

Authoritative Oral Tradition in Neo-Assyrian Scribal Circles

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The study of formal, authoritative systems of oral tradition has been the focus of much scholarly attention in the last generation. The present study's main concern is the investigation of the significance of the phrase *ša pî ummâni*, in an effort to determine the existence and nature of such an oral tradition in Ancient Mesopotamia in neo-Assyrian times; it attempts to lay the groundwork for further studies in this area. Toward this end, a brief review of some previous work may be useful.

In the wake of the Scandinavian School's¹ search for analogues of the process of oral transmission by which it assumed many of the traditions recorded in the Bible were handed down, several scholars attempted to evaluate the role of oral tradition in other civilizations of the ancient Near East. In a review article published in 1947, J. van der Ploeg,² following L. Dürr,³ adduced several examples which to his mind illustrated the importance of text-memorization in Ancient Mesopotamia. These texts, all of which employ the verb *aḫāzu* 'to learn', included the close of the Erra Epic⁴ and of Enūma Eliš, and Assurbanipal's hymn to Šamaš.⁵ He noted, however, that the oral recitation of Enūma Eliš was based on a written original, at least in the NA period. He hypothesized that the desire to facilitate memorization lay behind the predilection of Hammurabi's Code and others of the ancient Near East for fixed formulas in a regular scheme (for example, *šumma awilum* in the prothesis).

E. Nielsen, in a series of articles published in 1950 and 1952,⁶ again made use of the ex-

1 For a general introduction to the work of this school, see W. E. Rost, *Tradition History and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1972), esp. 9–18.

2 "Le Rôle de la Tradition Orale dans la Transmission du Texte de L'Ancien Testament", *RB* 54 (1947), 7–41.

3 *Das Erziehungswesen im Alten Testament und im antiken Orient*, *MVAG* 36/2 (Leipzig, 1932).

4 See now L. Cagni, *L'Épopée de Erra*, *Studi Semitici* 34 (Rome, 1969), V: 55–56 and Commentary, 257–58.

5 *KAR* 105 and 361, see E. Ebeling, *MVAG* 23/1 (1918), 25–27 and *ANET*², 386–87.

6 *Dansk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 13 (1950) and 15 (1952). These papers were translated into English and published as *Studies in Biblical Theology No. 16: Oral Tradition*, (London, 1954). The following citations are from that edition.

amples cited above.⁷ Since these tend to recur in many studies of this topic, a brief discussion of them may be in order.

Erra V: 55–56:

(55) *tupšarru ša iḫḫazu išēṭ ina māt nakri ikkabbit ina mātišu*

(56) *ina eširti ummānī ašar kayyān šumī izakkarū (or: izzakarū) uzunšu apetti*

(55) the scribe who learns (this text) will be able to escape the enemy country and be honored in his own land;

(56) in the craftsmen's chapel, where they regularly invoke my name (or: where my name is regularly invoked), I will make him wise.

While this passage is not free from ambiguities,⁸ it is clear that the poet wished to encourage the learning of the epic. Apropos also is the interpretation put forth by Oppenheim: "and the scholar who knows (it by heart, or: who has learnt its interpretation), if slighted in foreign countries, he shall become important in his own—and I shall give him inspiration (lit.: open his ears) in the assembly of the learned men where they assiduously mention my name."⁹

While we may assume that much of the teaching in Ancient Mesopotamia was by rote and memory,¹⁰ *aḫāzu/šūḫuzu* do not refer only to that, as a perusal of the passages cited in the relevant articles of *CAD* and *AHW*. will amply illustrate. More important, even texts that were to be learned by heart were still *transmitted* by writing and learned from tablets. We are thus not dealing with oral transmission. This is clear from the many colophons that run: *tuppi PN ana aḫāzišu . . . ištur* "tablet of PN, which he wrote in order to master/learn/memorize."¹¹ This distinction must always be borne in mind.

Thus, the use of *aḫāzu* in these passages is basically irrelevant to our problem. Assurbanipal's hymn has: *ša kammu annā iḫḫazu* "who learns this tablet" (*KAR 105*: rev. 8). The passage in *Enūma Eliš* (VII: 147), which is part of the epilogue of the poem, points to the same sense: *lišannīma abu māri lišāḫiz* "let the father repeat (this poem) in order to teach his son."

Here the teaching is clearly by repetition (*šanū*), but the goal is not necessarily memorization; *šūḫuzu* may refer merely to mastery, as *KAR 44*: 15 shows: *kidudā lišān šumeri lišān akkadī šite'a taḫḫazū* "you will learn to consult the (proper) Sumerian and Akkadian rituals."

7 Ibid., 18–19.

8 Hinging chiefly on the meaning of *šētu* and the implication of *eširti ummānī*. As to the latter, see *CAD A*², 439a sub 2: "a special room in a private house for cultic purposes", and the phrase is translated as the "a.-room of the craftsmen". This rendering leaves the location ambiguous.

9 *Or.* NS 19 (1950), 156–58.

10 Compare Heb./Aram. *šnb/tny* and see TB *Erubin* 54b: "R. Preda had a student for whom he repeated (the lesson) four hundred times before he learned it."

11 See H. Hunger, *Babylonische und assyrische Kolophone*, *AOAT* 2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1968), nos. 91, 94, 111. Again, while it is likely that the mastery indicated here was by memorization, the text was learned from a written exemplar.

II

In 1953, the subject received study from a primarily Assyriological point of view by J. Laessøe.¹² The author quite rightly emphasized the importance and antiquity of writing in Ancient Mesopotamia. His most "direct evidence" for the greater prestige and authority of written over orally transmitted knowledge is inferred from the prevalence in colophons of the formula *kīma labīrišu šaṭirma bari* "written like its (ancient) original and collated," which to Laessøe "corroborates . . . the fact that the text has undergone no change in being copies from the earlier written source" (page 212). He singles out for consideration the colophon of CBS 1516, published in *PBS I/2*, no. 106: *a-na K[A] UM.ME.A šá-ṭi[r] GAB! RI! la!-bi-ru ul a-mur*,¹³ which he translates "written after the oral communication (lit. mouth) of the learned (*ummānu*); I did not see (or, read) the ancient duplicate (*gabrû*)." Laessøe comments: "oral tradition was only reluctantly relied upon, and in this particular case only because . . . an original document was not available" (page 213).

However, it is doubtful that this interpretation can be maintained.¹⁴ The errors and strangely formed signs to be found in the colophon are not isolated; they abound in the text as a whole. Ebeling, in his edition (*Ar. Or.* 17 [1949], part 1: 178f.), indicates no less than thirty oddly formed or used signs in the text.¹⁵ These show that in all likelihood what we have here is a school-text, and *ana pî ummāni* refers to dictation. It is true that, as Landsberger pointed out in another context, "in the Mesopotamian schools the conception of dictation was introduced only in the late schools, where we know of a distinction between *liginna-qabû*, 'to dictate', and *liginna-šaṭāru*, 'to take dictation'."¹⁶ However, this text is late; the use of *ana pî ummāni šaṭir* is equivalent to *liginna šaṭir*. The latter expression (and tablet, see *CAD L*, 184a discussion) was apparently used only in Assyria, while our tablet is Babylonian. We may presume, then, that this text was the examination tablet of a mediocre, advanced student—advanced because of the length and complexity of the text to be copied from dictation, mediocre because of the errors he made.

Another, clearer case of dictation described as *ina pî PN šaṭir*, *šaṭāru* can be found in the "Catalogue of Texts and Authors" published by Lambert, where we read, unfortunately in a broken context ". . . *a-da!-pa ina pi-i-šu iš-tu-ru*, and in the next line, *a-na pi-i anše.kur.ra*

12 "Literary and Oral Tradition in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Studia Orientalia Ioanni Pedersen Dicata* (Copenhagen, 1953), 205–18.

13 With restorations and emendations as in W. G. Kunstmann, *Die babylonische Gebetsbeschwörung*, *LSS NF 2* (1932), 87, n. 2.

14 Note that Hunger, *Kolophone*, no. 486, translated: "Nach Diktat eines Gelehrten geschrieben; das alte Exemplar habe ich nicht gesehen."

15 For example, compare the BA at the head of l. 15 with that of qí-ba-a-ma in l. 25, or the MA of mím-ma in ll. 14 and 28 with that of l. 36. The KI (=qi) of l. 25 has obviously been influenced by the Û directly above. The writing SAL-ÁŠ in l. 23 is to be read Á.ÁŠ, see *CAD S*, 167b, and correct Ebeling. Examples could be multiplied.

16 Landsberger apud Kraeling and Adams, *The City Invincible* (Chicago, 1960), 116–17; see also G. Meir,

iš-tur."¹⁷ Whatever the remarkable verbal abilities of this particular horse, it is at least philologically clear that *ina/ana pî . . . ištur* refers to dictation; authorship or ultimate attribution is expressed by *ša pî* (passim), which has the meaning 'by, according to, by authority of' exactly as the Hebrew 'al pî, l^epî.

Furthermore, if we are to understand, with Laessøe, the phrase *pî ummâni* as referring to oral tradition,¹⁸ we shall soon see many examples of the reliance of Mesopotamian scribes on such traditions, even when alternate written sources existed. Whether this meaning—a recognized body of oral tradition possessing authority equivalent to that of written sources, a sort of Babylonian Oral Law (*Torâ šeb^e'al pê*)—can be ascribed to the phrase *pî ummâni*, will be taken up in the next section of this paper. Whatever the ultimate disposition of this question, it is sufficiently clear that the colophon Laessøe cites is irrelevant to the problem.

Thus, while Laessøe is to be credited with the attempt to bring the discussion of oral tradition in Mesopotamia to the point of investigating texts more relevant to the problem than previous ventures, we must search further for necessary texts, if they indeed exist. To this task we now turn.

III

In order to place the problem of oral tradition in Ancient Mesopotamia in its proper perspective, it is important always to remember that our understanding of Babylonian cultural values and institutions is based primarily on cuneiform documents. We are thus well-informed only in regard to the scribal class and those it served. The existence of a well-developed oral tradition among the illiterate "folk" can be considered likely, but this tradition is practically irretrievable.¹⁹ Those fragments of Mesopotamian literature we possess reflect mainly scribal

A/O 12 (1937–39), 238, n. 15.

¹⁷ JCS 16 (1962), 66, VI: 16.

¹⁸ In *The City Invincible*, 114–15, Landsberger affirmed the oral nature of *ša pî ummâni* material and its noncanonical status; but he also stressed the equality of canonical and noncanonical texts. While the nature of the forum in which this opinion was expressed must be given due weight (a symposium), this understanding of *ša pî ummâni* had appeared in print 25 years before, in F. R. Kraus, *Die Physiognomischen Omina der Babylonier*, MVAG 40/2 (1935), 38, where Kraus explicitly associates his teacher Landsberger with the idea that "š^a pî ummâni im Gegensatz zur schriftlichen kanonischen Tradition, kî pî lē'i (z. B. CT 30, 42. Z. 27'), steht."

¹⁹ Perhaps the best description of this is contained in Oppenheim's discussion of the "stream of tradition" in his *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago, 1964), 22, where he points to evidences of "a rich and productive oral literary tradition in Mesopotamia. It seems to have flourished not only before the period in which the standardization, or 'canonization', of the written tradition became effective, but also parallel and subsequent to it. [It included] cycles of songs, . . . courtly tales and legends . . . , popular stories . . . dire prophecies and political diatribes in poetic form as well as riddles and animal tales . . ."

Recently the problem of oral tradition in Ancient Mesopotamia has received a new impetus from the study of oral tradition in West Africa, Yugoslavia, and its presumed role in Ugaritic, Homeric, and most recently, Sumerian, literature. The paradigmatic figure for many of these studies is A. B. Lord's "Singer of

values. The results of our study will be most assured in regard to this class, and only then, after having extracted what information we can from the available texts respecting the existence, status, authority and ultimate transcription of this stream of oral tradition within that scribal class (to whom, after all, was mandated the work of maintaining and transmitting Babylonian higher culture,) can we infer anything about Babylonian culture in general.

This study will be useful in itself, without reference to conditions obtaining either in the West (Palestine-Syria) or for periods for which data is scarce. It is best to attempt to gain a picture of the status of oral tradition at one time and place, rather than produce a possibly erroneous "synthesis" of data from different periods and locations, despite the apparent homogeneity that most discussions of "Mesopotamian" culture seem to posit. Undoubtedly this apparent homogeneity stems from our lack of data.

Most revelatory of scribal practice and thought is undoubtedly the "professional literature" of the scribe—lexical and other lists, collections of omens of various types—and letters of the type collected in S. Parpola's *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, *AOAT 5/1*, (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1970). The scribes, including all manner of exorcists and diviners (the scribal art being the primary requirement for advanced training in extispicy, medicine, etc.) are "caught" in the practice of their professions. Most important for our purposes, the neo-Assyrian scribe evolved a system of standardized, "canonical" texts that were relied on and transmitted as sources of all kinds of information necessary for the fulfillment of their duties. If any authoritative oral tradition(s) existed in ancient Mesopotamia, it would be from these scribes, whose scrupulous regard for the reliability and provenance of their sources is reflected in hundreds of colophons and letters, that we might learn something of its nature and scope.

The key passage for proponents of the existence of an authoritative oral tradition in Mesopotamia is contained in *ABL 519 (=LAS 13)*, a letter sent by Ištar-šumu-ēreš to Assurbanipal, which contains a number of omens and their interpretations. The most important part of the letter for our purposes is obv. 21–27, rev. 1–12, which is reproduced below, based on Parpola's edition, with a few minor changes and a new translation.

"Tales," the professional, illiterate story-teller/singer, see *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964). B. Alster, in *Dumuzi's Dream: Aspects of Oral Poetry in a Sumerian Myth* (Copenhagen, 1972), has explicitly attempted to apply the results of these studies to Sumerian literature (see esp. 17–27, esp. nn. 4–5). The present study is not primarily concerned with this form of oral tradition. Mesopotamia, in common with other cultures in which literacy was rare, had a tradition of popular ("folk") oral tradition. What the present study is concerned with is an authoritative oral tradition in scribal circles, where its components may (hopefully) be isolated, rather than inferred from stylistic devices, etc. Any popular songs or epics preserved for us by scribal intervention have passed through too many stages of written development and lack the impact and immediacy of the Ugaritic epics, which bear the marked imprint of close reduction to writing from oral recitation, despite the long periods of oral development that preceded the versions we now have. It is hoped that the drier, "scholarly" material will perhaps bear such marks of closeness to oral transmission.

- (21) *l* ^dJ^šal^lbatānu kīma ištu libbi
 (22) zuqaqīpi ittūši issuhra
 (23) ina libbi zuqaqīpi ētarab anniu pišaršu

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- (24) I ^dŠalbatānu kī iturra ana libbi
 (25) zuqaqīpi ētarub ana maššartaka
 (26) lā teggi šar ūḫulgalū
 (27) bāba lā tušša

- (1) šumu anniu lā ša iškārīma šū
 (2) ša pī ummāni šū²⁰
 (3) kīma ^dŠalbatānu turra ištu libbi
 (4) qaqqadi urgulē issuhur
 (5) allutta ^dMāša ultappit
 (6) anniu pišaršu

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- (7) qīti palē šar amurri

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- (8) anniu lā ša iškārīma šū aḫiu šū
 (9) anniu šū ūdēšu qaqquru
 (10) bīt ^dŠalbatāni isabḫurūni ana lemutti ukallūni
 (11) ša rēḫti gabbu bīt isabḫurūni
 (12) lišhur amassu laššu etc.

20 Morris Jastrow, in *Die Religion Babyloniens und Assyriens*, (Giessen, 1905), 2:657, observed: "interessant ist nun der Zusatz, der angibt, dass diese Warnung für der König, sich passive zu verhalten, nicht der offiziellen Omina-Serie entnommen ist, sondern aus einem Schultext stammt. Dieser Omen ist nicht aus der Serie, sondern aus einer Lehrtafel." This understanding is of course based on an erroneous interpretation of *ummānu*; see Jastrow's n. 4.

Jastrow also restored the phrase *ša pī um[mānišu]* in Thompson, *Reports*, no. 200:rev. 4, although Thompson himself read *ša pi-i duppi*, as does Weidner, *Afo* 14 [1941–44], 176 and 183 (*ša pī tuppī [šanē]*). The text, which Pinches had published already in *III R 5*, no. 1, reads *ša pi-i UM*. Jastrow's restoration, even if accepted, lends little to our knowledge of the implications of our phrase, since the information thus classified (Nebukednazzar destroyed Elam) could easily have come from any number of written sources.

As to the history of the interpretation of *ABL 519*, Waterman, in his notes to the letter in his *Royal Correspondence of the Assyrian Empire*, Part 3:1, 183, as well as in his translation (1, 365), takes *ša pī um-ma-ni* as a "folk saying": "This statement is not from (any definite) series; it is from the mouth of the people." While *um-ma-ni* might conceivably be so understood, though *nišī* would fit better, the number of passages in which *pī ummāni* refers to scribes makes this unlikely. In addition, were the reference to a proverb, the writer would have used the phrases: *ina tēlte ša pī nišī šakin* (*ABL 403*: obv. 4–7), or, more simply, *ina tēltim ša pī šakin* (ibid., 13–15), or even [*š*] *a qabū amme'ū* (*ABL 652*, rev. 9). Ištar-šumu-ereš himself in quoting a proverb writes *anniu šū ša qabūni* (*ABL 37*:rev. 7 = Parpola, *Letters*, no. 12). We have already noted the Landsberger-Kraus reference to this passage, see above, n. 18. Finally, in the first of a series of papers on the series *Enūma Anu Enlil*, Weidner (*Afo* 14 [1941–44], 180), translates literally: "dieser Omen stammt nicht aus der 'Serie', sondern aus dem Mund eines Lehrers." Weidner in passing made an important observation regarding the omen given in ll. 2–5 and 9–12, to which we will have occasion to refer again: "Die beiden zitierten Omina sind in der Tat in der Serie *Enūma Anu Enlil* nicht zu finden" loc. cit.

(21) When Mars, after leaving Scorpio, retrogrades and (re-)enters Scorpio, this is its solution:

(24) If Mars, after returning, enters Scorpio, do not relax your guard, O King; it is an ill-omened day,

(27) do not go out.

(rev. 1) This is not of the Series, but is by authority of a master: When Mars is retrograde from the head of Leo and obscures Cancer and Gemini,

(6) this is its solution:

(7) end of the Westland king's reign.

(8) This is not of the Series but is non-canonical:²¹

(9) This is the only area in which Mars retrogrades that is considered evil. As to the remaining area in which it may turn, let it turn, there is no (ominous) word (about it)

Ištar-šumu-ēreš divided this portion of his letter into five sections, obv. 21–23; 24–27; rev. 1–6; 7; 8–12, and carefully divided the quoted omens and interpretations. In obv. 23 and rev. 6 the statement *anniu pišaršu* is followed by a horizontal line, setting off the omen of lines 24–27 from the statement of the problem in lines 22–23 and the apodosis of line 7 from the non-canonical protasis in rev. 1–5.

While we do not know whether the omen in lines 21–27 is canonical or not, the non-canonical (*lā ša iškari, aḫû*) omens are indeed not to be found in Enūma Anu Enlil, as observed by

21 "Non-canonical" does not in any way imply "unwritten" or "oral." Non-canonical omens could be written down: the section entitled "Unplaced Fragments Belonging to the Series Šumma Izbu" published by Leichty in *TCS IV*, 195–201, contains several omens described as non-canonical. Furthermore, some of these *aḫû* omens are actually to be found in the canonical series (see K. 4031=CT 27, no. 49, published in part in *TCS IV*, 198b–199a). From this we must conclude either that the scribe of K. 4031 did not have these omens in his (canonical) edition of Šumma Izbu, or that *aḫû* has another, more fluid connotation. Since the canonical series never attained the rigidity of the MT Biblical text, the former is quite likely.

Not only were non-canonical omens written down, they were also collected in non-canonical "series" (see the collection in *CT 28*, no. 32=*TCS IV*, 200). Indeed, the term *ša iškari* 'canonical', and *lā ša iškari, aḫû* 'non-canonical', are fluid enough that the usual renderings can be misleading, and ought to be laid to rest. We find in *ABL 722* (=LAS 116): 15–16, rev. 1–6, the following statement: *iškara lib[rū šar] ru liqbi šitta liḡināte ša šāti liššurrū šitta ša barūte liškunū* "Let them revise the canonical series. Let the king command: they should remove two long-tablets of *šātu*-commentaries and put two of the haruspice's corpus (in their place)." The term *ša iškari* would then mean: 'of the series collected for its usefulness with royal approval'. 'Canonical' is thus really 'approved for official use', and in most cases omens from approved series are applied to the case at hand without further ado. If these fail to serve the purpose, help is sought from private, unofficial, collections. Standardization is only one aspect of "approval" in this sense. Why the royal bureaucracy felt the need to institute this distinction is somewhat obscure to me, since ultimately both were in use. One might presume that if an approved omen was contradicted by an unapproved one, the former would win out, but there are instances of approved omens that were disregarded by the royal patron. I hope to discuss this matter in fuller detail elsewhere.

Weidner (*AfO* 14, [1941–44], 180). These non-canonical statements actually form an omen-complex (rev. 1–5, 7, 9–12), the latter part commenting on the former. These both contain Assyrian forms as opposed to obv. 21–27, which is linguistically Babylonian. The first non-canonical statement (rev. 3–5) is dubbed *lā ša iškari* and *ša pî ummâni* (Parpola: “the oral tradition of the masters”); the elaboration (lines 9–12) is called *lā ša iškari* and *aḫû*. Thus, at most, the omen is of oral origin and the elaboration written, an unlikely combination. More likely is that both came to Ištār-šumu-ēreš in written form.

Two possibilities exist: *ša pî ummâni* is merely synonymous with *lā ša iškari* and *aḫû*, that is ‘non-canonical’, or it refers to an oral or written scholarly tradition, which, while not canonical, was still not ‘non-canonical’. The first is made less likely by its use with materials in which canonicity is not an issue (see below); investigation of the second possibility will take up the next section of this study.

In light of this second possibility, the question arises: is *ša pî ummâni* of greater or lesser authority than *aḫû*? From the fact that the *ša pî ummâni*-omen has an *aḫû*-elaboration, it would seem that *ša pî ummâni* has authority equal to *aḫû*, if not more.

Before going on, it should be noted that while *um-ma-ni* can be singular or plural, in none of the attestations of the phrase *ša pî ummâni* is UM.ME.A followed by a MEŠ. The likelihood is that *ummâni* is singular, as Weidner took it in *AfO* 14 [1941–44], 180; see our note 20. The plural is adhered to by those who would infer a hallowed oral tradition from the phrase.

While it is unlikely that *ša pî ummâni* in this letter refers to an oral tradition, the phrase contains enough ambiguity to warrant further study. W. G. Lambert has stressed this basic equivocality: “The phrase *ša pî* means no more than ‘according to,’ or ‘that which is according to,’ as when in the catalogue K. 9717 and Sm. 669 (Haupt, *AB* III, nos. 51 and 53) [and re-edited by Lambert himself in *JCS* 16] all the works listed are said to be *ša pî annanna ummâni*. In itself then it does not indicate whether it is something written or oral.”²²

That Lambert is quite correct is shown by such combinations as *kîma pî lē’i* (Hunger, *Kolophone*, passim; see listing on page 166) ‘according to a writing board’. What we require is a context which argues as clearly as possible for either a direct oral communication denoted by *ša pî ummâni*, or, better yet, one that indicates that the scribe was drawing on a formal oral tradition of the schools. While this is an exacting standard, nothing less will allow us to pin down the connotations of the phrase through its basic ambiguity with any degree of certainty.

IV

We will now study a number of attestations of *ša pî ummâni* in colophons and commentaries, for evidence of oral tradition(s). All occur in “technical” contexts, generally omen and medical texts or commentaries of various sorts.

22 *AfO* 17 (1954–56), 320, comm. to Text F, line 8.

First, the colophon of a list of astrological omina:

Rm 2, 126: 25–31 = *ACb Supp.* 52 = Hunger, *Kolophone* no. 333 = Bezold, *Catalogue*, 1648:

(25) *nasbūte kakkabū ša Nēberi*

(26) *mašālāti ša pī ummāni kī ša [*

(27) *kī pī labīrišu šaṭirma [bari*

(28) *u'ūlti Aššur-bān-apli šar kiššāti šar māt Aš[šur etc.; for the standard ending of this colophon see Hunger, *Kolophone*, no. 333.*

(25) Excerpted star(-omina) referring to Jupiter [. . .

(26) examinations²³ by the master [. . .

(27) copied [and collated/ according to the original . . .

(28) tablet of Assurbanipal, king of the Four Quarters, of the Land of Assyria . . . etc.

Unfortunately, this tablet is damaged and still has not been published in a reliable copy. Bezold published lines 1 and 13 of the text in his *Catalogue*, 1648, as well as lines 1–4 (that is, lines 25–28) of the colophon, while Virolleaud omitted all but the first three lines of the colophon in his copy in *ACb Supp.* 52.

The authorities cited are *mašālāti ša pī ummāni*, according to the accepted understanding of *mašāltu* 'the master's examinations' (or, 'masters' *responsa*'; see note 23). The excerpts are, then, originally from the examination tablet of a student scribe, which was checked and marked, and whose quality was such as to allow its later, authoritative use. Note that *ša pī ummāni* is followed by *kī pī labīrišu šaṭirma*. The latter part of the colophon, while not contradicting the former, would seem to be an addition to the first two lines, which covered the *mašālātu* and which in turn were based on the excerpted omina. After this particular version of the excerpts passed into authoritative use, it was copied over for the library of Assurbanipal. What the his-

23 This according to the usual understanding of *mašāltu*, see *Ahw.*, 623b s. v. *maš'altu* 'Befragung', esp. def. "(2) Befragung in Schülen, Bez. einer Art v Kommentar," which goes back to G. Meier's interpretation in *A/O* 12 (1937–39), 239; "Im Unterricht wurde verlangt, dass der Schüler die *šātu*-Listen von Vorlagen abschrieb, dann aber wohl auch auswendig lernte. Der Lehrer überzeugte sich von dem Wissen seiner Schüler dadurch, dass er die Listen 'abfragte'. So versteht sich die Bemerkung *maš-a-a-al-tú amēl ummāni* ('Abfragung durch den Lehrer') in den Unterschriften einiger Texte." Another interpretation suggests itself, one that enables us to understand better the later authoritative use of the *mašālātu*. Doubtless many have noticed that *šātu*-commentaries seem seldom to gloss the words one would expect, at times passing over in silence rare words that give moderns trouble, at others explaining common words in fulsome detail. The explanation of this phenomenon would seem to be that these commentaries are based on student's questions and the masters' answers. Both *šātu*- and *mašāltu*-commentaries might have their origin in these exchanges. Note for example the colophon to the commentary to the Theodicy (*BWL*, 88): [*šā*] *tu u šūt pī mašāltu ummānu ša āš[iš. . .]*. In the course of time *mašāltu* came to stand for the commentary based on the masters' answers. A somewhat similar use of a *maqal* from *šātu* is furnished by the albeit obscure *mašāltu* in *PRU* III, 56:5: [*??*] 'a-dī' (?) *eqlat ma-aš-a-li*, which Nougayrol and von Soden (*Ahw.*, 623b) interpret tentatively as 'oracle'. Unfortunately, the usual context in which *mašāltu* is found is insufficient to decide between the two meanings.

tory of these excerpts was before they reached the student is impossible to state with certainty. It is obvious that we cannot hope to recover the various stages in the tradition-history of a unit of tradition (here, an omen), if it was reduced to writing only at one point and continued thereafter in the written stream of tradition. What is required is an omen or series of omens that was copied from oral tradition several times during the course of a number of generations in the same school. In the present instance we have a series of omens concerning Jupiter, Cancer, the moon and sun, which, with one possible exception (see immediately below), are not known in exactly this form from any other source.

The one possible exception is line 3 of the text:

MUL alluttu ana arki Šm izziz nišī

(If) Cancer stands behind the moon, people [. . .

which may be paralleled by *ACb Supp.* 2, 68: rev. 15:

MUL alluttu ana arki ^dŠim izziz [

(If) Cancer stands behind the moon, [. . . ²⁴

This latter omen is the second of a series of two Cancer-omens; more important, it stands at the end of a series of twelve assorted omens which are collectively labelled: *12 šumāti aḫūti ša pî tuppī šanîmma* [. . . , "12 non-canonical omens of another tablet [. . . ." While the lack of the apodoses makes it hazardous to assess that these omens are identical, they are certainly similar. We seem to have an omen that is *ša pî ummâni* (*ACb Supp.* 52) and also *aḫû* (*ACb Supp.* 2, 68); one that was both collected into a series of excerpts (*ACb Supp.* 52) and a group of non-canonical omens (*ACb Supp.* 2). Indeed, probably every scholar made his own collections of omens for his own use, and did not care very much whether they were canonical or not²⁵ (see *ABL* 23=*LAS* 185:23–27).²⁶ In the case of *ACb Supp.* 52, he made use of a collection of omens from various *mašālātu* which had the authority of (his?) teachers, and which were accepted as authoritative enough for Assurbanipal's Library at some later date.

Another *mašālātu ša pî ummâni* commentary is that labelled as Commentary O by Leichty in his edition of *Šumma Izbu* (*TCS* IV, pages 232–33). Little of the colophon remains, but most of the first line is preserved, and it reads:

24 For a list of *alluttu* omina, see *ŠL* IV/2, no. 14 (5b–7b). Note also Weidner, *Afo* 19 (1959–60), 152 (top): "Die Kommentare sind gewiss nichts mehr also Schüler-Präparationen mit derer Hilfe der Priester-schüler in einem vorgeschritten Studium des Unterrichts sich in die Omenliterature einarterten sollte (s. bereits G. Meier *Afo* 12 S. 237ff.)."

25 See, for example, Kraus, *Texte*, no. 23: rev. 8: *šanūti liginnu alamdinnū aḫūtu* "second tablet of non-canonical omens of the physiognomic omen series," and *CT* 29, no. 49: rev. 34–36 (Hunger, *Kolophone*, no. 295): *47 ittātu aḫāti ša ana nadê māt Akkadê illakāni* "47 non-canonical omens pertaining to the downfall of Akkad."

26 *rēs tuppāni ma'dūti lū 20 lū 30 damqāti aḫūti uba'a anašši'a ašaḫḫar* "I will look up, collect and copy many tablets, 20 or 30 canonical and non-canonical (ones)." Note that this writer, Marduk-šākin-šumī, in this letter and in *ABL* 453 (= *LAS* 186) rev. 14, is exceptional in his use of *damqu* (S1G₅) as "canonical". The exception once again proves the rule: even despite his implied description of them as "bad," he still troubles to collect them for practical use.

(33) [*šātu u šūt pî mašā*]tu ša pî ummānu.

Leichty restored [*maš-a*]/l-tú; I have added the description *šātu u šūt pî*. Leichty himself has compared this commentary with that of the one Lambert published in *BWL*, 69f., which is described in its colophon as *šātu u šūt pî mašālti ummānu* (*BWL*, 88, and note 23 above).

Occasionally a *šātu u šūt pî mašāltu*-commentary is ascribed to an *ummānu* without the use of *ša pî*, though the commentary itself does not differ from those otherwise described. The commentary contained on *CT* 41 no. 39 is called by its colophon

(11) *šātu u šūt pî mašāltu ummāni ša ina Tešritu iqqur ēpuš qati*

(12) *gabarī Barsippa kīma labīrišu šaṭirma bari giṭṭi PN etc.*

(11) *šātum* and *šūt pî mašāltu*-commentary of the masters dealing with (the series) *iqqur ēpuš*, month of Tešritu." To the end (of the tablet).

(12) Original from Borsippa, copied and collated from its original. One-column tablet of PN etc.

(*CT* 41, no. 39: rev. 11–12= Hunger, *Kolophone*, no. 409 = Labat, *Commentaires Assyro-Babyloniens*, 102–3.)

Another colophon similar to this has already been mentioned in note 26 (*BWL*, 88).

Although this study is intended to focus on NA times, two LB colophons, one from Kutha and the other from Nippur, seem to continue the NA traditions into Persian times. The first, published by Biggs (*RA* 62 [1968], 52–57),²⁷ seems to contain a series of excerpts from *LBAT* 1601, of astrological and medical content. The colophon (lines 19–23) describes the foregoing as *šūt pî mašāltu ummānu*, which Biggs translated as “according to the explanation of a scholar,” basing his translation on a misunderstanding of Meier’s “Abfragung durch den Lehrer” (*AfO* 17 [1937–39], 329; see note 23 above). At any rate, the scribe here is annotating his excerpts as having come (originally?) from a *šūt pî* and *mašāltu*-commentary. The close relationship of *šātu* and *mašāltu* commentaries is again emphasized by the fact that the interpretation contained in lines 17–18 is labelled *šūt pî ša šātu e-du-tú* “the *šūt pî* column of the *šātu* [and *šūt pî*] . . . commentary,” which in the colophon is included in the designation *šūt pî mašāltu ummānu*.

The second LB tablet, NBC 7832, was copied and published by Goetze in *JCS* 4 (1950), 74. It consists of excerpts from the lexical series *a=nāqu*. The relevant part of the colophon (see Hunger, *Kolophone*, no. 120 for the entire text) reads:

(36) . . . *šātu šūt pî m[aḡ-šāltu]*

(37) *ša pî ummānu ša libbi* | ab^{ab} etc.

This restoration, not given by Hunger, fits the traces at the end of line 36. Esoteric values were generally striven for in colophons, and LB PI=*maḡ*. This tablet, like that of Biggs, is a

²⁷ Note that *LBAT* 1601: rev. 10, transliterated by Biggs on p. 58, reads: *Jx-a-nu*, which should correspond to line 19 of Biggs’s tablet, and might be restored [*um-ma*]-*a-nu*, though the orthography would be strange.

giṭṭu, a one-column tablet used mostly for commentaries.²⁸

A variation is furnished by *ACb Adad XXX*: 10–11, whose colophon (not listed by Hunger) reads:

- (10) *mukallimti Enūma Anu Enlil šūt pî ummâni*
 (11) *ša libbi šumma ūmu irupma urpatu . . .*
 (10) *mukallimtu*-commentary of Enūma Anu Enlil, *šūt pî*-commentary (according to) the master
 (11) viz.,²⁹ of (the section) “if the day became dark . . .”

We now turn to an occurrence of *ša pî ummâni* within a commentary, and referring not to an entire tablet, but one particular scholarly comment. Text F of Lambert’s edition of “Marduk’s Address to the Demons”³⁰ is accompanied by a highly esoteric commentary, having little connection with the text itself. Line 6 of the text reads: [KI.MIN (= *anāku Asarluḥ*)] *ša ina tēmišu ibbanū anāku* “I am Asarluḥ who was born of his own will.” The commentary gives several interpretations of this line, the second of which, lines 11–12, reads: (11) *šanš mā ina muḥḥi ululu Anšar qabi* (12) *ša pî ummâni šanē mā* ^d*Nēbiru*: ^d*Meš ša ana ramānišu ibbanū* “Alternately, thus: in Elul he is called Anšar, according to a scholar. Secondly, thus: Jupiter is Meš who was created of himself.”

Here we have a case similar to that of *ABL* 519—where a small unit of traditional lore is ascribed *ša pî ummâni*. This is quite different from those colophons ascribing a whole compilation to *pî ummâni*, which, it could be argued, can be compared to those texts ascribed (ultimately?) to the *apkallū* (see below) before the Flood, or even to Ea in the list of authors published by Lambert. Moreover, while it might be argued that the omen in *ABL* 519 could have been extracted from a collection of non-canonical omens, or even the catch-line of a commentary on such, as the writer himself argued on one occasion, it is less likely in the case of this particular ad hoc interpretation of a line in “Marduk’s Address to the Demons.” It is important to note that this scribe was careful to denote his sources, as in line 17 where his interpretation is ascribed *ša mukallimte šū*. (The reason for the lack of an ascription in his commentary to line 4 is that the interpretations set forth for that line were common knowledge.)

Thus we may extract a kernel of assurance from the occurrence of our phrase in this context. While we cannot pass with the same assurance to our investigation of this phrase in other contexts, it does permit us to allow for the definite likelihood that *ša pî ummâni* can, in some contexts, refer to what in contemporary scholarly parlance is called “oral communication.” This, in turn, permits us to suppose, with due reserve, that an “oral tradition” of

28 Note that all the *giṭṭānu* listed in CAD G, 112a under the heading “one-column tablet with literary content” are commentaries or other “professional literature” of technical nature.

29 For *ša libbi* = ‘that is’, see CAD L, 173b s. v. 4b’. While not explicitly recognized, this rendering fits the passage cited and our colophon. Kraus (*MVAG* 40/2, 38) renders “Über(?)”.

30 *Afo* 17 (1954–56), 315, and corrected in *Afo* 19 (1959–60), 118.

such “oral communications” (*mašālātu ša pî ummâni*) existed, and were considered authoritative. It should be remembered that those texts designated as being *ša pî ummâni* are no different in content from those not so designated, that canonical and non-canonical omens do not differ in principle, and that the boundaries between all these categories were fluid—with the king’s agreement, even a canonical series could be changed; see note 21 above.

V

Another case of *ša pî* should be mentioned. In the colophon to *AMT* 105, no. 1 (= Hunger, *Kolophone*, no. 533), a list of salves and poultices is ascribed to *ša pî apkallē labīrūti ša lām abūbi*. Because previous treatments of this colophon have been incomplete, and since Hunger omitted the ending and misdivided the last lines, we give the full colophon here:

- (21) *[na] pšalātu [tak] širānu latkūtu*³¹ *barūti ša ana [qāt] i šūšū*
 (22) *ša pî apkallē labīrūti ša lām abūbi*
 (23) *ša ina Šuruppak šanat II Enlil-bānî šar Isin*
 (24) *Enlil-muballit apkal Nippur [ez] bu lā mūdū mūdā likallim*
 (25) *mūdū lā muda lā [ikal] lam ikkib* (NÍG.GIG)^d *Marduk*
 (21) proven and tested salves and poultices which are suitable for use (i.e., effective)
 (22) according to the old sages³² from before the Flood
 (23) which in Šuruppak in the second year of Enlil-bani, king of Isin
 (24) Enlil-muballit, *apkallu* of Nippur, bequeathed (to posterity).³³ The uninitiated should show (it) to the initiated;
 (25) (but) the initiated should not reveal (it) to the non-initiated (for) it is a sin (against) Marduk.

Enlil-bānî, the tenth king of the First Dynasty of Isin, reigned from 1860 to 1837 B. C. E., according to the middle chronology. Our copy is NA, apparently taken from an original more

31 This reading was first proposed by von Soden apud Lambert, *JCS* 11 (1957), 112; see the literature cited there. It was adopted by Reiner, *Or.* NS 30 (1961), 10, n. 1 (end).

32 The problem of the place of the *apkallū* in Mesopotamian lore is difficult, but Reiner has made a signal contribution in *Or.* NS 30 (1961), 1–11, esp. 8–11; see Greenfield, in *Homages à André Dupont-Sommer* (Paris, 1971), 40–50. See also Lambert, *JCS* 16 (1962), 59–77, esp. 73–74; van Dijk, *UVB* (1962), 43–52, esp. 47f. and his *Sagesse Suméro-Accadienne*, 20, n. 56; Foster, *Or.* NS 43 (1974), 344–54. Incidentally, the tablet published by van Dijk in *UVB*, 18 substantiates Reiner’s suggestion regarding the vizier-like nature of the *apkallū*; the scribe substitutes *ummānū* after the Flood for *apkallū* before the Flood.

33 For this use of *ezēbu* see *CAD* E, 420–21 sub 2d ‘to leave to posterity’ and the passages cited therein, esp. *An. St.* 5 (1955), 98, l. 29: *ina narū ul ištur ul izbamma* “he did not leave it written on a stele.” Lambert, *JCS* 11 (1957), 8, adopted the reading *ip’?pu-su?*, and notes (n. 30) that Wiseman “has . . . collated the original and confirms the possibility of this reading. The difficulty remains that a preterite, and not a present, would be normal. However, in late copies of texts such grammatical irregularities do occur.” Holding to the other possibility, *CAD* in 1968 still maintained the reading *[ez]-bu* (*A*², 172b), though the rendering ‘transmitted’ is question begging. The present writer fails to see what *ippusu* has to recommend itself; what is expected is *ištur*; this colophon is strange in many respects, but not particularly ungrammatical.

than a thousand years older. The colophon in the form we have it seems NA and refers to the lines immediately preceding; the tablet continues with illnesses of the head, but breaks off after two lines, and our NA scribe's colophon is lost. Enlil-muballiṭ seems to be a non-mythological exorcist of Nippur, who may have been the source of the claim that his *materia medica* dated to before the Flood, though, unless we by chance recover *his* tablet, we cannot be certain either about the source he claimed or the mode of transmission of the salves to him. As shall be seen presently, it is not altogether likely that he did make the claim. The attribution to the *apkallū* before the Flood appears to be an expression of the effectiveness of these potions, similar to the exorcist's claim that "this is not my incantation, it is an incantation of DN."³⁴

It should be noted that the colophon states that the tablet was left in Šuruppak, the city of which Ziusudra was king before the Flood.³⁵ What more appropriate place could a NA scribe find for a tablet containing knowledge from that time? Civil (apud Lambert and Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs*, 139) has observed that "judging from the information available at present, the theme of the flood which wiped out all but a handful of the human race became popular during the Isin dynasty." The associated idea that all worthwhile knowledge had its ultimate origin before the Flood would then be later.³⁶ This, coupled with the lack of a year-date and the general non-OB form of the colophon (compare Hunger, *Kolophone*, nos. 1–139), would argue for a NA provenance for the colophon and its claim of antiquity. The translation of *CAD A*², 172b, s. v. *apkallu*, *ana qāti šūšû* as "excerpted from the lists, after an oral tradition of the ancient sages from before the flood" cannot be accepted, and Reiner's translation, "which are suitable for use(?)" is to be preferred.³⁷ The regular word for 'to excerpt' is *nasāḫū*, not *šūšû*. If the use of *ša pî apkallē* is to be viewed against a NA background, it is subject to all the ambiguities inherent in *ša pî ummāni* as outlined above.

34 For references to the *ul-juttun* formula, see Biggs, *TCS* 2, 38–39. Biggs notes: "It is striking that most examples of this formula are in texts usually classified as medical, though it also occurs in Lamaštu incantations. What is the significance of this fact? The answer is obvious: it occurs in texts for exorcising demons." In our case, we do not have an *ul-juttun* formula, but the purpose is similar: to emphasize the efficacy of these *materia medica*.

35 See Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*, *AS* 11 (Chicago, 1939), 76, n. 34, and *CAH*³ 1/2, 234–44 and 277.

36 Lambert, *JCS* 11 (1957), 9 and n. 33).

37 *Or.* NS 30 (1961), 10, n. 1 (end).