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Morality and Religion in Three Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers

Thomas Krüger

The Problem

In this short paper I will examine the relation between morality and religion in three “Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers” (cf. OSHIMA 2014), namely *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, the Babylonian Theodicy and the Old Babylonian Man and His God.

With “morality” or “morals” (or “ethics”), I am referring to the rules of interaction between all human beings or between the members of a group of human beings, especially such rules which set limits to arbitrary and selfish behaviour, and to the convictions that support these rules. Moral or ethic rules and convictions are more binding than rules and convictions of taste and etiquette, but there is no sharp distinction. I will also refrain from drawing a distinction between intrinsically motivated “morals” and extrinsically motivated “ethics,”¹ because I find it difficult to establish such a distinction from what the texts say. Moreover, with “religion” (or “piety”) I am referring to the rules of interaction between human and divine beings and to the convictions that support these rules.

These definitions leave open whether also divine beings in their interactions among themselves or in their interactions with human beings behave or should behave according to the rules of human morals. These definitions also leave open whether it is relevant to the interactions between divine and human beings whether the involved human beings on their part behave according to the rules of human morals in their interactions with other human beings or not.

These are the very questions which I would like to ask the texts in what follows:

- Do the gods behave morally in their interactions with humans? And should they do so?
- Do the gods promote inter-human morality? And should they do so?

Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi, 13th–8th centuries B.C.E.(?)

Following an introductory hymn to Marduk, the speaker, Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, describes his former distress, which is now finished thanks to Marduk’s intervention. The gods had forsaken him. They did not respond to his prayers. The omens they gave

¹ See, e.g., WALTON 2006, 149.

him were obscure, or they gave him no omens at all. Incantations were ineffective. The gods turned away from him. As a result, he lost his social standing, his posts and his possessions. All that made him sick. His prayers were not heard.²

I invoked my god, but he did not *raise* (lit.: gave) his face towards me;
 I prayed to my goddess, but *she did not raise her head* (lit.: her head does not become high).
 The diviner could not determine the condition by means of extispicy,
 the dream-interpreter could not reveal my verdict through his *maššakku*-powder.
 I prayed to the *Zāqīqu-daemon*, but it *did not hear me* (lit.: open the ears),
 the incantation-priest could not release the divine wrath in the (incantation)-rituals. (II 4–9)

This behaviour of the gods would be intelligible in the opinion of the speaker if he had not fulfilled his religious duties:

Like someone who has not regularly done libation to the god (var.: gods);
 (who) has not *blessed* (lit.: called) the goddess during the meal-offering;
 (who) *neither (has) displayed the mark of respect nor made obeisance*;
 (who), in his mouth, entreaty and supplication (have) ceased;
 (who) (has) abandoned the (*feast*) day of the god (var.: gods) and neglected the festival;
 (who) (has) been remiss and disregarded their (i.e. gods') rites;
 (who) (has) not taught his people to revere and to be attentive to (the gods);
 (who) ate his (i.e. the god's) bread *without blessing* his god;
 (who) (has) abandoned his goddess, and (has) never brought *mašhatu*-flour-offering;
 (who) (has) forgotten his lord as if he became mad;
 (who) (has) lightly sworn honourable oath *to* (lit.: of) his gods – to (such people) I became equal.
 (II 12–22)

However, the speaker is not aware of any such religious offenses:

(But) I myself (*have*) *been mindful of* entreaty and supplication,
 supplication was (my) *essence* (lit.: wisdom, common sense), offering was my religious practice.
 The day of revering the god (var.: gods) was the joy of my heart,
 the day of procession of the goddess was benefit and profit.
 My pleasure was (reciting) the king's benediction (i.e. prayers for the king),
 and the joyful song about him was indeed for (my) goodness (i.e. was something good for me).
 I instructed my land to keep the rites of the god (var.: gods),
 I taught my people to honour the name of the goddess.
 I made the praise for the king equal to that for the god,
 I made the folk know *respect* for the palace. (II 23–32)

The text seems to presuppose that the gods should actually reward people for worshipping them. Thus also in the inter-human realm a lord should reward his subordinates for their loyalty. So it can be said that, according to the speaker, the gods are morally obliged to pay humans back appropriately for their good deeds and good conduct with regard to religion. However, there is no indication in the text that good religious conduct also includes good moral conduct in the inter-human realm – perhaps except for loyalty to the king.

² All translations of passages from *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* and the Babylonian Theodicy are taken from OSHIMA 2014.

Although he believes that the gods should treat him better because of his piety, the speaker does not doubt their righteousness, but rather his own piety. Perhaps he did not do what the gods expected of him out of ignorance, or he did something which seemed good to him, but was false and wicked in the eyes of the gods:

I indeed believed that these things (*would*) *satisfy* the god (var.: gods).

(However) what is (i.e. seems) good for oneself is a crime for the god (var.: gods),

and what is (i.e. seems) bad in one's mind is good for his god (var.: gods).

Which (person) could know the plan of the gods in the heavens?

Who could comprehend the counsel of the gods of the Deep-Water?

How could mankind know the way of the god (var.: gods)?

(II 33–38)

In view of the limitations of human knowledge, it seems more plausible to the speaker to assume that he himself has made a mistake out of ignorance, than to assume that the gods do not act properly. What follows in the text seems to prove him right. When Marduk turns back to the speaker, the restoration of the speaker appears to begin with Marduk forgiving his sins. This is suggested by the decipherable words in lines III 58 ff.: “my crime” (58), “the punishment” (59), “my offence” (60), “my negligence” (61) and “my curse” (62), as well as by III 66: “He made the wind carry away my negligence.” It is also indicated by IV 4'''–6''':

The one who does not fear [his] (personal) g[od ...

the one who does not fear [his] (personal) [goddess ...

the one who is negligent to Esagil shall see my example ...

From the preserved passages of the text we do not know what exactly the religious offenses of the speaker were. Perhaps this is not really important for the main statement of the text. Those who feel badly treated by the gods, though they have always fulfilled their religious duties, are not to blame the gods, but themselves, even if they do not know exactly what they have done wrong. Then there is at least the chance that the angry gods will calm down and turn back to the sufferer, as the introductory hymn to Marduk, the Lord of Wisdom, says:

Let me praise the lord of wisdom, the jud[icious] god,

the one who is furious by night (but) lenient by day ...

(I 1–2)

His severe punishment is harsh for a moment,

(but) once he *shows* compassion, soon he *becomes like* (lit.: turns into) a mother ...

(I 17–18)

When he commands, he makes him to *commit* (lit.: have) sins,³

on the day of his pious offering, penalty and crime are pardoned ...

(I 23–24)

Thus, in the course of the text, it becomes clear that Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan's first impression that the gods did not reward him for his piety was wrong. His suffering was a punishment by the gods, or especially by Marduk, for his religious offenses, which he was not aware of. The gods have been quite fair to him according to the standards of human morality. They treated him according to his behaviour in the field of religion.

³ Γi¹-qab-bi-ma gil-la-ti uš-raš-šú. ANNU/LENZI 2010, 31 translate “He speaks and imputes guilt” (with note: “Lit., ‘makes one acquire guilt.’”). This understanding would match the following line 24 (ibid., “But on the day of his justice liability and guilt are absolved.”).

However, the gods seem not to be interested in whether his behaviour towards other people has been morally right or wrong. At least, this is not expressly mentioned.

The Babylonian Theodicy, 12th–10th Centuries B.C.E.(?)

In this conversation between a sufferer and his friend, the friend repeatedly exhorts the sufferer to perform his religious duties (in the form of rituals, prayers, and sacrifices). For such piety is rewarded by the gods with well-being and prosperity:

The one who serves the god has (his) protective-sp[irit],
the one, who is in danger but (nevertheless) honours the goddess, amasses wea[lth]. (21–22)

In (response to) supplication, the furious pre-eminent being (i.e. divine being) will *ret[urn]*;
the friendly goddess will return in (response to) beseeching;
they (i.e. the gods) have mercy on the buried and misguided one (in response) to (their) *p[rayers]*.
(39–41)

To that the sufferer answers that those who do not care about their religious duties are doing well (48ff.). On this point the friend replies that the well-being of such wicked people is not of long duration (59ff.). Against that, the sufferer invokes his own experience: from his youth he has been pious, and yet he has never gotten ahead in life:

In my youth, I sea[rched] for the reasoning of the god,
with the mark of respect and benedictions, I sought the goddess.
I bear a yoke as a corvée which (brought) no gain (var.: wisdom),
(but) the god has imposed (on me) poverty instead of riches.
A cripple went up above me; a fool moved forward away from me;
(while) rascals have moved up (in society), I have fallen (so) low (in society). (72–77)

In view of this experience of the sufferer, the friend has to admit that the order or the plan of the gods is not really understandable:

Like the centre of the heavens, the plan of the god is dis[tant],
the command of the goddess is not hea[rd] ... (82–83)

The *divine* mind is as remote as the centre of the heavens,
comprehending it (lit.: its competence) is very difficult; people cannot understand. (256–57)

These arguments are repeated and varied several times during the conversation. As the debate goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that the experience of reality is morally ambivalent: there are events that appear to be good and fair from a moral point of view, but there are also events that conflict with the idea of a moral world order – and not infrequently an event can be interpreted in both ways.

At a point of the conversation, the sufferer even contemplates to abandon his piety and morality, and to procure wealth with violence:

I will disregard cultic duties of the god, [I will t]rample on the rites.
I will slaughter a bull calf, I will consume the foods/bread(-offering).
I will walk a great distance, I will get (to) distant places.

I will open a barrier (of the canals) and send a fl[ood].
 Like a robber, [I will] roam over countryside.
 From house to house, I will go (lit.: enter), I will drive away hunger;
 I will roam around *from one place to another*, I will pr[owl] the streets.
 Wretchedly, I will en[ter[?]] inside [... (135–42)

But he seems to realize that he would thus only increase the injustice in the world he complains about.

Shortly before its end, the dialogue takes a surprising turn. In his last speech, the friend notes that the gods have created men morally imperfect:

The king of the pre-eminent (ones) (i.e. the gods) Narru (= Enlil), the creator of the numerous (i.e. people),
 the noble Zulummaru (= Ea), the one who pinches off their (people's) clay,
 the queen, the one who shapes them (people), the mistress Mami,
 gave *twisted* speech to humankind:
 They (also) bestowed upon them (i.e. on mankind) lies and *falsehood* for all time.
 (Therefore) they (i.e. the people) proudly speak of the well-being of the rich:
 “The king is the one at whose side wealth walks.”
 Men treat the *pitiable* (*man*) badly like a thief,
 they *behave towards* him maliciously; they plan *his* murder.
 Falsely all the bad things were taught to him (i.e. to the sufferer) because he has no guidance;⁴
 they will make him fall down like a powerless (man); they will extinguish him like glowing ashes.
 (277–86)

It is not possible here to enter into the discussion on the understanding of these statements.⁵ I understand it as a concession by the friend that the gods, as creators of men, are at least co-responsible for the wrongdoing of people, and thus also for the injustice they have done to the sufferer. Reality is ambivalent. Sometimes the pious and the righteous are successful, and sometimes the godless and the wicked. Equally ambivalent are divine and human beings. Sometimes they are righteous and pious, and sometimes they are wicked and godless. That is why there is nothing left for the pious and righteous, when they are in distress, but to hope that gods, humans and circumstances can change for the better – even if one can not rely on it. Thus are the last words of the sufferer and the entire poem:

May the god who forsook me establish help (for me).
 May the goddess who d[eserted me] have mercy on me.
 May the shepherd (i.e. the human king), my Sun, gui[de] the people [back] to the gods.⁶
 (295–97)

As in *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, in the Babylonian Theodicy it is expected that the gods reward piety. In the course of the discussion, however, it becomes increasingly clear

⁴ *sar-ri-iš ka-la lum-nu šu-ḥu-zu-šú āš-šú la i-šu-ú i-ri-tú*. Oshima's (2014, 167) translation follows von Soden (1990, 157). Oshima (2014, 370) mentions the different translation by Foster (2005, 921): “They make him suffer every evil because he has no wherewithal(?)”

⁵ Cf. OSHIMA 2014, 133–43.

⁶ Oshima reads the last word of the line *li-saḥ-[ḥir]*. Note JIMÉNEZ 2017 in which he offers a different restoration of the last word *li-lab-'bi¹-[ib]*, “may he give long life.”

that they do not do so, or at least not always. In addition, in the Babylonian Theodicy the gods are also expected to promote inter-human morality. But they do not do even that, or at least they do not always do it (cf. 267ff., the section can be referred to both the people and the gods). This gives morality a certain autonomy. People should behave morally even if they do not profit from it. Whoever chooses to live morally, like the sufferer and his friend, can hope to be supported by people (especially the king) and by the gods (especially Shamash?). But they can not rely on it. This is because neither morality nor piety can guarantee success in life. Therefore it remains open at the end of the poem whether the gods or the king responded to the petition of the sufferer.

The Old Babylonian A Man and His God, 17th century B.C.E.(?)

The relationship between religion and morality is once again differently understood in the Old-Babylonian poem A Man and His God. Here the question is not so much how human suffering can be justified, but what consequences the experience of suffering and of its relieve by the gods should have. At the end of the poem the god connects his promise to heal the sufferer with an exhortation to piety and charity:

Your disease is under control ...
The years and days you were filled with misery are over ... (48–49)

The path is straight for you, mercy is granted you.
You must never, till the end of time, forget [your] god
Your creator, now that you are favored ... (55–57)

I will see to it that you have long life.
So, without qualms, do you anoint the parched,
Feed the hungry, water the thirsty ...⁷ (61–63)

Suffering can teach piety by showing humans their dependence on circumstances that they do not control. And suffering can teach humanity – which is the foundation of morality – by sensitising humans for the suffering of others. So in confronting people with unexplainable and uncontrollable suffering, the gods can contribute to their religious and moral progress.

⁷ Translation following FOSTER 2005, 149–50.

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