

ABL 1285 AND THE HEBREW BIBLE

LITERARY TOPOI IN URAD-GULA'S LETTER OF PETITION TO ASSURBANIPAL

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In the recently published *Festschrift* honouring Erica Reiner, Simo Parpola has presented a new edition of ABL 1285, a work of outstanding literary merit². In his comments to the text, Parpola speaks not only about the highly organized nature of the letter and its exalted, nearly poetic diction, but also about the great erudition of the author³. The assumed familiarity of the letter's intended readers with a wide variety of literature is displayed by the incorporation of various literary topoi which are exploited to the advantage of writer. The letter contains allusions to literary works known to us such as "The Poor Man of Nippur" or "Advice to a Prince", references to the astrological series *Enūma Anu Enlil*, and incorporates some hitherto unknown proverbial statements. While the proverbs are identifiable as such because of express internal evidence provided by the letter itself⁴, the citations from the other works are

¹) This study was written during the 1991-1992 academic year while I was on Sabbatical leave at the Annenberg Research Institute for Jewish and Near Eastern Studies in Philadelphia. I am grateful to the institute for its hospitality and generous support. I would also like to thank Prof. Jonas Greenfield for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

²) S. Parpola, *The Forlorn Scholar*, in F. Rochberg-Halton (Ed.), *Language, Literature, and History. Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner (American Oriental Series 67)*, New Haven 1987, pp. 257-278.

³) *Ibid.*, pp. 271-274.

⁴) Line 26 reads MU la SIG₅ lihšu u šeššû ša abiti izzi"ar. Parpola renders this line "improper conduct, whispering about and revealing a secret are detestable things". The difficulty with this interpretation is that the verb is in the singular while there are supposedly three subjects. I would suggest regarding this line as a possible proverb formulated in two parallel, chiasmatically arranged cola. The first colon is a nominal sentence and the overall arrangement of both cola is predicate – subject // subject – predicate. The line is to be read *zikru la damqu lihšu // u šeššû ša abiti izzi"ar*, "whispering is not a nice utterance // and revealing a secret is detestable".

recognized as quotations only because we possess the mother compositions from which they were drawn⁵.

In this brief study I would like to discuss five additional instances of dependency on known literary works or reliance on customary diction, practices, and stereotyped rhetorical devices. The difference between the topoi and rhetorical devices which I will identify and those mentioned thus far is that I base my identification on parallels from outside of Mesopotamia, namely Hebrew epigraphy and the Hebrew Bible. To be sure, Parpola himself has paved the way for such an endeavour by relating the reference to a lion's den in Obv. 39 (*ina IGI gab-'i ša UR.MAH*) to the *gôb 'arayôt* of Daniel 6:12-27, and recalling the parallel between "half the kingdom" in LAS 171 and the identical expression in Esther 5:3, 6⁶. These parallels, as well as the possibility that there may be certain resemblance between meter in this letter and Hebrew meter⁷, invite further comparison with non-Mesopotamian sources, especially in the cosmopolitan age which was the late Neo-Assyrian period⁸.

The reliance on "peripheral" parallels which typifies the present inquiry is not meant to imply that additional inner Mesopotamian parallels do not exist or won't come to light at some future time. Nor does the existence of a parallel with the Bible indicate direct borrowing or primary genetic links leading in either direction. Even so, the existence of biblical parallels is sufficient to demonstrate that the features to be discussed had a wider currency in the ancient Near East than the confines of cuneiform literature alone. Also, in certain instances, the parallel to be adduced illuminates some aspect of the Assyrian text.

I. The letter begins with a twelve line address to the king. This address leads into the actual petition which commences in line thirteen with the request:

šarru bēli ana dēni ša urdīšu liqūla
dibbī gabbu šarru lēmur

"May the king my lord listen to the plea of his servant.
May the king investigate my entire case."

⁵ For "intertextuality" in cuneiform literature see most recently W.W. Hallo, *Proverbs Quoted in Epic*, in T. Abusch et al. (Eds.), *Lingering over Words. Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (Harvard Semitic Studies 37), Atlanta 1990, pp. 203-217, and esp. 208ff. for proverbs cited in letters.

⁶ Parpola, *cit.*, p. 273, fn. 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 272, fn. 10.

⁸ See in particular H. Tadmor, *The Aramaization of Assyria. Aspect of Western Impact*, in H.J. Nissén - J. Renger (Eds.), *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn* (RAI XXV) (*Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient* 1), Berlin 1982, II, pp. 449-470.

Parpola has called attention to the resemblance this request bears to the first line in the "Advice to a Prince", otherwise known as the "Fürstenspiegel": (*šumma*) *šarru ana dīni lā iqūl*, "(if) the king does not hear a case". It seems to me that an even closer, in fact identical formulation, is found in the initial line of the famous judicial plea from Metsad Hashavyahu, a document nearly contemporaneous with our letter⁹: *yīšma' 'adōnī haššar 'et d'bar 'abdō*, "May my lord the prince hear the case of his servant". This line has been compared with David's words to Saul in I Samuel 26:19¹⁰: *we' attāh yīšma' 'adōnī hammelek 'ēt dibrēy 'abdō*, "and now, let my lord the king hear his servant's case".

In comparing these three texts we should bear in mind that the Hebrew word *dābār* can mean "lawsuit" or "case", and not simply "(spoken) word"¹¹, so that it is the semantic equivalent to Akkadian *dibbu* and *dīnu*. This parallel reveals something about Urad-Gula's rhetorical strategy. On the one hand, he has formulated his words on the model of a more widely used turn of speech, and has indicated that his letter should be given the weight and regard of a legal petition. On the other hand, the literary allusion to the "Fürstenspiegel", and the implied alarm to the king this allusion intends to set off, is limited to the introduction of the less common word *liqūla* rather than *lišme*. The author has used expected juridical diction, but has subtly coloured his speech by means of a literary allusion to accomplish the desired rhetorical effect¹².

He then goes on to convert the prosaic formula into a poetic statement by introducing the second line which echoes the first through parallelism and partial chiasm. Note that the second line provides the B word *dibbu* in parallel to the A word *dīnu* as well as the B word *amāru*¹³ to parallel the A word *qālu* (*šemū*). Moreover, the use of *dīnu* in one line and *dibbu* in the next exemplifies the well known procedure of "breaking up" a stereotyped hendiadys¹⁴, this time *dīnu u dibbu*, for use in parallelism.

⁹ For the Metzad Hashavyahu inscription from the late seventh century B.C. see the extensive treatment of D. Pardee, *The Judicial Plea from Mešad Hashavyahu (Yavneh-Yam: A New Philological Study)*, Maarav 1 (1978), pp. 23-66, and *id.*, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters (SBL Sources for Biblical Study, 15)*, Chico 1982, pp. 15-25. The most recent discussion of this document is K.A.D. Smelik, *The Literary Structure of the Yavneh-Yam Ostrakon*, IEJ 42 (1992), pp. 55-61. In my opinion, the literary level of this inscription has been greatly underestimated due to failure to recognize its overall logical structure as well as certain stylistic devices employed. I hope to be able to discuss these features in detail in a future study.

¹⁰ See Pardee, Maarav 1 (1978), pp. 37-38. The parallel between the Samuel passage and the Metzad Hashavyahu petition was pointed out first by J. Naveh, *A Hebrew Letter from the Seventh Century B.C.*, IEJ 10 (1960), pp. 129-130, esp. 131. The parallel with ABL 1285 has never been noticed.

¹¹ See *inter alia* Exodus 18:16, 22:8; II Samuel 15:3.

¹² The subtleness in the allusion is in keeping with the author's overall strategy. Parpola, in discussing the blessings, writes (p. 272) "... the king is gradually, almost imperceptibly, and elegantly, led toward a frame of mind best fit for the purpose of the petition". This evaluation holds true in line 13 as well.

¹³ Parpola translates "let the king see the whole situation". I would render "let the king read the entire brief". For *amāru* meaning "to read a tablet" see CAD A/1, s.v. *amāru* 3, pp. 18-19.

¹⁴ See E.Z. Melamed, *Break Up of Stereotype Phrases as an Artistic Device in Biblical Poetry*, in C. Rabin (Ed.), *Studies in the Bible (Scripta Hierosolimitana 8)*, Jerusalem 1961, pp. 115-153.

II. The petition continues (Obv. 14-17):

*issu rēši ina libbi abīšu ša šarri
a'īlu lapnu mār lapni
kālbu mētu qullulu u sukkuku anāku
issu libbi kiqilti intathanni*

*nāmurātešu amahharšu
issi šābē danqūte šūmī izzakkar
rehāti ma'dāti akkal*

*ina birit ibašši ANŠE.GÌR.NUN.NA u GUD.NÍTA iddanna
u ina šattīia kasap ištēn manā akaššad*

“Initially, in (the days of) the king’s father,
I was a poor man, son of a poor man,
a dead dog, a vile and restricted person.
He lifted me from the dung heap;

I got to receive gifts from him,
and my name was mentioned among fortunate men.
I used to enjoy generous ‘leftovers’.

Intermittently, he used to give me a mule or an ox
and yearly I earned over two minas of silver.”

In this passage, the now out of favour exorcist relates how it was in the “good old days” when he first came to court. Parpola discusses the word *kiqiltu* used here and refers to an Aramaic attestation of this term in the Tell Fekheriye inscription. In a study of that inscription, Aaron Shaffer and Jonas Greenfield indicated that the expression *issu libbi kiqilti intathanni*, “he lifted me from the dung heap” has Biblical parallels in I Samuel 2:8 (Hannah’s prayer) and Psalms 113:7, where God is described as *mē’ašpōt yārīm ’ebyôn*, “he lifts the pauper from the trash-heap”¹⁵.

However, it seems that the parallel is somewhat more extensive, especially with the passage from I Samuel 2:8. Naturally, the Hebrew words *dal* and *’ebyôn* are synonym-

¹⁵ See J.C. Greenfield - A. Shaffer, *Notes on the Akkadian Bilingual Statue from Tell Fekheriye*, Iraq 45 (1983), pp. 109-116, esp. 116 on l. 37; and *idem*, *Some Observations in the Akkadian-Aramaic Bilingual from Tell-Fekheriye* (in Hebrew), Shnaton 5-6 (1978-79), pp. 119-129, esp. 127.

ous with the Akkadian *lapnu*¹⁶. Furthermore, the *n^edîbîm* of the Biblical passage with whom the psalmist is placed are equivalent of the *šābē danqūte* (LÚ.ERIM.MEŠ SIG₅.MEŠ-ti) of the Akkadian letter with whom Urad-Gula's name is mentioned¹⁷. The three tiered sequence of 1) poor man, 2) raising from the dung heap, and 3) placing among the important and well-off is common to both texts.

Furthermore, the generous salary granted Urad-Gula corresponds with the statements that YHWH impoverishes and enriches (*YHWH mōrîš ūma^ašîr*). The mention of sumptuous food given to Urad-Gula is reminiscent of Hannah's statement (I Samuel 2:5a) that "men once sated must hire out for bread; men once hungry hunger no more"¹⁸. Finally, the scribe's complaint that he was a dead dog, with the implication that afterwards he was not, may be seen as paralleling the claim that God "puts to death and resurrects, brings down to the netherworld and raises up"¹⁹. The passage cited above thus has many thematic, structural and linguistic parallels with I Samuel 2:5-8a.

Moreover, both passages serve to describe people in similar circumstances. Hannah (or the persona behind the prayer attributed to her) is an unfortunate person whose fortunes God has now reversed, while Urad-Gula had been originally an unfortunate man whose fortunes a previous king had reversed in the past. Both are now reciting the benefits heaped upon them. The difference is that while Hannah is praising God for his recent graces to her, Urad-Gula is petitioning the king to renew his graces with him. Even so, the part of the letter containing the motifs mentioned above is the part in which he is praising his previous benefactor for his kindness.

It would be hard to imagine, nor do we suggest, that these two passages are directly dependent on each other. Nonetheless, in light of the great similarities, it is very likely that they are both based on some common traditional "cluster" of literary clichés used to describe royal benefits to faithful servants.

¹⁶ J. Greenfield suggests (oral communication) that the expression *lapnu mār lapni* is comparable with the biblical term of self abasement *'ebed ben 'āmāh* (Psalms 116:16).

¹⁷ A.L. Oppenheim, LFM 99, no. 38, translates ARM 3, 30, 16 *šābam damqam mārî Terqa ēbirma* as "I provided well to do citizens of Terqa with grain". J. Bottéro, ARMT 7, 244 explains *awilū damqūti* as "hommes de classe". J. Sasson, *The Military Establishment at Mari (Studia Pohl 3)*, Rome 1969, p. 61 fn. 74 remarks that *šābam damqam* is not a military grouping, but simply "good men" who could be the trained soldiers.

¹⁸ For this parallel to stand it is not necessary to translate *ûr'ēbim hādēlu 'ad* as "the hungry grow fat on food" following among others D.N. Freedman, *Psalm 113 and the Song of Hannah*, in M. Haran (Ed.), *H.L. Ginsberg Volume* (Eretz Israel 14), Jerusalem 1978, pp. 59*-69*, esp. 67*. For a refutation of this suggestion see T.J. Lewis, *The Songs of Hannah and Deborah: HDL-II ("Growing Plump")*, JBL 104 (1985), pp. 105-114.

¹⁹ This statement is to be taken figuratively. For the range of possible interpretations see Radaq *ad loc.*, and especially *remez lešārôt welirwāhôt* ("... or an allusion to troubles and relief").

III. Along with this particular cluster, and, indeed, interwoven with it, is a second cluster. This cluster consists of two elements: self abasement by calling oneself a dead dog, and receiving sumptuous food portions from the king.

First of all, self abasement by calling oneself a dog has parallels in the El-Amarna correspondence as well as the Lachish letters. The specific expressions *kalbu mêtû*, “dead dog”, has parallels in other Neo-Assyrian letters and in the Bible (I Sam. 24:15; II Sam. 9:8, 16:9; II Ki. 8:13 LXX). Of particular significance, however, is II Samuel 9:8, where Mephiboshet says to David: *meh 'abd'kâ kî pânîta 'el hakkeleb hammêt 'aşer kāmônî*, “what is your servant that you have had regard for a dead dog such as myself”²⁰.

Mephiboshet is responding to David’s pronouncement that he will be kind to him for Jonathan’s sake, return to him Saul’s field and let him eat regularly at the king’s table. Now it seems that the expression *rehâti ma'dâti akkal* in Urad-Gula’s letter is functionally equivalent to references in the Mephiboshet incident of “eating at the king’s table” in I Sam. 9:7, 10, 11, 13. Just as in our letter, so the Book of Samuel tells how the king has taken notice of a particular servant and done him favours. Both passages describe the servant as well as the favours in similar manners.

IV. On the reverse of the tablet (Rev. 3-13), Urad-Gula tells how he had on a previous occasion written to the king, and the king had in fact answered him. He claims to have placed the king’s letter in the temple of Nabû (l. 8):

*egirtu issi kussê ša Nabû ina libbi tukulti assakanši
kî mârî edi attašarši*

“I placed the letter in safety at the throne of Nabû and guarded it like my only son”.

Parpola remarks that the reference to the throne of Nabû remains unclear and then asks “was it customary to deposit valuable documents in the shrine of the patron of the scribal craft?”. If the king’s letter was in fact a positive answer to Urad-Gula’s petition and promised him some benefits, then its place would certainly be in a temple, where the god could see the promise and effect its fulfilment. The king’s letter would thus be a

²⁰ P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel* (Anchor Bible 8), Garden City 1980, pp. 384-385; *II Samuel*, p. 261. See also CAD K, s.v. *kalbu* j, p. 72. S.M. Paul, *Gleanings from the Biblical and Talmudic Lexica in Light of Akkadian*, in M. Brettler-M. Fishbane (Eds.), *Mishah le-Nahum. Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum M. Sarna in Honor of his 70th Birthday* (JSOTS 154), Sheffield 1993, pp. 242-256, esp. 242-244.

kudurru of sorts²¹. On the other hand, since the king's words are described as "recondite as a mountain" (*abutu ša šarri bēlīa kī šadê ša[pšūqat]*, l. 7), it seems that they did not bode well for Urad-Gula. If so, it would be preferable to compare his actions with those of king Hezekiah who read the *rab-šaqē*'s threatening letters and then spread them out before YHWH in the Jerusalem Temple (II Kings 19:14 // Isaiah 37:14). Otto Kaiser has compared Hezekiah's display of the letters with the well known Mesopotamian phenomenon of letters to gods²². H. Wilderberger, however, remarks about this proposal "daß man Drohbriefe eines Feindes der Gottheit zur Kenntnis brachte, scheint nicht bezeugt zu sein, ist aber immerhin denkbar"²³. Urad-Gula's letter is the example Wilderberger is looking for to validate Otto's proposal and turn the thinkable into the actually existent. Urad-Gula's action and that of Hezekiah are mutually illuminating. Spreading out the letter before a deity²⁴ is simply a way of confronting the deity with the danger to the supplicant and soliciting his assistance.

V. Further on in the letter, Urad-Gula relates the following incident (Rev. 13-20):

annurig šitta šanāte issu mār 2 umameia mētūni
šalšu ana āl Arba'il mala ana Aššur ina šēpēia attalak
mannu rā'imani qātī iṣbat
u lu ina mahar šarri bēlīa ušēribanni
atā ina libbi Ekallāte mašmaša šarru išši
u anāku hulu ša mudabbiri aṣṣabat
issu mahar ša nišē iša'ulūnnini mā
atā ina šēpēka tallaka
nišū bitī etteqū
dannūti ina kussē
šaniūti ina saparrati
ṣehrūti ina libbi kūdini (ANŠE.GIR.NUN.NA.MEŠ)
anāku ina šēpēia

²¹) J. Brinkman, RIA s. v. *kudurru*, points out that most *kudurrus* found *in situ* actually were discovered in temples and that the purpose of depositing them in temples was to enlist the aid of pertinent god in carrying out the stipulations of the document.

²²) See O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39. A Commentary*, London 1973, p. 393 on Isaiah 37:14.

²³) H. Wilderberger, *Jesaja 28-39 (Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament X, 3)*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1982, p. 1425.

²⁴) Note that Hezekiah's subsequent prayer addresses YHWH as specifically "the god of Israel who sits upon the Cherubs" (II Kings 19:15). This detail fully corresponds with Urad-Gula's reference to the "throne of Nabū" for the Cherubs were in fact YHWH's throne in the Jerusalem temple.

"It is two years now since the two beasts of mine died.
 I have walked three times to Arbela and once to the city of Assur,
 (but) who has showed me any compassion by taking me by the hand
 or leading me into the presence of the king my lord?
 Why did the king summon an exorcist from Ekallate,
 while I had to take the road to the desert
 because of people asking me 'Why do you go on foot?' ?.
 People pass my house,
 the mighty on palanquins,
 the assistants in carts,
 (even) the juniors on mules,
 (and) I on my feet!"

This passage displays several interesting features. First of all, there may be a graded number pattern of 3+1 in the complaint that the author was forced, for lack of proper transportation, to walk three times to Arbela and once even to Assur. The same sequence occurs in the account of people passing by Urad-Gula's house. This pattern of "not only three but four" is, to be sure, found occasionally in Mesopotamian literature such as in the "Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sîn" found at Sultantepe²⁵, or perhaps even the "Poor Man of Nippur"²⁶. It is, however, a well attested narrative device in biblical literature²⁷.

More important, however, is the end of the passage. Now, the previous passage in the document (Rev. 3-13) concludes with the citation of certain known proverbs (Rev. 10-13). It seems that this passage too may conclude in a similar manner. The statement "people pass my house, the mighty on palanquins, the assistants in carts, (even) the juniors on mules, (and) I have to walk" actually summarizes the indignities described in the preceding lines. That this summary is actually related to a well known proverb becomes more likely if we compare a passage from the book of Ecclesiastes, itself a well known repository of traditional statements and observations including some known from Mesopotamian sources²⁸. In Ecclesiastes 10:5-7 the author remarks:

²⁵ See O.R. Gurney, *The Sultantepe Tablets IV. The Cuthean Legend of Naram Sin*, AnSt 5 (1955), pp. 93-113. Naram-Sin goes out to fight the Gutians three times and is defeated each time. Only the fourth time does he learn his lesson and not go out to fight them.

²⁶ See J.S. Cooper, *Structure, Humor and Satire in the Poor Man of Nippur*, JCS 27 (1975), pp. 163-174.

²⁷ See Y. Zakovitch, *The Pattern of the Numerical Sequence Three-Four in the Bible* (Ph.D. Diss., Hebrew University Jerusalem), Jerusalem 1977.

²⁸ See the commentaries on Ecclesiastes as well as, in particular, A. Shaffer, *The Mesopotamian Background of Lamentations* (sic!) 4:9-12, Eretz-Israel 8 (1967), pp. 246-250 (in Hebrew; English summary p. 75*); *idem*, *New Light of the "Three-ply Cord"*, Eretz-Israel 9 (1969), pp. 159ff. (in Hebrew; English summary pp. 138ff.). Ecclesiastes 10:6, the verse immediately before the one with the parallel to the

yēš rā' āh rāūtī taḥat haššāmeš
kišgāgāh šeyyōšā' millipnēy haššālliṭ
nittan hassekel bammerômîm rabbîm
wa' ašîrîm baššēpel yēšēbû
rā' itî 'a bādîm 'al sūsîm
w' sārîm hōl' kîm ka' a bādîm 'al hā' āreš

“Here is an evil I have seen under the sun.
 as great as an error committed by a ruler.
 Folly (or the Fool) was placed on lofty heights,
 while rich men sat in low estate.
 I have seen slaves on horsebacks
 and nobles walking on the ground like slaves”.

The malicious and certainly abnormal situation observed by Qoheleth in which slaves ride horses while princes must walk like slaves on the ground is precisely the predicament in which Urad-Gula now finds himself²⁹. Inferior courtiers are provided means of transportation while the writer, a man of distinction, and rank, must walk. The specific means of transportation mentioned are indeed different³⁰, as are the types of inferiors mentioned. Nonetheless, the basic contrast and reversal of natural roles which is the gist of both statements is the same, indicating once again that Urad-Gula may be incorporating or conjuring up associations with a well known literary topos. In fact, he may simply have adapted the saying upon which Qoheleth based himself by expanding it into a 3+1 pattern.

Some of these parallels have helped us illuminate certain individuals aspects of Urad-Gula's petition. The five parallels, each individually and certainly when taken all together, deepen the impression of learnedness in the letter, an impression which Parpola's pioneering study could only start to develop.

Urad-Gula letter, has been compared with a passage from the Egyptian Admonitions of Ipuwer (see J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes. A Commentary*, Philadelphia 1987, p. 171, and M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, Berkeley 1973, pp. 140-163, and in particular 156-157: “See now the transformations of people etc.”). The parallel between Ecclesiastes 10:6 and Ipuwer is relevant *mutatis mutandis* for the parallel between Ecclesiastes 10:7 and ABL 1285 rev. 18-20.

²⁹⁾ G. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, Sheffield 1986, p. 167, remarks: “It is obvious that Qoheleth is setting up a hypothetical case”. Urad-Gula's true life experience is certainly just such a “hypothetical case”!

³⁰⁾ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 172, points out that riding on horses is a relatively late phenomenon in terms of biblical literature, referred to only in later books. In pre-exilic works people ride on donkeys and mules. It is quite possible that the author of Qoheleth has replaced the old mules in the proverb behind Urad-Gula's complaint with the more modern means of transportation.