

32 The value placed on women

As we approach the end of our book our readers, both women and men, will have been left with an abundant array of impressions. He may have hoped to find a clear conclusion, and she may have already drawn one for herself. Both will have realised that a woman's life was not an easy one. So this is the place to advance the view of the Babylonians themselves, which means the views of Babylonian men, because we scarcely hear anything from the women.

We have regularly quoted proverbs which always refer to women. Some but not all of them include traditional wisdom. Often they are rather to be seen as pointed utterances or brief anecdotes of an individual displaying his originality. A modern writer, in her book documenting worldwide cultural opinions about women, presents this 'Sumerian' wisdom in an unflattering light.¹ The Babylonian handbook about the physiognomy of women (see Chapter 22) has a passage where good and bad characteristics are distinguished.

She is a troublemaker. She binds together. She has become nubile and is a wastrel. She has become nubile and is honest.²

32.1 Positive views

We begin with some kindly remarks. In the Gilgamesh Epic the women the hero encounters all help him and advise him in a friendly way. First we have the prostitute who introduced his friend Enkidu into civilised behaviour. Then there was his mother Ninsun (Ninsun), and the innkeeper's wife Siduri on the edge of the world, and the unnamed wives of the scorpion man and of Utanapištim who survived the Great Flood.³ These women were clearly sensible and wise. In two Sumerian folk tales, a king confronted with a problem asked a woman of the palace to solve it.⁴ Older women in particular were regarded as wise, since the

1 Mineke Schipper, *Never trust a woman with big feet. Worldwide wisdom about women* (2003) 421, under 'Sumerian'. I could not trace the references she quotes on p. 2 (and 387), 34, 268, 282. A selection of such Sumerian and Akkadian proverbs is given in M. W. Chavalas, *Women in the Ancient Near East* (2014) 60–64, 82–91.

2 B. Böck, *Die babylonisch-assyrische Morphoskopie* (2000) 153:2–6; TUAT NF 4 (2008) 41. For a discussion see J. S. Cooper, CRRAI 47/I (2002) 108.

3 R. Harris, 'Images of women in the Gilgamesh Epic', *Studies W.L. Moran* (1990) 219–230.

4 B. Alster, JCS 43–45 (1991–93) 27 n. 4, 29b; E. Lipinski, 'The king's arbitration in Ancient Near Eastern folk-tales', in: K. Hecker, W. Sommerfeld, *Keilschriftliche Literaturen* (CRRAI 32) (1986) 137–142.

Sumerian word for ‘old woman’ carries such overtones. They are the ones who offer advice in the myths,⁵ and they were known to possess gifts of prophecy, as we saw in Chapter 28.

Women were thought to have more compassion than men. We noticed at the end of our discussion on intercession by women in Chapter 29 that the goddess Nungal in a myth showed kindness as warden of the prison. Intercession was a typical feature of a Babylonian woman’s behaviour. A man addressing a letter to ‘my mistress’ draws her attention to ‘the pity of women’ he had expected her to show him and reproaches her for her harshness.

You did not think back to the one day that you encouraged me and exerted yourself for me.
You did not show the pity of women to me.⁶

Showing compassion was clearly regarded as a feminine quality. In Akkadian the word for ‘pity’ is *rēmu*, cognate with Hebrew *rèhèm*, words which in both languages derive from ‘womb’.⁷ In New Testament Greek it is almost always given its literal Semitic equivalent, *splanchna*, ‘entrails’.

Women were also known for showing anxiety. Many women in Mari expressed their worries in letters about the dangers faced by their warfaring men.⁸ Adad-duri, the queen mother, told the king of a priest who dreamt that a goddess had declared that the king had no reason to be concerned about his position:

The kingship is his brickmould and the dynasty is his fortress. Why does he still climb the siege towers? Let him take care of himself!

Adad-duri herself added her own advice.

Now my lord must not be lax in looking after himself.⁹

Here we see two anxious women, a goddess in a dream and a lady of the court, both expressing their worries and their hopes that in the end their man would stop fighting.

We referred to another example of Adad-duri’s anxiety in Chapter 23.

⁵ H. Behrens, *Enlil und Ninlil* (1978) 74 f.

⁶ OBTR 150:17–20; B. R. Foster, *Studies W. W. Hallo* (1993) 101 f.

⁷ An omen prediction says ‘[the god will give] to the man a warm womb (*šassūram emmam ana awili*)’, CUSAS 18 (2013) 297:29 (§6).

⁸ J.-M. Durand in: G. del Olmo Lete, *Mythologie et religion des Sémites occidentaux I* (2008) 598 f.

⁹ ARM 10 51; LAPO 18 (2000) 279 f. no. 1095; TUAT II/1 (1986) 90.

It was also thought that women could easily become fearful. A letter from a Babylonian princess to ‘my lord’, the pharaoh, her husband-to-be, consists almost entirely of courtesies, but we also read,

Do not trouble yourself. You will make me sad.¹⁰

This is also alluded to in a simile to show how fearful the Urartians were when they were beaten, for they were

very afraid before the king, my lord, and they shook and fell silent like women.¹¹

The qualities of a mother were highly esteemed, as we saw in Chapter 4 about the family. The compassionate Gula, the goddess of healing in Babylonia, known in Sumerian as Nintinuga, was ‘the one who makes the dead live’.¹²

32.2 Negative views

By contrast more than once we find harsh opinions of women expressed. Earlier we referred to a letter citing almost everything a married woman could be blamed for. She could be a witch, tell secrets, or have an extra-marital affair.

Has your mistress carried out sorcery against Yarkab-Addu, her lord? Has she brought a word from the palace outside? Or has another opened the thighs of your mistress? Has your mistress done any evil against her lord?

This is not the only such reference. When it came to an extra-marital affair, which we discussed in Chapter 10 about adultery, she was assumed to have instigated it. Even in the wise laws of Hammurabi she is forced to defend herself against this accusation. That a woman could not be trusted with a secret is found in a Sumerian proverb (SP 1.82).

Whatever is spoken in secret, will be unveiled in the women’s quarters.

A liver omen confirms that this is likely to happen.

¹⁰ EA 12:19–22, after W. von Soden, W. L. Moran.

¹¹ SAA I 32:14. The voice of a woman is contrasted to the roar of a lion: CUSAS 18 (2013) 294:9 f.

¹² B. Groneberg in G. Leick, *The Babylonian world* (2007) 325 f.

If the ... of the liver is pierced and the kidney is 'loose', a man's wife will reveal a secret regularly.¹³

The same idea comes up again.

A woman shall reveal a secret of the king in the land of his enemy.¹⁴

Princess Kirûm complained about her husband, the king of Ilanşura, that he had accused her of spilling the beans at court when he said,

'You gossip to my slave-girls and slaves and you tell absolutely everything to your father, and you were the one who handed over to him information about (the city of) Ilanşura.'¹⁵

In an Assyrian letter we find a reference to loose talk using an expression literally meaning 'to open one's mouth':

Whoever opens his mouth shall ruin us thanks to the 'wisdom' of his wife.¹⁶

We discussed the question of a woman being a witch, speaking evil, making slanderous and false accusations in Chapter 19.

These are not the only unpleasant derogatory remarks on women. From here and there we glean comments about their propensity for gossip, jealousy, stupidity, stealing and vitriolic argument. Women were known to spread gossip, implied by some metaphorical language in a Sumerian proverb, probably referring to malevolent chatter:

A woman's sword never rusts.¹⁷

Even beyond the borders of Mesopotamia people believed women were inclined to spread rumours. An Aramaic inscription on a woman's grave in Egypt from the fourth century BC states that she was guiltless of typical female vices.

13 U. Koch-Westenholz, *Babylonian liver omens* (2000) 317 no. 59:8.

14 R. Labat, MDP 57 (1974) 61 no. 3:5, with p. 76.

15 MARI 3 (1984) 178 f.; LAPO 18 (2000) 442 no. 1229.

16 KAV 197:50–52 with J. N. Postgate, *Taxation and conscription in the Assyrian Empire* (1974) 365.

17 M. Schipper, *Never trust a woman with big feet* (2003) 268. I could not trace this proverb. This expression is probably a garbled rendering of 'A woman is a sharp dagger that cuts a man's throat', from line 52 in the 'Dialogue of Pessimism', see W. G. Lambert, *BWL* (1960) 146 f. A wisdom text dissuades a young man from buying a prostitute, by saying 'she has a mouth with whetted teeth'; see B. Alster, *Wisdom of ancient Sumer* (2005) 83 Instr. Šur. 154.

She had never done anything bad nor did she make false accusations (*krṣi*) against anyone.

Such declarations of innocence were normal in Egypt before the Last Judgement, and this one echoes Chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead, but it is hardly conceivable that such a statement would be found to commemorate the life of a man.¹⁸ In the New Testament the idea is perpetuated that women can easily spread gossip when the writer of the letter to Titus (Titus 2:3) says he does not expect devout women to be ‘scandalmongers’ (*diábolos*). In a letter to Timothy young widows were identified as particularly prone to such behaviour.

In going round from house to house they would learn to be idle, indeed worse than idle, gossips and busybodies, speaking of things better left unspoken (1 Timothy 5:13).

To avoid this it was recommended that these young widows should remarry. Then perhaps they could be expected to behave themselves more appropriately and adopt the habits of deacons, as described earlier in the letter.

Women in this office must likewise be dignified, not scandalmongers, but sober and trustworthy in every way (1 Timothy 3:11).

A woman’s tendency to jealousy is mentioned in a liver omen.¹⁹

If the third position is like the barb of a scorpion: out of jealousy the wife of a man shall set his house on fire.

The word used for jealousy literally means ‘the burning of her crotch (*suḥsu*)’, and must refer to sexual jealousy. The expression was particularly unusual and it had to be explained in an ancient commentary.

If you have the word *suḥsu* before you, *suḥsu* = to be jealous (*qenû*). She is jealous and through her jealousy she sets fire to her husband’s house.

It could be that the clue to understanding the explanation of the extispicy was the ‘barb’ that had been noticed on a particular part of the liver. That married wives could become jealous is clear from the reaction of the goddess Zarpanitum to her

¹⁸ KAI 269:2; TUAT II/4 (1988) 577.

¹⁹ Koch-Westenholz, *Babylonian liver omens*, 143 no. 19:84; A. R. George, CUSAS 18 (2013) 235:40, with p. 121 (to 28’), 243 (to 40). Cf. E. Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian text commentaries* (2011) 81 f. We now know that the word *suḥsu* does not mean ‘bed’ but a part of the body associated with the genital organs (A. R. George).

husband Marduk who was playing around with Ištar, an incident we mentioned earlier at the end of Chapter 21.²⁰

Stupidity is sometimes attributed to women, even goddesses. In a Hittite myth the wife of Appu reproached him that he was not being a successful bedfellow. He reacted angrily, telling her,

You are a woman like other women. You know nothing.

He jumped out of bed, consulted the sun god and fathered a son.²¹ In the annals of a Hittite king we have the same accusation of stupidity applied to a woman as if she were a child.

You are a child and you know nothing.²²

In Chapter 9 about divorce we saw in Old Babylonian laws that women sometimes found themselves tempted to steal. A wisdom text expresses the same idea.

Do not open your heart to your dear wife. If she presses you hard, seal away the presents in your sealed storage room. Do not let your wife get to know the very inside of your purse.²³

Women were also known to engage in fierce arguments. One genre of Sumerian literature involves dialogue. These conversations involve two people and after each of them had extolled their own good qualities a god decided which of them was right. Some arguments degenerated into torrents of abuse,

She is a huckster, she is flighty, she is an exile (?), she is a nymphomaniac,
She is quarrelsome, she is a liar, a slanderer, she is a double-dealer, she is worthless.²⁴

In other literary genres eloquent slanging-matches also took place. At the Sumerian school people were fond of abusing others. In the text known as ‘Son of a bitch’ someone is sworn at by using choice though coarse terms for character

²⁰ An Old Babylonian incantation against the ‘fire of the heart’ (izi šà-ga, VAS 17 23) is about jealousy, according to N. Wasserman, *BiOr* 72 (2015) 607 f.

²¹ TUAT III/4 (1994) 849.

²² A. Goetze, *Die Annalen des Muršiliš* (1933) 19 iv 16.

²³ Th. R. Kämmerer, *Šimā milka* (1998) 186:16–19.

²⁴ ‘The slave girl and the scoundrel’, 5–10; M. T. Roth, *JAOS* 103 (1983) 275. Cf. D. Shehata, *WZKM* 97 (2007) 522; M. P. Streck, ‘Schimpfwort’, *RIA* XII/3–4 (2009) 189–191.

assassination.²⁵ We also know of an argument between two women who call each other all sorts of names. It comes in two versions, both transcribed from earlier tablets. They are written in the woman's language and their choice of words is exceptional. Sumerologists have hesitated to translate the lingo of these fish-wives. So they have not quite managed to publish the texts, though sometimes a few lines were translated.

If anyone did not know your behaviour, they would see your fine appearance, see your beautiful face, and they would say, 'An (excellent) person'. However, you, your intellect is that of a monkey, your understanding is that of a dog.²⁶

Why do you slander the daughter of a citizen, your friend, by calling her 'My whore', and in so doing make her husband leave her?²⁷

O bitch, who [runs after] men with her leg raised. The young men do not [sleep] in the district where they live.

Troublemaker who cheats the men of the city. The young women do not sleep in the district where they live.²⁸

At a congress of Assyriologists in Helsinki a Sumerologist distributed his own English translation of insults that were thrown. We reproduce his version here.

Ugly, the most unbecoming of women,
 Green in colour, oozing bad humours,
 Black like a Meluḥḥan [= a Negro], a dough figurine,
 A liar, she does not fit the norm.
 With long hips, bloated stomach, the neck thick, the breasts pendulous.
 A hairy anus, a narrow vagina, but very long pubic hair,
 And you pretend to be made like a human being!²⁹

Some Old Sumerian clay tablets have come to our notice on which insults are written. The difficult Sumerian was translated into Akkadian around five hundred years later which makes it easier to understand.³⁰ The first fourteen insults are directed at women and include such sentences as

²⁵ Å. W. Sjöberg, 'He is a good seed of a dog', *JCS* 24 (1972) 107–109; H. Vanstiphout, *Eduba. Schrijven en lezen in Sumer* (2004) 247–251.

²⁶ K. Volk, *ZA* 90 (2000) 19.

²⁷ Volk, 18 n. 84.

²⁸ Volk, 19 n. 92 with *Saeculum* 47 (1996) 191 n. 80.

²⁹ *Dialogue* 5:144–152, after J. Klein.

³⁰ See M. Civil, R. D. Biggs, 'Early Dynastic Collection of Insults', *RA* 60 (1966) 5–7; B. Alster, *AFO* 38–39 (1991–92) 1–51; J. Klein, *Festschrift C. Wilcke* (2003) 135–149.

Let me break her heart, strike her mouth. As your mouth is so is your 'vessel' (2–3).
 The pieces of silver in it, you do not give back what you have gained (4).
 She always rolls her eyes. She is a liar for five (5).
 What is here, she brings there. What is there, she brings here (6–7).
 Her double tongue, I want to answer you doubly (10–11).

Later there are a few more terms of abuse.

The biggest liar among women, who sticks her nose into everything (65).
 She belittles herself (66).
 There she goes. That's the liar going past (74).
 Mad dog! Farter! A groin which makes the 'rod' wither away! (78).

32.3 Women compared with men

In Chapter 1, when discussing women's clothing, and in Chapter 22 we saw that men were associated with the right side and women with the left, corresponding to the generally accepted principle that 'right = male = favourable' as opposed to 'left = female = unfavourable'. It will not come as a surprise that there was a preference for male offspring when children were born.³¹

For a comparison between women and men we must turn to a Sumerian proverb.

The man is cheeky and eats salt things.
 The woman is cheeky and is dragged through the mud.³²

Whatever fate awaited the man it is likely to have been more agreeable than the woman's lot. In curse formulas a man is threatened to be changed into a woman by the goddess Ištar:

May Ištar, the great lady, turn his manhood into the state of a woman!³³

³¹ M. Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible* (2000) 206–208.

³² SP 1.156. An alternative translation is, '(If) a male is aroused, he eats salt. (If) a female is aroused, she is dragged in the mud'; thus A. Gadotti in: M. W. Chavalas, *Women in the Ancient Near East* (2014) 61.

³³ RINAP 4 (2011) 186 no. 98 rev. 55 f.; P.-A. Beaulieu, *The pantheon of Uruk during the Neo-Babylonian period* (2003) 366:15–17. In Hittite curses, 'May the oath deities make (that) man (into) a woman'; W. W. Hallo, *The context of Scripture I* (1997) 166 §9–10. More in K. van der Toorn, *Sin and sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia* (1985) 84.

More objectively we know that slave-girls cost less than male slaves.³⁴ It is also clear that women did not enjoy the same rights as men. There were other voices.³⁵ We mentioned in Chapter 9 a woman who was threatened with execution for keeping silent during a trial for murder in Nippur, but a question was raised of whether to treat her more leniently.

What has she, a woman, done to be put to death?

There are more examples where we should not be too harsh about their views of women's rights. When a woman wanted to marry, her father or her brother made the arrangements. The reason for this could simply have been that she was too young to do it herself. In those days girls married young. However, in the Neo-Babylonian period her mother could act on her behalf. Any physical punishment for a woman was brutal, but those that mirrored the offence could also be brutal for men. The impression we get of brutality against women comes from the Middle Assyrian law-book which is concerned exclusively with women, giving us a one-sided perspective. Even so, when a widow and a widower married they had equal rights according to §35 of that law-book. Yet in a case of adultery the death penalty was prescribed for a woman but not for her lover. This becomes understandable when we take into account that she had brought dishonour on her family. He was an outsider, and she had greater responsibility. Moreover, such behaviour directly compromised her important function of producing the next generation. We said more about the principles underlying these laws at the end of Chapter 31.

In the end a balanced judgement leads us to the conclusion that in ancient society women fared much worse than men. We have seen evidence of this time and time again in this book, with some chapters showing nothing to the contrary. Even in the generally wise laws of Hammurabi women were more severely punished than men.³⁶ As we come to a close we expect none of our readers to shut this book without uttering a sigh of sadness.

³⁴ M. Stol, 'Sklave', *albab.*, § 6.1, in *RIA XII/7–8* (2011) 567a; K. Radner, *Die neuassyrischen Privatrechtsurkunden* (1997) 248.

³⁵ M. T. Roth in V. H. Matthews, *Gender and law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (1998) 181–183.

³⁶ M. T. Roth, *Festschrift J. Renger* (1999) 460; S. Franke, *ZABR* 6 (2000) 13.