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An Exploration of Parallels
and A Contest Against Theodicy

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Introduction

Wisdom is a didactic (contains wise teachings), dialogic (invites conversation) and cultic (concerns religious experience) phenomenon, and is dynamically shared across the ancient Near East. This interaction of ancient scribal scholars yielded a corpus of literature with observable commonalities. In line with these commonalities, this paper explores the parallels of the book of Job with the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. Based on the evidences of their generic parallels, this paper sets out to argue against the idea of theodicy in the book of Job, at the same time to advocate for an imperative to comprehend the wisdom in the book of Job within the ancient Near Eastern background.

The Wisdom in the Book of Job

The message of the book of Job has been widely taken as theodicy. This paper argues against such interpretation, suggesting instead “a pursuit of meaning amid unknown suffering.” Despite being a pious believer of God, Job was on the verge of abandoning the fear of the Shaddai (Job 6:14; cf. 15:4). Job did not blame God though, instead demanded

explanations from God for the predicament he experiences (Job 9:32; 10:2-7). What is the point of abiding in the belief of God? The point must be finding a meaning in suffering, that is, a dynamic encounter with the reality of God—"now my eyes see you!" as Job 42:5 suggests. Job was finally *comforted* (though many interpreters take the niphath form of *nḥm* in 42:6 as "*repented*") after he realized the true meaning in his suffering was found in the divine presence.¹ The ancient Near Eastern parallels of Job tend to be understood as an issue on theodicy as well, this I will argue after summarizing five ancient texts that are suggested to be reminiscent to the biblical Job.

Mesopotamian Speculative Wisdom

*A Man and His God, the "Sumerian Job"*²

A Man and His God is a Sumerian retrospective monologue, perhaps the earliest Mesopotamia text that explores the pain of pious suffering. Though often associated with the biblical Job, this poetic lament differs from Job on two counts. First, the protagonist is mostly penitential despite proclaiming his innocence, e.g., "I, the young man, shall publicly declare

¹ I am indebted to George E. Mendenhall, *Ancient Israel's Faith and History: An Introduction to the Bible in Context* (Edited by Gary A. Herion; Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 2001), 189-190 for this understanding. Mendenhall suggests the Judean exile as Job's actual predicament, see 189.

² W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 10-11. See also James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 589-591.

my sins before you!”³ In the biblical Job, however, the suffering Job upholds his innocence (Job 31) and delivers his violent protest in his pain (Job 10:1-7, 14-15; 13:13-19; 16:17-22). Second, the sufferer upholds conservative orthodoxy e.g., “Never has a sinless child been born to its mother,....a sinless [workman] has not existed from of old.”⁴ Whereas in the biblical account, it was Job’s friends who held this traditional view, “What are mortals, that they can be clean? Or those born of woman, that they can be righteous?”⁵ (Job 15:14; see also Job 4:7-8; 15:1-35; 18:5-21; 20:4-29; 21:7-24; 24:22-23). M. Weinfeld hence noted the “praise-lament-restoration-praise” structure of this document comparable more to the biblical thanksgiving psalms, e.g. Ps 34.⁶ There is thus no direct connection of this text to the biblical Job.

*Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi, the “Babylonian Job”*⁷

This four-tablet Akkadian poetic monologue entitled *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*, meaning “I will praise the Lord of Wisdom,” begins and ends with the

³ S.N. Kramer, “Man and His God: A Sumerian Variation on the ‘Job’ Motif,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East Presented to Professor Harold Henry Rowley* (ed. M. Noth; VTSup 3; Leiden: Brill, 1955), i-iv, 170-181; Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 175.

⁴ Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 176.

⁵ Translation mine.

⁶ M. Weinfeld, “Job and Its Mesopotamia Parallels – a Typological Analysis,” in *Text and Context: Old Testament and Semitic Studies for F.C. Fensham* (ed. W. Claassen; JSOTSup 48; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 217-226.

⁷ Text and translation see Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 21-62; Pritchard, *ANET*, 596-600.

protagonist's praise for the god Marduk.⁸ The protagonist, Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, is a wealthy public figure who appealed to the gods for help after losing his position, wealth, family and health. He is restored to favor after having experienced further hardships and illness.⁹ The sufferer's laments correspond with Job's outcry in some remarkable ways.

*My god has forsaken me and [disappeared],
My goddess has cut me off and stayed removed from me.¹⁰*
(cf. Job 6:4; 23:3, 8-9; 30:20-24)

*My dignity had been taken away,
My manly good looks jeopardized,
My pride has been cut off,
My protection has skipped off.¹¹*
(cf. Job 19:13-20; 30:9-10, 15)

*My house has become my prison.
My arms are powerless—my own flesh is a manacle,
My feet are fallen flat—my wound is severe.
My afflictions are grievous, my wound is severe.¹²*
(cf. Job 7:5; 16:12-14; 19: 26; 30: 28-31)

⁸ Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 177; Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible*, 62.

⁹ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 75.

¹⁰ Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 177.

¹¹ Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 177.

¹² Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 178.

There are both similarities and dissimilarities between *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* and the biblical Job. On account of the similarities, both *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* and Job illustrate practical wisdom of a person coping with pain. Further, both names of the protagonists embody the text's theology: Job, "where is my father?"¹³ and Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, "may Esagil [Marduk's temple] declare the righteous pure."¹⁴ On account of the dissimilarities, with regards to the theology of both documents, the biblical Job recounts Job's pursuit of divine presence (6:1-13; 7:17-21; 9:16-32; 10:1-22; 13:1-28; 19:6-12, 23-29; 23:3-10; 27:1-23; 31:35-40), whereas *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* entails propaganda for Marduk.

*Marduk, the lord of wisdom, the [deliberative] god.*¹⁵

*From Marduk's pure hands I have brought prosperity.*¹⁶

*Humanity, all of it, gives praise to Marduk!*¹⁷

The Babylonian Theodicy¹⁸

¹³ Suggestions for the meaning of the name of Job include: "where is my Father," "one who turns back to God", and "the one who is assailed" (from the Hebrew word that means "enmity" or "to be at enmity", as of Job 13:24). See V. Philips Long, "Job I," *Psalms & Wisdom Literature* [article on-line] (Covenant Theological Seminary, 2006; accessed 21 Dec 2009), 1-2; available from http://worldwidefreeresources.com/upload/OT240_T_23.pdf; internet.

¹⁴ Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005), 62.

¹⁵ Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 177.

¹⁶ Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 178.

¹⁷ Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 178.

¹⁸ Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 63-91; ANET 601-604.

This Babylonian acrostic composition consisting of 27 stanzas of 11 lines each, is dated around 12th and 11th BCE.¹⁹ The text records a debate between a friend and a suffering sage, Saggil-kinam-ubbib, who openly challenged the retributive orthodoxy, making it thematically closer to the biblical Job. As in the biblical Job, this sage is accused of arrogance and blasphemy (cf. Job 22:5-9), is abandoned by his friends and strongly advocates his innocence (cf. Job 10:1-7, 14-15; 16:17-22).²⁰ Through the heated dialogues, the sage and his friend disputed over death, which is the greatest liability of human living. The sage is urged to look for divine deliverance by offering worship to god, but he complains instead about divine abandonment and the futility of religious piety.²¹

Similarities of this text with the biblical Job include the following. First, with regards to the literary structure, both represent debates between a sufferer and a friend (as for Job, a debate with a friend from a group of three in three cycles). Second, with regards to the motif, the sufferer of both texts complains about unexplained suffering in his life, while the friend attempts to defend the conventional retributive theology of explaining suffering (Theodicy 2:1-11; 8:1-11; 17:1-11; 22:1-11; 23:1-11; cf. Job 4:7-8; 15:1-35; 18:5-21; 20:4-29; 21:7-24; 24:22-23).²²

¹⁹ Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 179. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible*, 66; Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus*, 35.

²⁰ Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible*, 63.

²¹ Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 35.

²² Pritchard, *ANET*, 602-603.

In the Babylonian Theodicy,

The sufferer:

“The rich man is fallen. [His wealth] is far away.” (Theodicy 17:11)²³

The friend:

“Seek the favorable breath of the god,
What you have lost in a year you will make up in a moment.”
(Theodicy 22:11)²⁴

In the book of Job,

Job:

*I will say to Eloah, “Do not condemn me,
make known to me over why you contend against me.
Is it good for you to oppress, to reject the work of your palms,
and glorify the scheme of the wicked?” (Job 10: 2-3)²⁵*

Zophar:

*“Do you not know this from ancient,
since humankind was placed on earth,
that the exultation of the wicked is short,
but the joy of the godless is for a moment?” (Job 20:4-5)²⁶*

²³ Pritchard, *ANET*, 603.

²⁴ Pritchard, *ANET*, 603.

²⁵ Translation mine.

²⁶ Translation mine.

Thirdly, with regards to religious piety, both protagonists turn to god(s) for deliverance, thus was Job's Eloah (Job 5:17; 6:8; 16:20; 23:3-5; 29:2,4), so as Saggil-kinam-ubbib's god Narru, Zulummar, and goddess Mami.²⁷ Fourthly, in terms of literary device, both texts use language of nature i.e. grain of the field, north wind, sea, fields, pleasant breeze, growing plants (Theodicy 3:2,9; 6; 6:1; 7:1; cf. Job 6:15-17; 8:11-12, 16-17; 14:7-9) and animal world i.e. lion, cow, wild ass, jackals, goats, deer, ox, horse (Theodicy 5:4,6; 6:4,7; 13:4; 15:4; cf. Job 30:29; Job 38-40) as part of their rhetoric, enhancing the beauty of imagery and metaphors in the texts.²⁸ Expressions like "gods of the underworld" in *the Babylonian Theodicy* and "Sheol is naked before God" in Job 26:6 represent an example of cross textual virtual quotations.²⁹

Based on the above similarities between *the Babylonian Theodicy* and the biblical Job, it can be said that wisdom authors in the past may have shared common literary skill and epistemology. Also, as Robert Gordis has suggested, both biblical and ancient Near Eastern authors in wisdom literature may have employed virtual quotations freely; and their readers, who play active role in ascertain the meanings, could have recognized the allusion.³⁰

Despite the similarities, both biblical Job and Babylonian Theodicy

²⁷ See Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 181.

²⁸ Pritchard, *ANET*, 602-603.

²⁹ Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 178.

³⁰ Robert Gordis, "Virtual Quotations in Job, Sumer and Qumran," *Vetus Testamentum* 31 no.4 (1981): 410-427.

demonstrate two distinctions worthy of attention. First, the book of Job has two historical narratives (Job 1-2 and Job 42) that framed the lengthy debates between Job and friends, whereas the Babylonian Theodicy consists mainly of rhetorical dialogues. Second, Job was restored eventually to health and wellbeing, whereas no signs of restoration is indicated in case of Saggil-kinam-ubbib.

Egyptian Speculative Wisdom

*The Dispute of a Man with His Ba (First Intermediate Period)*³¹

Among only a few pessimistic texts in Egyptian wisdom that voices complaint, this manuscript records laments about this life. The protagonist longs for death because it offers relief from life's difficulties, but his *ba* ("soul") disagrees and threatens to part with him at death. This threat prompts the man's eloquent debates over the necessity of tomb preparations, priestly activities, and rituals of death.³² This disputation text, may have been inspired by the Harper Songs,³³ challenged the principles of *ma'at* (translated as truth, justice or order) and the traditional Egyptian optimism regarding afterlife.³⁴ The laments in this text can be associated with that of Job:

³¹ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (3 vols; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971-1980), 1:163-169; Pritchard, *ANET*, 405-407.

³² Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus*, 20.

³³ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1:196-197; Pritchard, *ANET*, 467.

³⁴ Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible*, 75.

*May it be near to me on the day of misfortune and wait on that side...*³⁵

(line 16; cf. Job 3:1-10)

Let Thoth, who propitiates the gods, judge me.

Let Khonsu, who writes in truth, defend me.

Let Re, who pilots the sun barque, hear my speech.

*Let Isdes..... defend me.*³⁶

(line 24-27; cf. Job 6:8-9; 10:2; 13:3; 27:2)

To whom can I speak today?

One's fellows are evil;

*The friends of today do not love.*³⁷

(line 104-105; cf. Job 6:14; 12:2-3)

Death is in my sight today like the odor of lotus blossoms,

*Like sitting on the bank of drunkenness.*³⁸

(line 135-136; cf. Job 10:22; 17:12-13)

*Declarations of Innocence (Late Period)*³⁹

Declarations of innocence were well-known excerpts from the Book of

³⁵ Pritchard, *ANET*, 405.

³⁶ Pritchard, *ANET*, 405.

³⁷ Pritchard, *ANET*, 406.

³⁸ Pritchard, *ANET*, 407.

³⁹ Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 219.

the Dead which was carved inside pyramids and tombs in Egypt. The inscriptions consist of 192 chapters of varying lengths, each designed to call for resurrection of the dead and a blessed afterlife.⁴⁰ Parallels to the declarations are found in Job's defense against God's apparent punishment as Job's friends had rationalized.

*I have not deprived the orphans of their property,...
I have not taken the milk from the mouths of children. (Declarations
125)⁴¹*

*If I have withheld the poor from pleasure,
or I have caused the eyes of a widow to despair,
or I have eaten my bit alone,
while the orphan has not eaten from it,
(Job 31:16-17)⁴²*

*I have not been boastful, I have not been arrogant.
I have not desired more than I possess.
(Declarations of innocence before the Divine Assembly)⁴³*

⁴⁰ Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 219.

⁴¹ Paraphrase from Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 3rd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 221.

⁴² Translation mine; alternately, the translation can be: "I have not withheld the poor from pleasure, I have not caused the eyes of a widow to despair, I have not eaten my bit alone while the orphan has not eaten from it" to be closer to the words of *the Declarations*.

⁴³ Paraphrase from Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 222.

*If my lips have spoken falsehood,
or my tongue has murmured deceit. (Job 27:4)⁴⁴*

Theodicy? Or In search of Meaning in Suffering?

From my observation, the Egyptian wisdom texts hardly correspond with the idea of theodicy for only a few that voices complaint and openly challenges the gods. As for the Mesopotamia documents mentioned above, Daniel P. Bricker calls into question the validity of classifying them as theodicy.⁴⁵ This paper asserts as well “the pursuit of meaning amid unknown suffering” rather than an issue of theodicy. In the case of *A Man and His God*, the protagonist did not argue in the face of unjustifiable misfortune but to plead, lament and confess his sins and failings.⁴⁶ For this reason of religious piety, Lambert has also ruled out A

⁴⁴ Translation mine; alternately, the translation can also be: “my lips have not spoken falsehood; my tongue has not murmured deceit.”

⁴⁵ Daniel P. Bricker, “Innocent Suffering in Mesopotamia,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 51 no.2 (2000): 193-214. Quoting Wolfram von Soden, Bricker listed four basic elements of theodicy’s definition: (1) a clear sense of right and wrong, so that a sufferer could reasonably claim to be suffering undeservedly; (2) significant individual worth, so that personal suffering must be justified; (3) minimal competition within godhead, so that suffering cannot be blamed on one deity due to human loyalty to another; and (4) a limited view of judgment in the afterlife. Bricker argues that most documents above that were recognized as “theodicy” hardly contain all four of these elements; see pp.193-194. See also W. von Soden, “Das Fragen nach der Gerechtigkeit Gottes im Alten Orient”, *Mitteilungen der deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft* 96 (1965):41-59.

⁴⁶ Bricker, “Innocent Suffering in Mesopotamia,” 198-199; cf. Kramer, “Man and His God: A Sumerian Variation on the ‘Job’ motif,” 170-182.

Man and His God as part of wisdom literature genre altogether.⁴⁷ Further, in the case of *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*, the protagonist confesses ignorance instead of innocence:

*I wish I knew that these things would be pleasing to one's god!
Who can know the will of the gods in heavens?
Who can understand the plans of the underworld gods?*⁴⁸

Hence this is again not the case of theodicy where the sufferer blamed Marduk for his predicament, but is instead a case of uninformed suffering. The protagonist was eager to search for an explanation to his predicament. Furthermore, in the case of the so called *Babylonian Theodicy*, it is the pious friend, not the skeptic sufferer, who recites proverbs of traditional wisdom that was accounted for an issue of theodicy:

*He who looks to his god has a protective spirit;
the humble man who fears his goddess accumulates wealth.*⁴⁹

Likewise in the case of the biblical Job, it was Job's friends, not Job, who engaged in traditional definitions of theodicy that sought to justify the ways of God in an attempt to remove the contradictions in their

⁴⁷ W.G. Lambert, "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature," *Wisdom in Ancient Israel* (ed. J. Day, R.P. Gordon and H.G.M. Williamson; Cambridge University Press, 1995), 30-31; cf. Bricker, "Innocent Suffering in Mesopotamia," 199.

⁴⁸ Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 178.

⁴⁹ Arnold and Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 180. Pritchard, *ANET*, 602.

theological systems. At the end of their debates with Job, they were rebuked severely by God exactly for their perspective (Job 42:7). Job on the contrary was commended for his “speaking to God,” in the theophany in Job 42:6c, “for you have not spoken *to me* as my servant Job has done correctly.”⁵⁰ Job’s violent protests in his lengthy debates as well as in his personal laments aimed for an encounter with God. The book of Job therefore concerns mainly with the pursuit of divine presence through a meaningful God-human relationship (e.g. Job 23:3-9), not blaming on the goodness of God in the face of evil as many have purported. Therefore the view that the book of Job should be understood as theodicy also fails to convince.

The Book of Job in Ancient Near Eastern Context

The latitude of biblical wisdom is larger than one may have thought. Although the word “wisdom” hardly appears in the ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts,⁵¹ the same type of those literatures is obviously identifiable with the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible. The stylistic devices of these dialogic texts include rich usage of metaphors and imagery, repetition, reflection and rhetorical questions, which are also characteristics of the biblical Job.⁵²

⁵⁰ Translation mine.

⁵¹ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 60.

⁵² Sara J. Denning-Bolle, “Wisdom and Dialogue in the Ancient Near East,” *Numen* 34 no.2 (1987): 214-234, here 225-230.

Likewise, the theology embodied in the wisdom literature represents a generic concern in ancient Near Eastern wisdom tradition. The fear of god is commonly communicated in instructions and wise sayings. Later when faith is in crisis, the retributive theology in most of these proverbs is generally questioned, and the speculative wisdom like that of Job seems to come in handy for the survival of faith. These common religious values were shared between biblical and non-biblical authors. The book of Job uses retributive theology of the ancient Near Eastern understanding—represented through the arguments of Job’s friends—as a backdrop to bring home its ultimate quest for the meaning in faith. Therefore, the “contextual approach” purported by W.W. Hallo to outline the biblical text against its wider literary and generic environment, is highly suggestive.⁵³ Understanding this wider wisdom genre in ancient international dynamics rather than in isolation within Hebrew Bible itself contributes to a legitimate interpretation of the biblical wisdom texts. With regard to this wider cross-textual reality, wisdom documents from the ancient Near East can serve as an effective tool for understanding the biblical material better. The question remains how does one account for the theology in view of the utilization of earlier pagan literature into a biblical literature? This paper inclines to think that biblical wisdom authors confront pagan religion in an imaginative and creative way: through the dissimilarities among the similarities between both anthologies of wisdom texts.

⁵³ W. W. Hallo and K.L. Younger, eds., *Context of Scripture* (3 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1997-2002).

Conclusion

In Mesopotamia as well as in Egypt, there are religious people who question traditional retributive theologies and found themselves searching in different ways. Dialogue may be one of those ways of searching. Dialogic texts appear in both Mesopotamia (i.e. *the Babylonian Theodicy*) and Egypt (i.e. *the Dispute of a Man with His Ba*), implying that the concept of discourses may have existed in wisdom writing legacy across ancient Near East. One can observe the wisdom works of both biblical and ancient Near East manifest notable thematic and formal coherences. Where similarities can be observed between the biblical and ancient Near Eastern genre, the understanding of the parameters and characteristics of the genre as they existed in the ancient mind can be enhanced. In short, it is an imperative to study biblical wisdom within ancient Near Eastern background. Such comparative study offers an alternative to interpret the biblical wisdom texts in its context.

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