takes place in a quite different way in the so-called creation story or, by its incipit, Entûma Eššī. As has been asserted by various authors, this creation story is not about creation at all, it is about the rise of Marduk, city-god of Babylon, to the head of the pantheon.34 The composition famously ends with the fifty names of Marduk. This is a learned piece of work in which fifty names of Marduk are explained by complicated hermeneutical techniques.35 The names are in Sumerian. They are analysed with fantastic etymologies, sometimes involving complex transformations. Thus a Sumerian word may be replaced by a homonym, or by an entirely different word that happens to be written by the same cuneiform sign. The complicated relationship between Sumerian and Akkadian writing is used for hermeneutical ends. The etymological techniques are not explained; knowledge of the complexities of the writing system and its possibilities are presumed. This, in other words, is a text that speaks from expert to expert. Moreover, it is a text that only makes sense in writing. The fifty names of Marduk may only be understood by someone who understands the intricacies of the cuneiform writing system, it is lost in recitation.36

Entûma Eššī is related to the learned tradition of the lexical corpus. First millennium lexical texts are bilingual. They provide a

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36. Entûma Eššī in fact was recited at different occasions (see R. Pongratz-Leisten, "Nesgabirmartu", Baalûkûûkûr Anûsûrâkûr 9 [1999], 294-298 and G. Gavagnin and W. G. Lambert, "The Late Babylonian Kidinnû Ritual for Enûma", Journal of Cuneiform Studies 43/45 (1993), 89-106). The ritual tablets in question are very late, but it is generally believed that it represents an older custom.
Sumerian word with an Akkadian translation. As is well known, words ordinarily do not have a single translation. The solution of the lexical texts is to be as inclusive as possible. All Sumerian—Akkadian correspondences, in all possible contexts, were simply enumerated. Only in exceptional cases we may find an indication of the context in which the translation or use is valid. These lists provide a rich source for the kind of etymological reasoning that we find in the Fifty Names of Marduk. Similar techniques are found in some categories of commentary texts. Commentary texts exist for several divinatory series, for medical texts and for a number of literary compositions. One type of commentary simply explains difficult words. The other type indulges in the kind of etymological analysis described above. Stephen Lieberman has pointed out the relations between these techniques and later rabbinic hermeneutics. What is of importance here is that such exercises only make sense in a world where texts and writing have their own inherent authority.

The inherent authority of traditional texts may further be illustrated by first millennium colophons. Such colophons may go at lengths to assure the reader that the copy he has in his hands is an accurate one, and was collated against the original. Even tablets which—according to the colophon—were ‘hastily excerpted’ often claim accuracy: ‘copied according to the original; collated’.

There is another, perhaps more entertaining way to illustrate the attitude to written texts in first millennium Mesopotamia, and that is humour, in particular parody. Humour has had a place in Mesopotamian literature from its very beginning. The early proverbs from the middle of the third millennium include rather sexist expressions about women and female sexual parts. They were no doubt considered very funny in the all-male world of scribes. Humour in Old Babylonian Sumerian compositions largely plays on human shortcomings. The texts describing school life are full of stupid pupils calling each other names or being spanked by short-tempered teachers. The dispute poems, such as the dispute between Hoe and Plow, derive part of their entertaining value from the humiliation of the proud. The expensive and complicated plow turns out to be so much less useful than the simple hoe. One type of humour, however, seems to be almost entirely absent and that is parody. First millennium literature is more productive in this respect. I will discuss two examples. One is a fragmentary text called The Tale of the Fox, and probably related to later Reynaert stories. It parodies—among other things—heroic narratives. Heroic narratives introduce direct speech by one of several traditional formulas, most famously: ‘he opened his mouth and said: ‘...’. In the Tale of the Fox the speech by the dog—who is portrayed as a braggart—is introduced as: ‘he opened his mouth and barked’. This text is well-edited in W.G. Lambert’s Babylonian Wisdom Literature. It has been extensively studied and is widely known in the Assyriological community as well as beyond. Another text, less well-known, parodies a variety of scholarly and literary text types. This text so far received only rather poor editions. In one of the first attempts the composition was understood as a most serious description of the fate of human beings at the last

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39 The difference between tablets ‘hastily excerpted’ and literary copies, therefore, is not that the latter claims to be more accurate. The literary copies were produced to be consulted in the future, the excerpts indicate that they were made for a specific purpose (ritual or didactic).
judgement. Three years later the book was effectively destroyed in a review by Von Soden, who was the first to point out in print the parodic nature of our text. We now have an excellent recent translation of some passages in Benjamin Foster's Before the Muses. Since Foster's work a few important new fragments were published, so that it is well worth spending some time on this fascinating composition.

The text consists of six sections, each perverting a different text type. It begins with a god list. God lists are closely related to lexical lists. They represent truly venerable traditional knowledge. In our present text each god is related to a city:

- 3 lu-mi-tum: Marduk, king of Babylon
- 4 6a-hum: AN 1, god of Sumeria
- 5 Nanna: AN 1, god of Sumeria
- 6 la-sa-ku: Sumeru: god of heaven
- 7 la-ub-anni-anni: Nergal, god of war
- 8 l-e-mum-ma: Enki, god of wisdom
- 9 i-din-ma: God of the underworld
- 10 la-ba-ba: God of the underworld

In those cases where the god is known we may observe that he or she is placed one line too low. Zababa belongs to Kish, and Aja-Hubani presumably belongs to Hubbani, and so on. Ebar is, of course, not a lord, but rather a mistress. There may well be something more sophisticated behind this list, or perhaps not. In the second section the text continues with a first person account by a woman, who compares herself to several animals and brags about her appearance.

A short quotation (slightly adapted from Foster's):

> Among the long ones, the short ones, there is no girl like me! My limbs are like those of an elephant, my face like a hyena's. I tower like a tortoise, I have no rival.

The text continues like this for several dozens of lines, but the section is only partially preserved. The humour may be less scintillating than it seems at first sight. There is only one mortal who can brag in Mesopotamian texts, and that is the king, a male. Some of the expressions used here are directly borrowed from this royal bragging,

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79 See Foster (1993), 824-826 with bibliography.

80 The additional tablets and fragments are F 24, 118; CTXIV, 204-206. Prof. W.G. Lambert, who is preparing a new edition, kindly informed me of the existence of many unpublished fragments, mainly of Babylonian origin.

such as 'I have no rival', or the metaphorical description of the limbs. That the bragging is female here, comparing herself to an elephant, is a double perversion of a well-known text-type. More than the female of the species it is the king himself who is mocked here indirectly.

The next section is not so much a parody of a text, but a mocking description of various professions. The aluzinnu, the jester, pretends that he is able to perform all those specialized professions. Here I quote Foster's translation:

> "Jester, what can you do?"

> "Of the whole of the exorcist's craft, nothing's beyond me."

> "Jester, how do you exercise?"

> "Here's how: I take over the haunted house, I set up the holy water, I tie up the scape goat, I skin a donkey and stuff it with straw. I tie a bundle of reeds, set it on fire, and toss it inside. I spied the boundaries of the house and its surroundings. But the haunt of the house, the serpent, the scorpion, are not spared.

Here is a specialist whose remedy destroys the house that he is supposed to exercise. Note that the exorcist is one of those learned people who would be versed in all the technical and literary texts of the time.

The fourth section seems to describe an heroic quest, the details of which are lost in breaks. In section five we arrive at the chapter division. Here are a few examples:

3' lus-su ala u-nab-tu u-la-um-ma u-sah-di 
4' a-ki 
5' i-uma-nu o n-ab-tu u-ka-mm a la-a-lu 
6' i-uma 
7' la-ba-ba 
8' i-uma-nu o n-ab-tu u-ka-mm a la-a-lu 
9' i-uma 
10' la-ba-ba

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34 CXXV, IV, 203 columns ii. 
51 The text has NI, which seems to make no sense. Confusion between LUGAL and NI is hard to imagine in Assyrian writing, but is easier to understand if the copy in question has a Babylonian ancestor.
In January, what is your diet?
Thou shalt dine on goose eggs and dung, embedded in sand, and cumin infused with Euphrates water in ghee.

In February, what is your diet?
Thou shalt dine on hot bread and donkey's ass, stuffed with dog turds and fly dirt.
And so on.\(^{59}\)

The entire composition has been interpreted by some commentators as recording an actual performance of an alzuinnu or jester.\(^{54}\) This, I believe, is very unlikely for two reasons. First, the alzuinnu appears in section three but there is no reason to assume that he plays a role in the other sections as well. Morphology identifies the alzuinnu as a male and the main protagonist of section two as a female. This has led to speculation about the alzuinnu as a transvestite, but it seems much more natural to read the sections as separate entities. Second, the humour behind this text is mainly based on a parody of learned texts. It is hard to see how such humour could work in an actual performance outside the world of texts. The unity of the composition is not to be found in the alzuinnu or his performance, but in the textual world that it ridicules.

As to the cleverness of the humour behind this composition, I am not overly impressed. The importance of this text is that it is only effective if the text parodied has sufficient status. The text, once again, reflects on the textual nature of the intellectual universe of the first millennium.

4. Conclusion

First millennium canonical texts do not derive their canonicity from divine sanction or divine inspiration. The few hints at divine inspiration I have mentioned may not be compared to the Biblical model. They are also very different from the canonical body of literary texts from the Old Babylonian period. The Old Babylonian Sumerian corpus is a living, changing corpus. The first millennium corpus is

more or less closed and textually fixed. There is little new invention, and little adaptation of the received text. The texts are old and authoritative, as is sometimes indicated by the attribution of divine authors or authors from a time past. Their canonicity, their intention and ability to prescribe a direction is not in defining what newly created literature should be like. It is rather in the never-ending project of hermeneutics.

The comparison between Old Babylonian and first millennium corpora of texts reveals that the notion of text itself developed and changed dramatically. Old Babylonian schools used the heritage from the past freely. They transmitted, re-created, and used the old tradition as inspiration for new compositions. The texts were written, first of all, for educational purposes. The concept of a library does not seem to exist. Knowledge was located in the heads of school masters, not in collections of tablets. First millennium libraries contain repositories of reliable knowledge, knowledge about writing, knowledge about divination. Divination itself is a textual business. Gods have written their messages in the heavens or on the liver of a sacrificial sheep. Divination is hermeneutics, no less than reading a traditional cuneiform text. Knowledge of this heavenly writing, as it is called, is the scholarly way to know the world. It is intricately related to knowledge of the writing system and the way this knowledge is represented in texts. Knowledge and wisdom are entwined in texts talking to texts about texts and the intricacies of writing. In this self-contained world we find the wise Gilgamish who finally found immortality in writing his biography. His shelf-neighbours in the royal library are long lists of Sumerian words with their translations, endless observations of the skies, monstrous births, earthquakes, the behaviour of ants, the physiognomy of humans, and so on. We need to conceptualize the variety of compositions in the Assurbanian library as a body of texts that defined the undoubtedly small intellectual elite of the time. Scholars have started to realize that complicated mathematical-astronomical tables are not essentially different from astrological divination. They belong to the same intellectual discipline. And so do literary and lexical texts. They are all part of an essentially textual technique for the production of meaning.

15 See Brown (2000) with earlier literature.

HOW THE BIBLICAL CANON BEGAN: WORKING MODELS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

STEPHEN B. CHAPMAN

Recent discussion about canonization within the field of Old Testament or Hebrew Bible studies1 provides a helpful vantage-point from which to identify several key methodological issues for comparative work on the phenomenon of literary and religious canons, especially in antiquity. In this essay, I hope to offer a contribution to such comparative work with the following themes: efforts to reconstruct the process of biblical canon formation have consistently raised certain basic methodological issues for historical-critical scholars of the Bible; furthermore, the way in which such scholars have chosen to respond to these issues has largely determined the shape of their historical reconstructions. In this way, historical theories about biblical canonization have not been 'neutral', but instead reflect the working out of various phenomenological assumptions about the process of 'canonization' itself.

1 While I would like to employ a 'neutral' term for this literature, especially given the original context for these remarks at the Hebrew University, I am not at all convinced that such neutrality is possible. This conviction is not only a matter of my own social location (as a Christian scholar), but also involves the different references denoted by alternative terms. For example, 'Hebrew Bible' implies a contrast with the Greek Bible or Septuagint (LXX), while 'Old Testament' does not. Because this essay pertains to both the Hebrew and the Greek biblical traditions, as well as the relationship between them, 'Hebrew Bible' cannot function as an adequate umbrella term. Moreover, although I would agree that the term 'Old Testament' was foreign to pre-Christian Judaism, I remain unconvinced that 'Hebrew Bible' does better justice to the precise hermeneutical position and role of this literature for ancient Israel. Cf. P.E. Greenough, "Does Judaism Have a Bible?", in: J.J. Greenpoon and B.F. Le Beau (eds.), Sacred Text, Sacred Time, (Omaha, 2000), 1-12. By using 'Old Testament' I do not intend to impose a network of Christian theological presuppositions upon this literature, but rather positively to describe the status of Israel's Scriptures as a venerable collection for both Early Judaism and Early Christianity. In addition to these historical issues, moreover, it also seems fairest not to disguise from the reader the nature of my own social location and religious commitments.
Homer, the Bible, and Beyond

LITERARY AND
RELIGIOUS CANONS
IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Edited by
MARGALIT FINKELBERG
& GUY G. STROUMSA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

M. Finkelberg, G. G. Stroumsa, Introduction: Before the Western Canon ........................................ 1
N. Velisius, Mesopotamian Canons .................................. 9
S. Chapman, How the Biblical Canon Began: Working Models and Open Questions ......................... 29
C. Grottimelli, On Written Lies .................................. 53
Sh. Shaked, Scripture and Exegesis in Zoroastrianism .......... 63
M. Finkelberg, Homer as a Foundation Text ................. 75
H. Pelliccia, Two Points about Rhapsodes ..................... 97
H. Cancik, Standardization and Ranking of Texts in Greek and Roman Institutions .................... 117
A. Vardi, Canons of Literary Texts at Rome .................. 131
G. G. Stroumsa, Early Christianity -- A Religion of the Book? .................................. 153
Ch. Markschies, The Canon of the New Testament in Antiquity .............................................. 175
R. Lampert, The Neoplatonists and their Books ............ 195
H. Sivan, Canonizing Law in Late Antiquity: Legal Constructs of Judaism in the Theodosian Code ...... 213
D. Stern, On Canonization in Rabbinic Judaism ............ 227
M. Halfertal, From Oral Tradition to Literary Canon: Shem Tov Ibn Gaon and the Critique of Kabbalistic Literature .......................................................... 255
A. Plaks, Afterword: Canonization in the Ancient World: The View from Farther East .................. 267
Notes on Contributors ........................................... 277
Index .......................................................... 281