DIALOGUES AND RIDDLES: THREE OLD BABYLONIAN WISDOM TEXTS

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This article presents new editions of three Old Babylonian wisdom texts.[1] Text A contains dialogues between different professionals and their customers(?), Text B is a dialogue between a friend and his fellow, and Text C contains several riddles. All three texts are poorly preserved and the interpretation is tentative in many points.

A. *Dialogues between professionals and clients(?)*

The cuneiform tablet fragment CBS 1399 (8.8 × 6.4 × 3.0 cm; 2.5 cm thick at the top and 3.0 cm at the break) was first published by Stol (1987: 383–86). He reports that it belongs to the second Khabaza Collection, which was purchased by the University of Pennsylvania Museum in 1895 and originates from Sippar in north Babylonia. Judging by the photograph kindly sent to us by S. Tinney (Fig. 1), the tablet is of whitish clay, composed of many fragments and in a poor state of preservation.

The text deals with a "barber of evil" (obv. 1–9), a "harlot of evil" (obv. 10–17), an unidentified female professional (rev. 1′–9′), and a "scribe of evil" (rev. 10′–16′). The different sections of the text are separated by horizontal lines. Each of them probably presents a dialogue between the above-mentioned professionals and dissatisfied persons, maybe their clients. If understood correctly, these professionals do not offer their services readily, thus causing the protests of their customers. We do not know any direct parallel to this text, but it brings to mind the Babylonian dialogue between a fuller and his fussy customer (*UET* 6/II 414). The text is catalogued in Wasserman 2003: 208 as no. 158. Our collations — marked with an asterisk (*) — are made from the photograph.

Text

obv.

1 *a-na* ŠU.I *ra-a*[*g-gi gullibniāti*]
2 *šum-ma ú-*⌜*ga*?*⌝-[*llab*? . . .]
3 *iš-te-en a-na* x*
4 *li-is-sú-uḫ* [x x x (x)] x [. . .]
5 *a-li-ik a-li-*[*ik-ma*] *na*-šu-ú *i*?-[*na*?-*di*?-*kum*?]
6 *la na-šu-ú l*[*a i-n*]*a-ad-di-ik-kum*
7 *qí-in-na-tim l*[*i-qé-e*] *i*-⌜*ra*⌝ *-tim* *ṣú-ub-bi-it*
8 *qá-ab-li-a-a*[*t* x x] *ra-ag-g*[*a-a*]*t* x [x] x-*ta-as-sú*
9 *i-di-ma ša ra-ag-gi ša mi-ša-*[*r*]*i-im ṣa-ba-at*

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10 [*a-n*]*a* KAR.KID *ra-ag-gi mu*-[*ug-ri-i*]*n-ni-a-ti*
11 [*šum*]-*ma a-ma-a*[*n-g*]*a-a*[*r* x x x] x x x *ar*? x x (x) x x
12 [*l*]*e-es-sà im-ta-aḫ-ṣú* ⌜x⌝ [x (x)]-⌜*ša*⌝ x x-*ru*
13 [*a*]*l-ki al-ki-i*!*-ma na-*[*š*]*u-ú i-n*[*a-a*]*d-di-ik-ki*
14 [*l*]*a na-šu-ú la i-na-ad-d*[*i*]*-ik-ki*
15 [*ši*?]-*in-na-a dam*? *kal*? *te*?-x-[. . .] x
16 ⌜*i*?⌝-*di*!?-[*ma*] *ša*? *ra*?⌝-[*ag-gi ša mi-ša-ri-im*]
17 [*ṣa-ab-ti*]
rest broken

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Fig. 1 CBS 1399, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

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rev.
1′ [*a-na* x x] ⌜*ra?-ag?-gi?* x [. . .]
2′ [x x x *šum*]-*ma a-qá-la ḫa* x [. . .]
3′ [. . . *-n*]*u it-ta-qí al-ki a*[*l-ki-i-ma*]
4′ [x x *ru?*]-*qá-tim ša iš-tu* A.ŠÀ!? 1 DAN[NA . . .] x
5′ [(x) x x DANN]A *an-n*[*u*]-*ú a-na dam-qá-t*[*im* x (x)] *tu?-ša?*
6′ x [(x)] x *l*[*i?*] x x [x (x)] x
7′ [*a*]*n-nu-ú* [*a*]-*na da*[*m?-qá-tim*] *ḫ*[*a?*] ⌜*i*⌝-[x x]-x
8′ *i-di-ma ša ra-a*[*g-gi ša*] *mi-ša-r*[*i-im*]
9′ *ṣa-*[*ab*]*-ti*

10′ *a-na* DUMU.É.DUB.B[A.A] *ra-ag-gi*
11′ *ši-pí-ir-ta-a*[*m*] ⌜*šu*⌝*-*⌜*uṭ*⌝*-ra-an-ni-a-ši-im*
12′ *i-lum šu-um-ma ši-pí-ir-tam*!
13′ *iš-t*[*a*]*-ṭá-ar-ku*!(text: *šu*)*-nu-ši-im*
14′ *a-li-ik a-li-ik-m*[*a* . . .]
15′ DUMU.É.DUB.BA.A *qá-tum l*[*e-qé?* . . .]
16′ SAḪAR.ḪI.A *a-ia**?[*-ki?-im?* . . .]

Translation
obv.
1 (They said) to the barber of evil: ["Shave us!"]
2 (He answered:) "If I s[have(?) . . . ,]
3 one to . . .
4 May he tear out [. . .]."
5 "Go, g[o off!] The *one who provides* [shall give (it) to you.]
6 The *one who does not provide* s[hall not] give (it) you to.
7 T[ake] the buttocks, grasp the br[eas]ts(?)!
8 The middle of [. . .] is evil. [Wicked(?) is] his . . .
9 Give up what is evil! Grasp what is of justice!"

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10 (They said) to the harlot of evil: "C[omp]ly with us!"
11 [(She answered:) "I]f I ⌜comply⌝ . . ."
12 They slapped her cheek, . . .ed her . . . :
13 "[G]o, go off! The ⌜*one who provides*⌝ shall [giv]e (it) to you.
14 The [*one*] *who does not provide* shall not give (it) to you.
15 My [tee]th(?) . . .
16 ⌜Give⌝(?) [up] what is(?) e[vil! What is of justice,]
17 [grasp!"]
rest broken

rev.
1′ [(They said) to the . . .] ⌜of evil(?)⌝: "[. . . !"]
2′ [(She answered:) "I]f I heed, . . . [. . ."]
3′ [. . .] she poured out. "Go, g[o off!]
4′ [. . . far] away(?) which from a distance(!?) of one double-hour
5′ [. .]. [double-h]our." "⌜Yes⌝, pleasantly . . .
6′ . . ."
7′ ["Ye]s, pl]ea[santly(?)] . . ."
8′–9′ "Give up what is e[vil]! Gr[as]p what is [of justice!"]

10′ (They said) to the scr[ibe] of evil:
11′ "[Wri]te down for us a message!"
12′ (He answered:) "God himself

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13′ wrote down for you(!) the message!"
14′ "Go, go off . . .!
15′ O scribe, t[ake(?)! . . .] into the hand
16′ dust of the san[ctuary(?) . . .]"

Commentary

The text normally shows northern Babylonian orthography: *qí* l. 3′, *pí* l. 11′, 12′, *ṭá* l. 13′. But cf. *qá* l. 8. Note the nasalization in the form *a-ma-a[n-g]a-a[r* (l. 11) which may point to a late Old Babylonian date for the text.

1, 10, 10′: *raggum* here is not the person, i.e. "the evil one", but an abstract noun (cf. *CAD* R s.v. *raggu* 2) as is clear from l. 10.

5, 6, 13, 14: *našûm, inter alia*, has the meaning "to provide". However, this verb requires a direct object which here is missing. The participle *nāšû* may refer to the client.

5: The restoration of *i[naddikkum]* at the end of the line is quite uncertain. *i-* is unclear, but space surely does not allow the expected restoration *i?-[na-ad-di-ik-kum]* (cf. ll. 6 and 13f.).

10: Stol reads *ra-ag-gi-ti[m]* but this does not yield a grammatically correct form. We expect a verb. — Cf. the use of *magārum* for sexual consent also in the love lyric composition *Or.* 60: 340 ll. 9, 12 (von Soden 1991).

12: Note the curse of Šamḫat in Gilg. VII 119: *[šakru u ṣ]amû limḫaṣ lētki* "May [drunk and] sober strike your cheek!" See also the curse of Aṣûšunamir in Ištar's Descent (*AnOr* 54: 101 Nin. 108): *šakru u ṣamû limḫaṣū lētka*.

13: Stol reads *al-ki-im-ma*.

1′ ff.: The professional in this section is not preserved, but the imperatives *alkī* (l. 3′) and *ṣ[ab]tī* (l. 9′) indicate that a female profession is the topic of this section. The verb *qâlum* "to heed" (l. 2′) is probably connected with this woman's profession.

10′–14′: These lines are quoted by Metzler 2002: 492. In l. 11′, he restores *[iš-ta]-˹ṭá?˺-ra-an-ni-a-ši-im*, in l. 12′ *ši-pí-ir-[t]i*$_7$.

12′–13′: We cautiously suggest that *šu-um-ma* stands for *šū-ma* (a conditional sentence with *šumma* is unlikely here). Instead of *-šunūšim*, written clearly on the tablet (coll.), we expect *-kunūšim*.

16′: Stol reads A.ŠÀ(?) "of the field", but the second sign does not look like ŠÀ. — Does the dust mean that the scribe is expected to gather material for making his tablet?

B. *Dialogue between a fellow and his friend*

The small fragment BM 95431 was copied by A. R. Millard and published in 1965 as *CT* 46 44. It is a fragment of a three-column tablet, probably part of its obverse. The text is divided into six visible sections, marked off with ruled lines. Each of these sections contains a short dialogue between a fellow (*ebrum*) and his friend (*rū'um*). Lines ii 3′–6′ and 11′–14′ present wisdom-like dicta regarding the fate of mankind and just behaviour. Lines ii 7′ f. offer a fatalistic view of life.

The handwriting is neat. The text exhibits typical Old Babylonian orthography. Mimation is usually kept (but cf. ii 11′ *we-du*, and ii 14′ *r]a-ag-gi*). Double consonants in verbal forms are explicitly written, but long vowels are not written *plene*. Note the uncontracted vowels in *pí-a-šu* (ii 10′, iii 5′), *ru-a-šu* (ii 9′, [iii 4′]); cf. also *ru-e* (ii 11′). The text has been mentioned by Deller 1982: 147, and Metzler 2002: 552 and 669. It is catalogued in Wasserman 2003: 195 as no. 68. The text was collated by Wasserman on 3 January 2003 (results marked with *) and photographed by him on 11 April 2008 (Fig. 2).

Text

col. i

1′ [. . . . . .] x-*du*?
2′ [. . . . . .]-*i-ma re-ši-ka*
3′ [. . . . . .] x WI *at*
4′ [. . . . . .] *ša-ap-ti-ka*

5′ [*eb-rum ru-a-š*]*u** *i-ip-pa-al*
6′ [*pí-a-šu i-pu-ša-am*]-*ma iz-za-kàr-šum*
7′ [. . . . . .]·*lim-˹lí˺-ku*
8′ [. . . . . *a-na-k*]*u*? *ù at-ta*
9′ [. . . . . *niš*?]-*ku-un*

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Fig. 2 BM 95431, British Museum, courtesy of the Trustees.

10′ [. . . *nušē*?-]⌜*pí*?⌝-*iš*
rest broken

col. ii
1′ x x x [. . . . . .]
2′ *ù qá-tim*! *ša is-ni-qú* ⌜*i*?-x⌝ [. . .]
3′ *mi-im-ma-a a-šar-ša-na ṭi-du-u*[*m*?]
4′ *nu-uk***-ku***-ur*
5′ *ki-ma ša-ak-na-ma i-il-la-k*[*am*]
6′ *te-ne-še-tum*
7′ *mi-in-šu at-ta ta-qá-at-tu-ur*
8′ *a-na ma-da-tim*

9′ *eb-rum ru-a-šu i-ip-pa-al*
10′ *pí-a-šu i-pu-ša-am-ma iz-za-kàr-šum*
11′ *ru-e m*[*i*]*-in-šu** *la we-du i-li-šu*
12′ *da-bi-ib mi-ša-ri-im*
13′ [*m*]*u-ki-il ki-na-tim*
14′ [*kí*? *r*]*a-ag-gi lu ša-ki-in*
15′ [. . .]-*us*-B[A/Z[U]
16′ [. . .] RI? [. . .]
rest broken

col. iii
1′ [. . . . . .]
2′ x[. . . . . .]
3′ *i-b*[*a*? . . . . . .]
4′ *eb-rum ru-*[*a-šu i-ip-pa-al*]
5′ *pí-a-šu i-p*[*u-ša-am-ma iz-za-kar-šum*]
6′ *mi-in-šu* x[. . . . . .]
7′ *iš-*[*t*]*i* [. . . . . .]
rest broken

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Translation

col. i

1′ [. . .]. . .
2′ [. . .]. . . your head,
3′ [. . .]. . .
4′ [. . .] your lips.

5′ Answering [hi]s [fellow, the friend]
6′ [opened his mouth] and talked to him:
7′ "[. . . . . .] let them deliberate,
8′ [. . . . . .] I(?) and you.
9′ [. . . . . we have pl]aced(?)
10′ [. . . . . we have caused] to do(?)."
rest broken

col. ii

1′ ". . .
2′ . . .[. . . the . . .] and of the hand which drew near . . .
3′ Can any clay
4′ be removed elsewhere?
5′ As it is destined so will
6′ humanity go.
7′ Why are you gloomy
8′ over many things?"

9′ Answering his fellow, the friend
10′ opened his mouth and talked to him:
11′ "Friend! Why does not (even) a single (man), towards his god,
12′ speak justice
13′ (and) be truthful,
14′ (but) indeed behave like a wicked one?"
15′ . . .
rest broken

col. iii

1′–3′ *broken*
4′ [Answering his fell]ow, the friend
5′ [op]ened his mouth [and talked to him:]
6′ "Why . . .[. . .]
7′ . . .[. . .]."

Commentary

i 5′ (// ii 9′): See *CAD* R 440: "the friend answered his fellow".

ii 4′: The second sign in this line was not copied. Hence — contra *CAD* N/II 64 s.v. *našāru* and 355 s.v. *nušurtu* "portion?" ("*mi-im-ma-a ašaršana nadû nu-šu-ur-*[*tam*(?)] *kīma šaknāku*"), and *AHw* 759b *našārum* D 1 ("Lehm *nu-šu-ur*") — it is not a form of *našārum* that occurs here, but *nukkur*. Note that this mistaken reading is the sole non-lexical attestation for *nušurtum* in *CAD* N/II.

ii 5′–6′: The last sign of l. 5′ is not *k*[*a*], but rather -*k*[*am*], contra *CAD* T 342 e. *AHw* 1347a is aware of the problem but still reads *illakā*! *te-ne-še-tum*. Metzler 2002: 669, reads correctly *i-il-la-k*[*am*]. We analyse both verbal forms in ii 5′ as singular, *šaknamma illaka*[*m*], so *tenēšētum* is construed here as a collective noun with singular verbal forms.

ii 7′ (// ii 11′ // iii 6′): Contra *CAD* M/II 84 *minde* e ("*mi-in-de atta taqattur*"), the reading *mi-in-šu* is secured by collation and by photo (so also *CAD* Q 166 2 and George 2007: 69). The interrogative *mīnšu*, the non-assimilated form of *mīššum* "why?" (*AHw* 661b and *CAD* M/II 130a), is attested so far in Old Akkadian and Old Assyrian. Until now it was recorded in Old Babylonian only as a lexical entry (OBGT Ib i 3′). In Standard and Late Babylonian one finds the form *minsu* (*CAD* M/II 89; see *GAG* §120).

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ii 5′–8′: *CAD* Q 166 2: "mankind will go on as it has been established for them, why are you despondent over so many things?"; cf. *CAD* T 342.

ii 11′: With *AHw* 998a 2 and *CAD* R 440 c) *ru-e* is a vocative, "friend!", so, *rū'e*, perhaps even *rū'* — not *rū'ī*, as Deller 1982: 147: "Mein Gefährte". We understand *la we-du i-li-šu* differently than Deller 1982: 147 f. ("warum ist kein einziger unter seinem Göttern . . ."): *i-li-šu* is taken to be a defective spelling for *iliššu*, with the term.-loc. ending, "to/towards his god". Note the concerns of W. von Soden regarding Deller's interpretation mentioned in Deller 1982: 148 n. 25. Describing the relationship of man and god as companionable and personal is found elsewhere, cf. the well-known first line of "Man and his God": *eṭlum rū'iš ana ilišu ibakki* "A man weeps to his god like a friend" (Lambert 1987: 188 f.; but cf. the different interpretation of Mayer 1995: 185 f.).

ii 15′: Deller 1982: 147 f., reads [KI *mu*]-*us-s*[*ú*] "Soll denn [am Ort?] der B]ösen sein Tod gesetzt sein?"

C. *Riddles*

The tablet IM 10863 (5.5 × 5 × 1.5 cm) has only been published in copy, by J. J. van Dijk as *TIM* 9 53 (1976). Nothing is known to us about its present whereabouts and physical shape. According to van Dijk's introduction to *TIM* 9, the tablet probably originates from Tell Ḫarmal. The tablet contains six riddles (ll. 1–4: sunlight, 5–8: beer, 9–11: solution undeciphered, 12–15: auxiliary forces(?), 16–19: governor, 20–22: broken bow). The first two riddles are separated from each other by horizontal lines. The solutions of the riddles are indented.

The text uses many logograms and, according to van Dijk, it is a school exercise which shows a "very careless writing" (*TIM* 9, summary catalogue). The text has been partially studied by Stol 1989: 328, and Cavigneaux 2007: 224. It has been catalogued in Wasserman 2003: 210 as no. 171. Note that, from l. 15 onwards, our line numbering deviates from the numbering of the copy.

The corpus of Old Babylonian riddles is very small (see Cavigneaux "Rätsel" [2007] 224; *CUSAS* 10 19 is not a riddle text but an incantation against scorpions, see George 2010). The present text is therefore important for the understanding of this sub-genre of wisdom literature.

Text

1 *dimtum*(AN.ZA.GÀR) *a-li-a-at*
2 *a-li-a-at ù ṣillam*(GIŠ.GI$_6$)
3 *ú-ul i-šu*
4 *ša-ru-ur* ^{d}UTU

---

5 *i-na pí-ka ù ši-na-ti-ka*
6 *ib-ta-li-iṣ-ka*
7 SÌLA *be-li-ka*
8 KAŠ!?

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9 E/KAL BI *li um*?/GIŠ?-*mi-ka*
10 *i-na na-*⌜ḪI?⌝-*ki*?/*di*?-*ma*
11 *pa*/*ú-am-tim*-X
12 [X] X X *ra*
13 *na-qí-ib-tum ú-ul i*!?-*r*[*i*]
14 *la na-qí-ib-tum i*!?-*ri*
15 ILLAT (KASKAL.KUR)
16 *i-*⌜*nam*⌝^{am} *i-pu-lam*
17 *ú-ul*! NAM! *mi-tim*!
18 *i-*⌜*ki-sa*⌝-*am* GÚ! ÚŠ
19 GÌR.NÍTA!?
20 *ki* KU$_6$ *i-na* PÚ!?
21 *ki*! ^{lú}Á.KAL *i-na* IGI LUGAL
22 ^{giš}RU TAR

Translation

1 The tower is high;
2–3 it is high, but nonetheless has no shade. (— What is it?)

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4 (Answer:) (It is because of) the sunlight.

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5 In(?) your mouth and your teeth (or: your urine)
6 constantly stared at you
7 the measuring vessel of your lord. (— What is it?)
8 (Answer:) Beer(!?).

---

9 . . . of your mother(?)
10 is by the one who has intercourse(?) (with her). (— What/who is it?)
11 (Answer:) . . .
12 . . .
13 The deflowered (girl) did not become pregnant(!?),
14 the undeflowered (girl) became pregnant(!?). (— What is it?)
15 (Answer:) Auxiliary forces(?).
16 He gouged out the ⌜eye⌝:
17 It is not the fate of a dead man.
18 He ⌜cut⌝ the throat: A dead man. (— Who is it?)
19 (Answer:) A governor(?).
20 Like a fish in a fish pond(?),
21 like troops before the king. (— What is it?)
22 (Answer:) A broken bow.

Commentary

1–4: For the first riddle see *CAD* Š/I 142 *šarūru* b and Cavigneaux 2007: 224. In our opinion the "tower" in this riddle does not refer to sunbeams but to an actual high building, which at midday, when the sun is high, does not cast shade. Note that sunbeams are also attested in *Iraq* 60: 204 l. 15 (George and Al-Rawi 1998), possibly also a riddle.

For *a-li-a-at* without the umlaut a > e, see Kouwenberg 2001: 233.

5–8: Stol 1989: 328 suggests that this riddle refers to the taste of malt (MÙNU) in the mouth. *CAD* Š/III 42 quotes the riddle s.v. *šīnātu* "urine" but without translation. We tentatively suggest that the answer to the riddle is KAŠ "beer" and not MÙNU "malt" and that ll. 5 f. refer to beer being drunk.

12–15: This riddle remains unclear. It might have a sexual connotation, like the riddle that precedes it, and we tentatively suggest that *naqibtum* is the verbal adjective of *naqābum*, and not the participle *nākiptum*. *CAD* N/I 130 reads *na-ṭi-ip-tum ú-ul tur-r*[*i*] *la na-ṭi-ip-tum tur*(?)*-ri* KASKAL.KUR "not to return the *n.*, to return the non-*n.* (the solution of the riddle is?): clan."

15: Note that the sign KUR, slightly above the right edge of l. 15 of the copy, belongs in fact to l. 14.

16–19: This riddle describes the power of a governor, namely to act as a judge who punishes or sentences to death. Note that in l. 16 the scribe complemented with *-am* the syllabic NAM-sign, in order to distinguish it from the logogram NAM in the next line.

20–22: A possible interpretation of the riddle is that a broken bow is as useless as a fish which is not caught but still swims in the well, or as troops which do not fight in battle but remain in front of the king.

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