WISDOM FROM THE LATE BRONZE AGE

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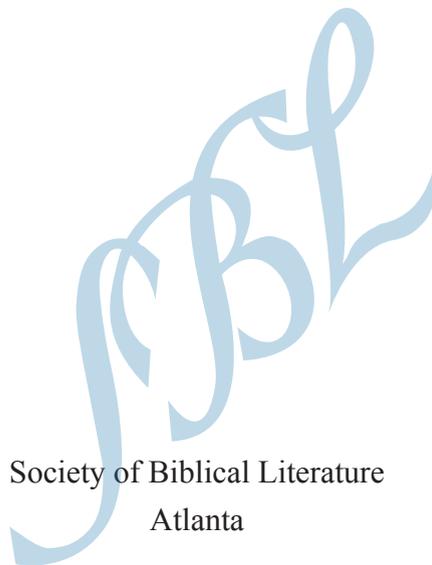
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Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age

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by Yoram Cohen

Edited by Andrew R. George

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SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Writings from the Ancient World is designed to provide up-to-date, readable English translations of writings recovered from the ancient Near East.

The series is intended to serve the interests of general readers, students, and educators who wish to explore the ancient Near Eastern roots of Western civilization or to compare these earliest written expressions of human thought and activity with writings from other parts of the world. It should also be useful to scholars in the humanities or social sciences who need clear, reliable translations of ancient Near Eastern materials for comparative purposes. Specialists in particular areas of the ancient Near East who need access to texts in the scripts and languages of other areas will also find these translations helpful. Given the wide range of materials translated in the series, different volumes will appeal to different interests. However, these translations make available to all readers of English the world's earliest traditions as well as valuable sources of information on daily life, history, religion, and the like in the preclassical world.

The translators of the various volumes in this series are specialists in the particular languages and have based their work on the original sources and the most recent research. In their translations they attempt to convey as much as possible of the original texts in fluent, current English. In the introductions, notes, glossaries, maps, and chronological tables, they aim to provide the essential information for an appreciation of these ancient documents.

The ancient Near East reached from Egypt to Iran and, for the purposes of our volumes, ranged in time from the invention of writing (by 3000 B.C.E.) to the conquests of Alexander the Great (ca. 330 B.C.E.). The cultures represented within these limits include especially Egyptian, Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Hittite, Ugaritic, Aramean, Phoenician, and Israelite. It is hoped that Writings from the Ancient World will eventually produce translations from most of the many different genres attested in these cultures: letters (official and private), myths, diplomatic documents, hymns, law collections, monumental inscriptions, tales, and administrative records, to mention but a few.

Significant funding was made available by the Society of Biblical Literature for the preparation of this volume. In addition, those involved in preparing

this volume have received financial and clerical assistance from their respective institutions. Were it not for these expressions of confidence in our work, the arduous tasks of preparation, translation, editing, and publication could not have been accomplished or even undertaken. It is the hope of all who have worked with the Writings from the Ancient World series that our translations will open up new horizons and deepen the humanity of all who read these volumes.

Theodore J. Lewis
The Johns Hopkins University

PREFACE

This book presents a collection of Mesopotamian wisdom literature composi-
tions and proverbs recovered in archaeological excavations of the Late Bron-
ze Age sites of Ḫattuša, Emar, and Ugarit (ca. 1500–1200 B.C.E.). Among the
compositions included here are some of the major works of Mesopotamian
literature of this period, such as The Ballad of Early Rulers, *Šimâ Milka* (Hear
the Advice), The Righteous Sufferer and The Date Palm and the Tamarisk, as
well as some shorter compositions and proverbs. The final chapter of the book
is dedicated to proverbs and aphorisms appearing in contemporary or near-
contemporary letters.

Many of the wisdom pieces brought together in this book are attested al-
most exclusively in the archives and libraries of Ḫattuša, Emar, and Ugarit, yet
they are Mesopotamian creations. If not for the copies recovered at these sites,
these wisdom compositions would have almost completely disappeared from
the record, their only trace their titles, preserved in Mesopotamian literary cata-
logues. Hence Late Bronze Age manuscripts of Mesopotamian wisdom litera-
ture—or to put it more simply, Late Bronze Age wisdom compositions, a term
we will use throughout this book—are crucial in our reconstruction of Meso-
potamian literature. Specifically they further our understanding of the content,
scope and distribution of Mesopotamian wisdom literature.

These compositions, generally thought to have been composed during the
Post Old Babylonian period or the early Kassite period (the sixteenth–four-
teenth B.C.E.), constitute a missing link between wisdom literature of the Old
Babylonian period (twentieth–seventeenth centuries B.C.E.) and wisdom pieces
that were composed at the end of the second millennium or the beginning of
the first millennium in Mesopotamia. To explicate, Late Bronze Age wisdom
compositions complete for us a literary sequence (although at times still poor-
ly represented) that begins with the Old Babylonian wisdom literature corpus
in Sumerian and ends with well-known Akkadian wisdom compositions, such
as *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* (I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom) or The Babylonian
Theodicy, of the Kassite and post-Kassite periods. As will be demonstrated

throughout this book, Late Bronze Age wisdom compositions stand as witnesses to a long and complex process of transmission and reception of Mesopotamian literature, wisdom literature included, in Babylonia and the surrounding regions (those west of Babylonian collectively referred to as the western periphery).

Part 1 of the book is an introductory essay that discusses definitions, key themes and approaches for understanding the form and function of wisdom literature. It introduces the sources and briefly discusses current scholarly views of what constitutes Mesopotamian wisdom literature. It then offers a few approaches through which wisdom literature will be explored. It continues by examining the archival and archaeological contexts where Late Bronze Age wisdom literature manuscripts were found. On this basis it evaluates the role of wisdom literature in the curriculum of cuneiform scribal schools. The aim of part 1 is to expose readers to a variety of compositions situated within particular historical and social contexts in order to sharpen their appreciation of wisdom literature and highlight the position of this genre within Mesopotamian literary and scholarly creativity.

Part 2 consists of eight chapters devoted either to single works or to a few sources that together constitute a single subject. The wisdom compositions are presented in their original languages (mostly Akkadian and occasionally Sumerian or Hittite). Each composition is provided with an introduction to the main theme of the work and its sources. Then come the text edition and its translation, followed by an extensive discussion. An appreciation of the relationship between Late Bronze Age wisdom compositions and the wider circle of Mesopotamian literature is given throughout. Since most of the manuscripts presented in the book were found outside the Mesopotamian core areas (i.e., Babylonia and Assyria), at times the degree of local influence upon the Late Bronze Age wisdom compositions is questioned. In this respect the ways in which Akkadian and Sumerian compositions were understood and occasionally translated by local scribal circles are also considered.

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Late Bronze Age cuneiform texts deviate from the Old Babylonian or Standard Babylonian Akkadian dialect with which nonspecialist students of Akkadian are usually familiar. For example, they make use of a different syllabary from that encountered in Old Babylonian compositions. They are also full of aberrant spelling, textual errors, and nonstandard vocalization of Babylonian Akkadian (and sometimes Sumerian). This requires a careful reworking of the primary sources that leads to a certain degree of compromise. Thus the transcri-

bed or normalized texts presented here cannot be considered full critical editions. However, the outcome, so it is hoped, is the presentation of lucid and yet reliable text editions that readers can navigate without great difficulty. These editions allow readers to appreciate the literary and at times the poetic quality of the compositions, enabling them to assess the choice of vocabulary by recourse to the standard dictionaries (such as the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, *Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, *Akkadische Handwörterbuch*, *Chicago Hittite Dictionary*, and the *Electronic Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary*). For those seeking more detailed editions of the primary sources I have provided relevant bibliography at the end of each chapter.

The editions and translations in this book derive from my own textual reconstruction based on autograph copies and photographs (where available) of the original tablets. I have benefited from previous editions, discussions, and translations. Mention is to be made here of one of the important recent publications used in this collection: Arnaud's 2007 book *Corpus des Textes de Bibliothèque de Ras Shamra—Ougarit (1936–2000)*, which includes improved text editions of wisdom works from Emar and Ugarit. Among its pages are also found two previously unpublished manuscripts of *Šimâ Milka* from Ugarit. These new manuscripts allow a reconstruction and translation of this composition that are fuller than any published before.

On occasions where I adopted the readings and translations of Andrew R. George, the academic editor of this book, I have acknowledged his contributions (noted as ARG in the textual notes). Throughout the discussion I have made reference to individual studies or editions, but because of the format of this series, I have avoided the use of footnotes. As a consequence, one runs the risk of conveying the impression that one is the author of certain ideas when one is not; certainly that was not my intention, therefore apologies are extended in advance to those who may feel they have not been given sufficient or adequate credit. And contrariwise, when I have tried to articulate my own ideas and conclusions, I have attempted to make clear that responsibility for the contents expressed lies with me. My hope is that I have not falsely attributed to anybody ideas not his or hers.

Travels to fields other than Assyriology have been ventured here and there. The occasional comparisons to biblical verses or the citation of a proverb or two from the Sayings of Ahiqar, however, are merely illustrative, neither critical nor comprehensive in their scope. Hopefully more competent scholars than myself will see in this study an opportunity to continue and explore the relations between Mesopotamian wisdom literature and other wisdom corpora.

This book will have more than fulfilled its purpose if it succeeds in writing a chapter in the history of Mesopotamian literature that secures a place for Late Bronze Age wisdom compositions alongside better known works, such as The Instructions of Šuruppak found in Alster's magisterial *Wisdom of Sumer* (2005) or The Dialogue of Pessimism made famous by Lambert's classic *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (1960).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.	Tablet signature of texts from Mari
ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992
ABL	*Assyrian and Babylonian Letters Belonging to the Kouyunjik Collections of the British Museum*. Edited by R. F. Harper. 14 vols. Chicago, 1892–1914
AfO	*Archiv für Orientforschung*
ANESSup	Ancient Near Eastern Studies Supplement
AnOr	*Analecta Orientalia*
AnSt	*Anatolian Studies*
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AoF	*Altorientalische Forschungen*
ARG	Andrew R. George
ARM	Archives royales de Mari
ARMT	Archives royales de Mari, transcrite et traduite
AS	Assyriological Studies
ASJ	*Acta Sumerologica*
AuOr	*Aula Orientalis*
AuOrSup	Aula Orientalis Supplementa
BWL	Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. Oxford, 1960
CAD	*The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. Chicago, 1956–2010
CHANE	Culture and History of the Ancient Near East
CM	Cuneiform Monographs
CUSAS	Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology
EA	*El-Amarna Tablets*. According to the edition of J. A. Knudtzon. *Die el-Amarna-Tafeln*. Leipzig, 1908–1915. Reprint, Aalen, 1964. Continued in A. F. Rainey, *El-Amarna Tablets*, 359–379. 2nd revised ed. Kevelaer, 1978

ETCSL	The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature; online at http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk
FAOS	Freiburger altorientalische Studien
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GMTR	Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record
HANE/M	History of the Ancient Near East: Monographs
HO	Handbuch der Orientalistik
HSCP	Harvard Studies in Classical Philology
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
JANER	*Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religion*
JANES	*Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JCS	*Journal of Cuneiform Studies*
JMC	*Le Journal des Médicines Cunéiformes*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series
KAR	*Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts*. Edited by E. Ebeling. Leipzig, 1919–1923
KBo	*Keilschrifttexte aus Boghazköi*. WVDOG 30, 36, 68–70, 72–73, 77–80, 82–86, 89–90. Leipzig, 1916–1923, Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1954–.
KUB	Keilschrifturkunden aus Boghazköi. Berlin: Akademie, 1921–.
LAPO	Littérature Ancienne du Proche-Orient
MAOG	Mitteilungen der Altorientalischen Gesellschaft
MARI	*Mari, Annales de Recherches Interdisciplinaires*
MC	Mesopotamian Civilizations
MRS	Mission de Ras Shamra
NABU	*Nouvelles Assyriologiques Bréves et Utilitaires*
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
OIS	Oriental Institute Seminars
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
OLP	*Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica*
Or	*Orientalia*
ORA	Orientalische Religionen in der Antike
PIHANS	Publications de l'Institut historique-archéologique néerlandais de Stamboul (Leiden)

RA	*Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale*
RlA	*Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie*
RS	Ras Shamra (excavation number)
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SAACT	State Archives of Assyrian Cuneiform Texts
SBLSymS	Symposium Series
SBLWAW	Writings from the Ancient World
SBLWAWSup	Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series
SEL	*Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici sul Vicino Oriente Antico*
SMEA	*Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolici*
StBoT	Studien zu den Boğazköy-Texten
THeth	Texte der Hethiter
TUAT	Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments
UF	*Ugarit-Forschungen*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplement Series
WO	*Die Welt des Orients*
wr.	written
WVDOG	Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der deutschen Orientgesellschaft
ZA	*Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie*

Fig. 1. Map of the ancient Near East in the Late Bronze Age
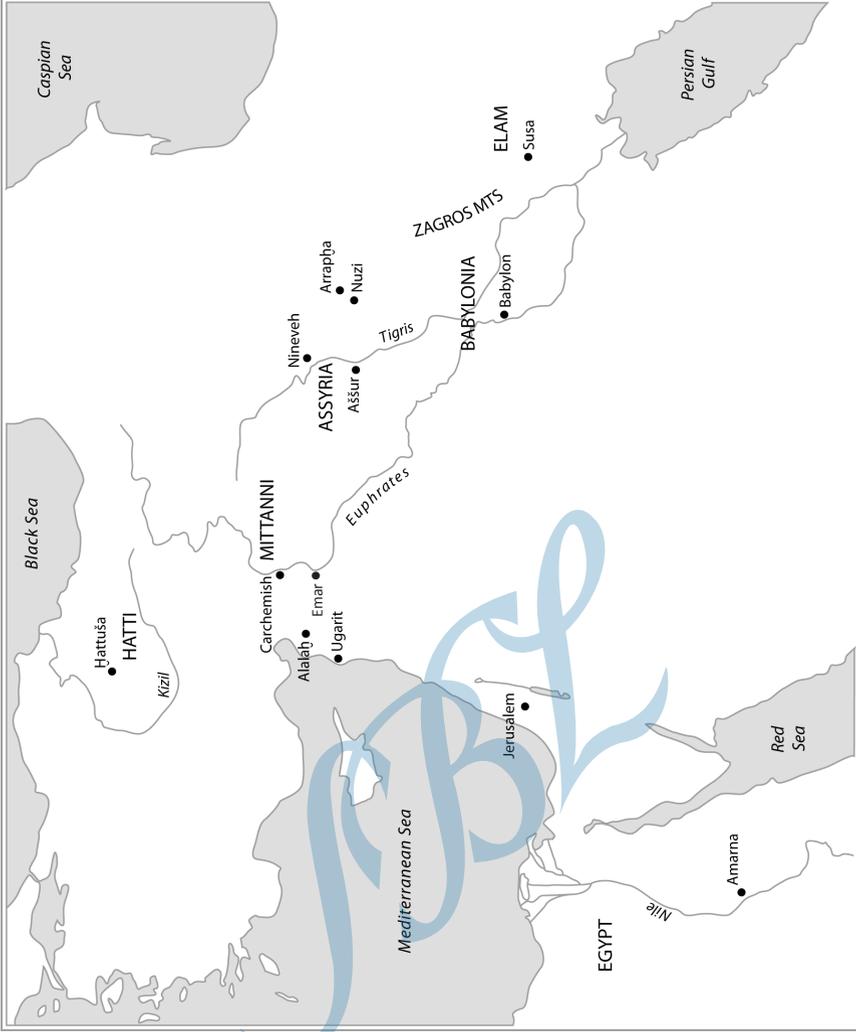
PART 1
INTRODUCTION

A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE COMPOSITIONS
AND THEIR SOURCES

This study includes five major wisdom compositions, three shorter works of proverbs (that lack any narrative frame), and a selection of proverbs deriving from letters. They are briefly described here so that the reader can appreciate from the very start of the book the nature and scope of the corpus. The numbers given below to each composition or group of proverbs will continue to designate these works throughout the book. First to be surveyed are the major wisdom compositions:

1. *Šimâ Milka* or Hear the Advice (sometimes called The Instructions of Šūpê-amēli) is the longest composition in the book, with over 150 lines. It deals with the two themes present in Late Bronze Age wisdom compositions, namely, practical wisdom and skeptical wisdom. The first theme is presented by a person called Šūpê-amēli, and the second theme, in the form of a reply to the first, is delivered by his son, who is not named in the composition.

2. The Ballad of Early Rulers is a composition extending a little over twenty lines. A string of sayings about the futility of life opens the composition. It then goes on to list early rulers of the past, such as Gilgameš and Etana, who, in spite their glorious deeds, are now dead.

3. Enlil and Namzitarra is a short story concerned, like The Ballad of Early Rulers, with the futility of life. The theme is introduced in a dialogue between the god Enlil and a priest called Namzitarra. Once the main composition ends, a string of proverbs, very poorly understood, follows.

4. The Righteous Sufferer from Ugarit is a prayer to the god Marduk. Although in and of itself it is not a wisdom composition, it deals with one of the chief concerns of Mesopotamian wisdom literature, namely, divine retribution. This prayer is usually considered to be in one form or another a forerunner of the great Babylonian wisdom composition,

Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi, "I will Praise the Lord of Wisdom," also known as "The Babylonian Job."

5. The Date Palm and the Tamarisk is a debate poem, a subgenre of wisdom literature. The two contestants, the date palm and the tamarisk tree, engage in a lively debate as to who is more beneficial to civilization.

The other materials lack narrative frames (as far as can be judged from the remains of the compositions today; the only exception is 6 B, for which see below), but are simply collections or assemblages of proverbs without a connecting thread between one saying and the next.

6. Proverb collections from Ḫattuša include two (unconnected) sources. The first source (6 A) is a collection of Akkadian proverbs, some of which are in very poor condition. There is no apparent relation between one proverb and the next. The second source (6 B) is written in Hittite (it is a translation of an Akkadian column, now mostly broken away). It includes a proverb followed by a short speech discussing the importance of the study of wisdom. The speech perhaps offered a summation of a longer composition, now lost.

7. The Akkadian-Hurrian proverb extract is an exercise tablet containing two proverbs in Akkadian provided with a Hurrian translation.

8. The last chapter in this book is dedicated to proverbs and colloquial sayings found in the Mari letters and Late Bronze Age correspondence including the famous Amarna letters. Over twenty-five proverbs and sayings from various social and historical contexts are presented.

The languages represented in our corpus are Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, and Hurrian. The Akkadian language features in all our compositions, either alone (in 1 [the Emar and Ugarit sources], 4, 5, 6 A, and 8), as a translation or paraphrasing of the Sumerian (2 and 3), or as the language translated into the target languages Hittite and Hurrian (1 [the Ḫattuša source] and 6 B into Hittite; 7 into Hurrian).

The sources at our disposal derive mainly from three sites—Ugarit, Emar, and Ḫattuša. They are occasionally supplemented by sources deriving from elsewhere and dating to different periods. The richest site in wisdom-literature finds is Ugarit, followed by Emar and then Ḫattuša. The count of manuscripts from each site results in the following figures: Ugarit boasts of ten manuscripts, Emar seven, and Ḫattuša three; note that some manuscripts are very fragmentary. The distribution of the manuscripts according to wisdom compositions is as follows (included within this count are fragmentary manuscripts of wisdom compositions that are not treated in this book; see further below).

		Ugarit	Emar	Ḫattuša
1.	*Šimâ Milka*	3	1	1
2.	Ballad of Early Rulers	3	2	–
3.	Enlil and Namzitarra	1	1	–
4.	The Righteous Sufferer	1	–	–
5.	Date Palm and Tamarisk	–	2	–
6.	Proverbs from Ḫattuša	–	–	2
7.	Akkadian-Hurrian Extract	1	–	–
(other)	(The Fowler)	–	1	–
	(The Fable of the Fox)	1	–	–
	TOTAL	10	7	3

Only one composition, *Šimâ Milka*, was found at all three sites. In spite of its popularity in the Late Bronze Age, it has not been recovered in the Mesopotamian core areas. Two compositions, The Ballad of Early Rulers and Enlil and Namzitarra are known from two sites each—Ugarit and Emar. The rest of the works were recovered at only one site.

As noted above, sometimes our sources can be supplemented from manuscripts from elsewhere. Perhaps the most popular piece, to judge by its distribution (although this might be coincidental), is The Date Palm and the Tamarisk. Recovered from only one Bronze Age site (Emar), it is however represented in addition by two fragmentary Old Babylonian manuscripts (of the same tablet) from Tel Harmal in Babylonia, two Assyrian manuscripts from Assur (one dated to the Middle Assyrian period, the other possibly to the early Neo-Assyrian period), and a fragment from Susa.

Next comes The Ballad of Early Rulers. It is not represented at sites other than Ugarit and Emar during the Late Bronze Age, but is known from a Neo-Assyrian fragment. A Sumerian version of the composition dating to the Old Babylonian period is represented by a few manuscripts.

Enlil and Namzitarra is known in its bilingual version only from Ugarit and Emar, but it is found in seven monolingual Sumerian manuscripts dating to the Old Babylonian period.

The Righteous Sufferer was found only in Ugarit. However, its literary heritage is indirectly reflected in *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*, known from later Mesopotamian sources. The rest of the works we will encounter are known only in Late Bronze Age manuscripts.

Proverbs are quoted in letters from Mari, El Amarna (but written in the cities of Canaan and Lebanon), Ḫattuša, and elsewhere. They do not attest directly to the spread of wisdom literature in learned contexts, that is, schools

and archives, but they may reflect something of the spread of wisdom through-out the region in more or less the time period we are interested in.

I have specified what this book includes but a word is needed on what was excluded and on what grounds. Three wisdom compositions were left out of this collection mainly because of their poor preservation. The Fowler and His Wife is a wisdom piece or Sumerian morality tale (following Alster's defini-tion; see Alster 2005: 371–72) known from chiefly Old Babylonian sources; it is represented by two very poorly preserved fragments from Emar (Arnaud 1985–1987, no. 768). Not enough of the piece remains to merit its reproduc-tion here and afford it a suitable discussion. It does however feature in 1.5 where I discuss wisdom literature and its role in the Emar curriculum.

Another piece excluded is a fragment of unknown provenance of The Instructions of Šuruppak. It is a bilingual piece written in two columns, Akka-dian and Hurrian. It has been suggested that the fragment comes from Emar but this cannot be verified. It is in a rather pitiful state, but nonetheless sense can be made out of it by comparing the remains to parallel passages in the Sumerian version. Since a commendable result has been achieved by B. Alster and G. Wilhelm (for the Hurrian column), the reader is referred to their work (in Alster 2005).

The final wisdom work excluded is The Fable of the Fox, represented by two pieces from the House of Urtenu in Ugarit (Arnaud 2007, no. 51; Yon and Arnaud 2001, no. 29). Because the remains are not well preserved and the composition itself is only poorly known elsewhere (see Kienast 2003; *BWL* 186–209; Vanstiphout 1988; Alster 2005: 346–51), I decided to omit it. It deserves additional investigation much beyond the scope of this book. I will briefly mention it when I assess the remains from the House of Urtenu in 1.4.

Definitions and Approaches

When dealing with a collection of works brought together under the rubric of wisdom literature, there is no escape from the question, what is wisdom literature? Since the compositions in this book originated in Mesopotamia (regardless for the present of whether or not they underwent any editorial changes or modifications on their transmission route to or reception at Late Bronze Age sites), I will revise the question to, what is Mesopotamian wisdom literature? In the first part of this chapter, I will try to examine the different ways in which scholars have responded to this question in the past. As we will discover, the question revolves around the issue of genre. The changing understanding of what genre is and whether it is useful in discussing ancient literature has affected the definition of Mesopotamian wisdom literature. The second part of this chapter will introduce three methodological approaches by which our question can be addressed: examining the Mesopotamian view of wisdom literature, re-evaluating key themes in the compositions, and adopting a contextual approach in the study of wisdom literature.

I will focus here primarily on the opinions of ancient Near Eastern scholars who have studied wisdom literature extensively, for a review of the whole range of opinions on what Mesopotamian wisdom literature is and whether genre is a useful category in the discussion of ancient Near Eastern literature is beyond the scope of this short presentation. Likewise, it must be made clear from the outset that this short introduction does not pretend to redefine the genre of wisdom literature, but rather to present in a critical way already existing definitions and offer a few approaches for its further investigation.

Definitions

Like many studies concerned with wisdom literature, this book begins by briefly sketching how wisdom literature has been defined and redefined, categorized,

and studied in modern scholarship; and like many studies, it too will begin with Lambert's now classic 1960 magisterial edition, translation, and commentary of Babylonian wisdom compositions known at that time. We will see how Lambert attempted to define Babylonian wisdom literature in his book; then observe how, with the spate of new Mesopotamian literature compositions from the mid-twentieth century onwards, a reevaluation of Mesopotamian wisdom literature was required; and, finally, consider the questioning by recent scholarship of the very usefulness of such a literary category or genre as wisdom.

"'Wisdom' is strictly a misnomer as applied to Babylonian literature." Thus the first sentence in Lambert's introductory chapter to *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. As Lambert explains, wisdom as a literary genre is applied to the Biblical wisdom books, Proverbs, Job, and Qohelet. He stresses that, "though this term (i.e., wisdom literature) is thus foreign to ancient Mesopotamia, it has been used for a group of texts which correspond in subject-matter with the Hebrew Wisdom books, and may be retained as a convenient short description." Hence the implication is, if one chooses to recognize an apologetic tone in Lambert's words, that although Babylonian wisdom literature shares its subject matter with biblical wisdom books, "real" wisdom is inherent in biblical literature. The unease Lambert felt in using the term "wisdom" was because this category, taken from biblical studies, defines a group of books that are in essence very different from ancient Near Eastern sources in their theological view of wisdom, if one takes, as an example, Proverbs 1 or 8.

But perhaps more than apologetic—if one may venture to read deeper in to Lambert's pronouncement—in a sense his view was a reaction against the strained relationship between biblical studies and Assyriology, which continues to this day (a heritage of pan-Babylonianism and the Babel-Bibel controversy; Holloway 2006; Chavalas 2002). To illustrate this claim, one may look at Langdon's *Babylonian Wisdom* of 1923. In its introduction it is said to bring together "fragments of the books of Babylonian Wisdom," including an edition of *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*, recognized almost since its initial publication at the end of the nineteenth century C.E. to be of special relevance for the book of Job. Langdon's treatment of *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* was, so he himself writes, "inspired by a desire to complete the profound system of Sumero-Babylonian theology in its ethical aspects." Langdon spoke of the "books" of Babylonian wisdom, which he held to be as profound as the wisdom found in the biblical books and which were a crucial ethical component in Mesopotamian theology. However, Lambert asserts that the term wisdom when applied to Mesopotamian writing should be used with caution lest it be abused: Babylonian culture should be studied on its own merit.

For lack of a better criterion by which to include compositions under the title of wisdom literature, Lambert borrowed (with some apparent unease)

a definition foreign to Mesopotamian categories. He chose works that were deemed to be within the sphere of "what has been called philosophy since Greek times though many scholars would demur to using this word for ancient Mesopotamian thought" (Lambert 1960: 1).

That is as far as Lambert was prepared to go in defining Babylonian wisdom literature. The rest of his introduction avoids any discussion of the form or structure of the genre. However, although the book on the whole refrains from providing an explicit definition of the genre, Lambert's collection de facto defined the genre (Clifford 2007: xii). Surely, his choice and arrangement of the materials were individual and consciously subjective, because, in his words, "there is no precise canon by which to recognize them (i.e., wisdom compositions)." Nonetheless, it is obvious that his collection of compositions was influenced, like van Dijk's book *La Sagesse suméro-accadienne* (1953), by earlier compilations of ancient Near Eastern literature, such as *Altorientalische Texte zum alten Testamente* (Gressmann 1909), *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament* (Rogers 1912) and the first edition of *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (=*ANET*; Pritchard 1950). They all included "wisdom" literature within their pages.

Whatever the influences on Lambert, *ANET* in its third edition (1969) was already citing his *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. Lambert's book instantly became canonical: it is an exemplary work of Assyriological philology; it remains one of the most read books in the field of ancient Near Eastern studies; its influence on Bible studies was immeasurable; and, most importantly for the present discussion, it is the yardstick by which all anthologies of wisdom literature are measured—it was and still is *the* canon. However, the usefulness of Lambert's loosely defined genre of wisdom literature was soon questioned, as change was on the horizon.

After the Second World War, serious efforts, spearheaded by Samuel Kramer and Edmond Gordon, were made to collect and better understand Sumerian literature. Since then, the corpus of Sumerian literature has grown significantly, constantly augmented by a flow of editions and studies by Bendt Alster, Miguel Civil, Jacob Klein, Herman Vanstiphout, and the ETCSL team led by Jeremy Black, as well as others.

In addition, the corpus of mostly Akkadian literature found outside of Mesopotamia also substantially expanded, with new discoveries at Ḫattuša, and particularly at Ugarit (published by Nougayrol 1968), and later Emar (published by Arnaud 1985–1987).

In short, Mesopotamian literature vastly expanded in the number of new compositions and in their scope. For lack of a precise generic definition, a multitude of new works, which were difficult to define, differing in struc-

ture as well as in form, themes, style, and language, jumped on the "wisdom literature" bandwagon: Sumerian proverbs, debate poems, school compositions, humorous or satirical works, and others were placed in the category of "wisdom." The strain on Lambert's (as well as others') loose definition of wisdom literature was beginning to be felt. The result, many scholars thought, was a genre that had become so broad that it lost any useful meaning (see George 2007a). In the words of the Assyriologist Niek Veldhuis (2003: 29), wisdom literature had become "a mixed bag."

Perhaps awareness of this problem is what drove Hallo and Younger to choose a new category in which to place wisdom literature with all its new Sumerian and Akkadian compositions. As editors of *The Context of Scripture* (a three-volume book that successfully replaced *ANET* as a modern anthology of ancient Near Eastern texts in English; 1997–2003), they included in the first volume (Canonical Compositions) *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* and The Babylonian Theodicy under the header "Individual Focus" (one of three such categories, the other two being "Divine" and "Royal"). But under the same category as *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* and The Theodicy came proverbs, instructions, disputations, and even Sumerian School Dialogues, which are short humorous works describing life at the scribal school. It seems that Lambert's definition of wisdom literature was simply replaced by another definition even broader than his. Was Hallo and Younger's "Individual Focus" to have any meaning if works as profound as *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*, dealing with the concept of divine retribution, were included under the same category as the Sumerian School Dialogues, which are concerned with students skipping school and lazy pupils not preparing homework?

The all-inclusive approach adopted by *The Context of Scripture* was one alternative. Exclusion of compositions from the genre of wisdom was another. One of the major wisdom compositions I will deal with here is The Ballad of Early Rulers (2.2). In Foster's *Before the Muses* (2005, 3rd edition) it is relegated to a lesser rank. The Ballad, one of the most-widely distributed compositions in the ancient Near East, can boast of a long literary history ranging from the Old Babylonian to the Neo-Assyrian period. And yet it is placed under the nondescript header "Miscellaneous Expressive Compositions," together with The Monkey Man, a rather insignificant spoof of a legal document of no known literary history. (Later, we will see what a distinguished position the Mesopotamians themselves gave to The Ballad of Early Rulers: It was considered to be a part of series of wisdom compositions compiled by a Mesopotamian sage; see 1.5.) Excluded from the genre of wisdom literature, The Ballad of Early Rulers, according to Foster, is considered no more than an "Akkadian drinking song," pushed far away from Lambert's anthology of

texts belonging to "what has been called philosophy." As expected, however, *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*, as well as its "forerunner," The Righteous Sufferer from Ugarit (2.4), and other wisdom compositions are collected in *Before the Muses* under the heading "Wisdom and Experience"; but so are minor wisdom compositions, as well as proverbs retrieved from letters. How do these lesser works fare in comparison to The Ballad of Early Rulers?

In the book *Akkadian Literature of the Late Period* (2007), meant to serve as an annotated guide to the Mesopotamian textual record, Foster located wisdom literature under the general header "Human Experience" and then rather thoughtfully placed one or several compositions in subcategories such as Ancient Wisdom, Human Plight, Fables, Debates, Humorous Stories, Parody and Satire, and so on. The Ballad of Early Rulers, a work surely within the timeframe of Foster's Late period (since it is known from the Late Bronze Age as well as the Neo-Assyrian period), is however not mentioned at all. Was it because this work was already considered trivial in Foster's *Before the Muses*?

All of this is meant neither to offer a critique of Foster's choices (although I disagree with them) nor to defend the place of The Ballad of Early Rulers with the Mesopotamian tradition of wisdom literature (I will do this later in the book). The intention is to demonstrate how genre very much defines our understanding of an ancient text, its meaning, purpose, and importance in Mesopotamian literary history (and see here Longman 1991: 16–19; George 2007a).

As the examples of *The Context of Scripture* and *Before the Muses* demonstrate, genre as a category was breaking down. However, this breakdown was not only caused by too many new compositions that nobody knew what to do with; it was a sign of the times. The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a sustained and prolonged attack intent on the disintegration—or deconstruction if one prefers this term—of canon and genre. Western canon, including the Classics and the Bible, was understood as an oppressive political and social mechanism whose aim was to appropriate, colonize, and marginalize non-Western cultures (among, so to speak, its many other victims). *Wisdom* in Mesopotamian wisdom literature, a loaded term taken from biblical studies, simply became too difficult to employ: Using the term wisdom foreign to ancient Near Eastern categories implies an appropriation of ancient Near Eastern literature and, implicitly, its eventual marginalization in comparison to the biblical canon (and see here the remarks of Annus and Lenzi 2010: xxxv). As discussed, real wisdom was thought to lie within the books of Proverbs, Qohelet, and Job. Was wisdom not after all a misnomer in Lambert's words because only the biblical books contained revealed wisdom? The terms *genre* and even *literature* were now deemed inadequate, imposed by a modern western system

of thought, foreign to the Mesopotamians who themselves had no definitions of such categories. In Andrew George's words (2007a:53), the notion of wisdom literature in ancient Mesopotamia had come under attack.

Some views were reductionist to the extreme, others more moderate. Buccellati (1981) denied outright any identification of a literary genre with wisdom. Vanstiphout (1999a; 1999b), although much informed about Mesopotamian literature, and as a consequence more willing to recognize a Mesopotamian understanding of genre, even if not explicitly defined, nonetheless concluded his evaluation of our genre with the words: "Exit 'Wisdom Literature'" (1999a: 713). In his eyes, there is simply too much of it for "wisdom literature" to have been meaningful to an ancient Mesopotamian scribe, hence, as a category meant to designate a group of texts, it is worthless.

Alster (2005), to conclude this brief survey, was perhaps less harsh, although he too wished to abandon the category of wisdom as genre. Like others, he saw "wisdom literature" as a harmful, outdated, and unusable genre designation. Alster (2005: 25) writes in the conclusion to the introduction of his monograph *The Wisdom of Sumer*:

> It must be admitted that "wisdom" can be regarded as a relic from the early days of oriental scholarship, when the wisdom of Zarathustra had already become a common cliché. "Wisdom," indeed, was one of the literary topics that first aroused interest when Babylonian and Assyrian literature started to become available to scholarship around the turn of the twentieth century. Today, using the designation "wisdom" would make sense only if this is refined and restricted to a much narrower group of texts.

How ironic that Alster critiques the use of the term wisdom in Mesopotamian wisdom literature as something not far removed from orientalism, only to call his own book *The Wisdom of Sumer*, in the same pattern of the topical "*The Wisdom of…*" book title, common, as he points out, in the early days of scholarship.

In the next section (under Key Themes) I consider how Alster, like others, tried to redefine and restrict the corpus of wisdom literature.

APPROACHES

As we have seen, recent scholarship came to regard Mesopotamian wisdom literature as an empty literary category. This was the result of two trends, the first the ever-growing accumulation of different types of works all conveniently dumped under the rubric of wisdom literature, the second the result of postmod-

ern intellectual trends at the end of the twentieth century. Despite, or perhaps as a reaction to, such a hypercritical evaluation, scholars attempted to reconsider the worth of Mesopotamian wisdom literature as a useful independent category of genre from different points of view.

I use three different approaches that I believe can contribute to this study. The first approach examines closely the Mesopotamian view of the literary genre of wisdom; the second reevaluates key themes in wisdom literature; and the third adopts a contextual approach to the study of wisdom literature. I will briefly elaborate on all three because they are the methodological underpinnings upon which this book is based (note however that fuller presentations of the data will be found in the rest of part 1 and throughout the book). As we will see, these approaches do not solve all the problems I have identified. At best, they allow a renewed appreciation of wisdom literature and point out the significance of key themes or intellectual trends found in wisdom compositions and additional Mesopotamian literature.

THE MESOPOTAMIAN VIEW OF WISDOM LITERATURE

Many scholars writing on Mesopotamian literature and specifically contending with Mesopotamian wisdom literature face a rather frustrating situation. Outside of technical genres such as omens or incantations, and other than performative designations, such as *song*, *lament*, Mesopotamian literature lacks explicit native categories of genre. The result is first and foremost an absence of a defined or regulated canon of compositions, as Lambert was already aware. However, we are not totally in the dark regarding the Mesopotamians' understanding of genre, including wisdom literature. As will be discussed in greater detail here and throughout this study there are a few clues that permit us to gather indirectly how wisdom literature was understood by its ancient students and compilers.

Recent scholarship has looked carefully at the way Old Babylonian student exercises were compiled. It was seen that they consisted of a few consecutive texts, which arguably were studied one after the other. When individual wisdom compositions are found together in such a way on *Sammeltafeln* or collective or compilation tablets, it can be implied that some connection (thematic or other) was understood to exist between them.

Another group of texts that has been under the spotlight recently are the so-called Old Babylonian library catalogues. Regardless of the various opinions about their exact function, the catalogues provide us with groupings of various texts. Sometimes, the reasoning for grouping particular texts together

escapes us, but it is clear that when wisdom compositions are arranged thus, some type of connection is to be assumed between them. With all due reservations, it can be argued that the connection is one of genre, even if not explicitly defined as such by the ancient compilers.

A more explicit definition of wisdom literature can be reconstructed from loose strings of related data, such as catalogues, commentaries, and other learned texts, mostly dated to the Kassite or post-Kassite period. By piecing this information together, it can be demonstrated that wisdom literature as such was understood by Mesopotamian scholars to be a select corpus (like other textual corpora such as omens). This corpus transmitted a written legacy that was valuable because of its antiquity. It was considered to have been compiled or composed by learned figures of old, who were associated with famous kings. More will be said at the close of 1.5 about the importance of these sources for appreciating the Mesopotamian definition, or at least the understanding of, wisdom literature.

KEY THEMES

A major contribution of Alster's *The Wisdom of Sumer* (2005) to the questions discussed here is his identification and elucidation of two basic key themes, which bring about a sharpened appreciation of a particular group of wisdom compositions. Alster studies a group of wisdom compositions (comprising the bulk but not all of his book), which he divides into two categories: a traditional or conservative outlook and a critical approach. In the steps of the biblical scholar Michael Fox, one can term these categories as *positive* wisdom and *negative* wisdom. Fox (2011) uses these terms to define wisdom in two of the biblical wisdom books, namely, Proverbs (positive) and Qohelet (negative).

Positive, or traditional, wisdom offers a model for attaining success in life, either material or ethical. The preservation of one's wealth, marrying properly, behaving adequately in the company of others, acting with fairness will provide one with a good and fulfilled life. This view is articulated in some Sumerian proverbs found in the Sumerian Proverb Collection (Alster 1997), and notably in The Instructions of Šuruppak, a wisdom composition already known from mid-third millennium manuscripts but mainly reconstructed on the basis of Old Babylonian sources (Alster 2005). There, father instructs son on how to achieve a proper life.

This kind of wisdom is also seen in our collection. In the first part of *Šimâ Milka* (2.1), the sage Šūpê-awīli offers this kind of practical or positive wisdom to his son, telling him for example, how to behave in a tavern, whom to marry, and where to avoid digging a well in order to ensure the success of one's field.

Similar attitudes inform the collection of proverbs from Ḫattuša (2.6) and the Akkadian-Hurrian proverb extract (2.7). Many of the proverbs found in letters (2.8) also convey positive instructions, hence they share the same attitude in regards to wisdom.

The reversal of this key theme is negative wisdom, or to use Alster's definition, a critical approach. It expresses two intertwined notions: 1) nothing is of value, hence 2) enjoy life while you can before eternal death. These ideas are reflected in several short Old Babylonian Sumerian compositions beginning with the lines "Nothing is of value, but life itself should be sweet-tasting." The first sentence is defined by Alster as the vanity theme and the second the *carpe diem* theme.

In the Late Bronze Age collection of wisdom compositions, we find negative wisdom in The Ballad of Early Rulers (2.2) and Enlil and Namzitarra (2.3), and again in *Šimâ Milka* through its second part—the son's response to his father. The son tells his father that instructions such as his (i.e., positive wisdom) are worthless because life is short and beyond it there is only death. Worth pointing out in relation to our discussion about genre is that both key themes are found in the same text, *Šimâ Milka*. Their presence shows that the Mesopotamian scribe who wrote this piece consciously recognized the two distinct wisdom traditions. Ingeniously he combined them both in one single composition. This is certainly something important to think about when coming to evaluate the Mesopotamian sensitivity to genre or literary type even when not openly declared.

As Alster clearly demonstrated, both positive and negative key themes are common to many literary works. The positive key theme finds expression, as seen, already in the very first wisdom literature available—the mid-third millennium manuscripts of The Instructions of Šuruppak. The negative key theme or critical approach also boasts of a long history, beginning in the Old Babylonian period.

Wherein lie the origins of the critical perspective in wisdom compositions? It is not necessary to assume that this critical view arose as a result of a particular social or political event. It simply may be looked upon as part of a literary trope that began to be articulated more and more forcefully from the Old Babylonian period onwards, as part of an intellectual trend that had come to reflect on the limits of mortal life as opposed to the gods' eternal life. Such a trend is seen in a variety of epic stories about mortals that end in disaster, failure, or irresolution (see the observant remarks of George 2007a: 50). In wisdom compositions, this intellectual trend finds its articulation in the vanity theme, which is always expressed by mortals and not divine beings. How could the immortals ever understand death?

The tension between positive wisdom or traditional values and negative wisdom or critical values existed not only within the domain of wisdom compositions such as The Ballad of Early Rulers or *Šimâ Milka*. It can also be recognized, for example, in The Epic of Gilgameš, which underwent a development from a story concerned with a hero's glorification to one reflecting on the futility of life. According to George (2007a: 54; 2003: 32–33), it was the achievement of Sin-lēqi-unninni (traditionally considered as the author of the Standard Babylonian version of the epic) to reinforce the pessimistic tone in the epic, following the literary fashion of the day, as seen in the Kassite and post-Kassite pessimistic or critical poems. The vanity theme, however, was already present in the Old Babylonian versions of the epic. Here it is expressed by Gilgameš who encourages Enkidu to do battle with Huwawa:

> *mannu ibrī elû šam[ā'ī]*
> *ilūma itti šamšim dāriš uš[bū]*
> *awīlūtumma manûma ūmūša*
> *mimma ša īteneppušu šāruma*

> Who, my friend, is the one to go to the sky?
> Only the gods dwell forever in the sunlight.
> As for mankind—its days are numbered.
> Whatever it will chose to do—it is but the wind.
> > (The Epic of Gilgameš, Yale Tablet, col. iv, ll. 140–143; George 2003: 200–201)

Contextualizing Wisdom Literature

Adopting a contextual approach to the study of wisdom literature demands that the search for an all-inclusive or precise definition of wisdom literature be put aside while wider issues concerned with the historical, social, and intellectual background of these compositions are brought to the fore. A temporary position may consciously be adopted, such as viewing wisdom literature as *philosophical* (George 2007a, following Lambert), *existential*, or *intellectual* (so Alster 2005). This study prefers to avoid such loaded terms and recommends (following Beaulieu 2007) an intuitive understanding of wisdom literature based on common humanistic traditions; this will suffice to allow readers to recognize elements current in ancient Near Eastern literature that mark out certain compositions as wisdom literature, even if on a provisional basis.

A contextual approach, although not defined as such at the time, was at the heart of Lambert's introduction to *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. Surely a source of disappointment for many, the introduction refrained from speaking at all about formal characteristics of Babylonian wisdom literature but moved on to discuss in a somewhat general way the development of thought and literature in ancient Mesopotamia. The introduction, apart from the opening section (which we have discussed above), is rather ignored nowadays because it is long outdated, its historical and social observations questioned if not dismissed. However, what is worth noticing is Lambert's attempt to speak of the social and political contexts out of which the texts he studied emerged.

An updated social and partly political approach, inevitably more sophisticated and subtle, is undertaken also by Beaulieu (2007). Taking for granted the existence of the genre of wisdom literature, he moves on to examine its intellectual milieu (especially in the Kassite and post-Kassite periods). He discusses the growing role of the professional exorcist, who becomes involved as a protagonist in wisdom compositions and whose own area of expertise in composing prayers or incantations comes to be reflected in wisdom compositions (see 2.4). He demonstrates the connections sought by these professional scholars between wisdom, Mesopotamian kingship, and the learned world of sages from before the flood. This was the outcome of an intellectual movement that sought to grant to scholars more standing in the sociopolitical world of their times, thus granting them a superior status. As Beaulieu concludes, wisdom literature was one particular form of scholarly expression, relatively minor amongst others of much greater importance (chiefly omens and rituals), but all relating to a broader theological purpose, that is, understanding the will of the gods so that the king's fate be divulged.

Beaulieu refrains from generic definitions but understands that especially after the Old Babylonian period wisdom literature was a form of expression within a larger system of thought. I have spoken above of some of such intellectual trends and am tempted to see a connection between the development of the critical or negative wisdom on the one hand and the rise of scholars to prominence in court on the other, as has been suggested repeatedly in the scholarly literature, but this is a topic beyond the purposes of our study.

Another, somewhat similar, contextual approach, although narrower and more focused in its investigation, has been advocated by Niek Veldhuis (2004). He suggests that Mesopotamian literature (and for that matter wisdom literature) should be viewed from a social-functional approach, which looks at literature from the "perspective of the institutional context in which literary texts were produced and consumed" (2004: 43). Hence, wisdom literature should be seen in the context of additional compositions that then should all

be assessed with respect to where, by whom, and for what purposes they were produced, copied, and studied. Naturally Veldhuis was thinking about the Old Babylonian scribal school, students and teachers included, as the setting in which this comprehensive investigation is to be conducted. We have to shift however to another timeframe and geographical area, for the focus here is wisdom compositions of the Late Bronze Age. With all due limitations of the data, as will be seen, I will try to form questions similar to those put forward by Veldhuis.

The rest of my introduction will be devoted to examining in greater detail the historical and social contexts of Late Bronze Age wisdom compositions (1.3). I will then proceed to discuss the archaeological and archival contexts (1.4), and finally the curricular context of Late Bronze Age wisdom literature, namely, how it was used in schooling environments and for what educational purpose (1.5). In doing so, I will apply some of the approaches I have introduced here for the study of wisdom literature.

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The understanding of what is wisdom literature has gone through many twists and turns since Lambert's canonical *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. The influx of new compositions, Akkadian as well as Sumerian, challenged Lambert's loose definition, stretching the limits of the genre beyond what the label could bear. The result as we saw was almost a complete rejection of *wisdom* from Mesopotamian wisdom literature. But the stream of new compositions also brought about a renewed interest in the genre, especially with the publication of Akkadian wisdom literature from Ugarit and Emar. All these works have greatly expanded our view of ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature and with it, biblical wisdom. Let us just look briefly at two significant examples from the Late Bronze Age.

Šimâ Milka fills in a gap in the father-to-son instructions tradition which stretchs from The Instructions of Šuruppak to The Sayings of Ahiqar (although properly speaking the latter is an uncle-to-nephew instruction) and even Proverbs (e.g., 23:19). And The Ballad of Early Rulers highlights the continuity of the vanity theme from its rise in the Old Babylonian period to its fullest expression in the great pessimistic works of the late Kassite or Isin II period, later to become fully developed in The Dialogue of Pessimism (Lambert 1995). The relationship of these works to biblical wisdom has long been noted.

In his return to the subject of wisdom literature many years after the publication of *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* Lambert (1995) again made no direct attempt at defining Mesopotamian wisdom. According to his article's title "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature," in a volume dedicated to wisdom

in ancient Israel, he seems to have been satisfied with the genre he himself did much to establish and define. One may also claim that Lambert felt more at ease to offer a place of honor for Babylonian wisdom literature side by side with biblical wisdom literature, without any qualms or disclaimers. After all, to paraphrase Lambert (41), Qohelet was only presenting in an Israelite garb the old old Mesopotamian vanity theme found in The Ballad of Early Rulers and other works. In this respect, is *wisdom* in Mesopotamian wisdom literature indeed a misnomer? I leave it for the reader of this book to decide.