

The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer

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“The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer,” also known by its first line (*Ludlul-Bel-Nimeqi*, “I will praise the Lord of Wisdom”) is a Babylonian poem dating to ca. 1700 BCE describing the plight of a faithful man who is beset with suffering. (Similar themes were later treated in the Book of Job, which was written about a thousand years after this work.) In the poem, Tabu-utul-Bel, age 52, an official of the southern Mesopotamian city of Nippur, laments his various pains and injustices and, asserting his own righteous behavior, asks why the gods should allow him to suffer so. There is some evidence the poem is based on earlier Sumerian works dating to ca. 2000 BCE.

People in ancient Mesopotamia lived in a world with hundreds of gods at work, all doing different things that might or might not have anything to do with mortals. One upshot of this is what one god is trying to accomplish might be thwarted, randomly or deliberately, by any number of other gods. Thus even when Marduk intends good for a faithful or honorable man, other gods can get in the way. Tabu-utul-Bel would have been aware of this, but complains nonetheless that his suffering is unjust.

Eventually Tabu-utul-Bel’s afflictions are assuaged by a necromancer whom Marduk sends to him, and Marduk is duly credited. The problem of suffering is dealt with through a god, one of many, working through an intermediary to deliver justice.

- Source: “The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer” (ca. 1700 BCE). Translation: Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: Myths, tales and poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bathesda: CDL Press, 1995).

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TABLET I

I will praise the lord of Wisdom, solicitous god,
Furious in the night, calming in the daylight;
Marduk! lord of wisdom, solicitous god,
Furious in the night, claiming in the daylight;
Whose anger engulfs like a tempest, 5
Whose breeze is sweet as the breath of morn
In his fury not to be withstood, his rage the deluge,
Merciful in his feelings, his emotions relenting.

The skies cannot sustain the weight of his hand,
His gentle palm rescues the moribund. 10
Marduk! The skies cannot sustain the weight of his hand,
His gentle palm rescues the moribund.

When he is angry, graves are dug,
His mercy raised the fallen from disaster.
When he glowers, protective spirits take flight, 15
He has regard for and turns to the one whose god has forsaken him.

Harsh are his punishments, he. . . in battles (?)
When moved to mercy, he quickly feels pain like a mother in labor.

He is bull-headed in love of mercy
 Like a cow with a calf, he keeps turning around watchfully. 20

His scourge is barbed and punctures the body,
 His bandages are soothing, they heal the doomed.
 He speaks and makes one incur many sins,
 On the day of his justice sin and guilt are dispelled.

He is the one who makes shivering and trembling, 25
 Through his sacral spell chills and shivering are relieved.
 Who raises the flood of Adad, the blow of Erra,
 Who reconciles the wrathful god and goddess
 The Lord divines the gods' inmost thoughts
 But no god understand his behavior, 30
 Marduk divines the gods' inmost thoughts
 But no god understand his behavior!

As heavy his hand, so compassionate his heart
 As brutal his weapons, no life-sustaining his feelings,
 Without his consent, who could cure his blow? 35

Against his will, who could sin and escape?
 I will proclaim his anger, which runs deep, like a fish,
 He punished me abruptly, then granted life
 I will teach the people, I will instruct the land to fear
 To be mindful of him is propitious for 40

After the Lord changed day into night
 And the warrior Marduk became furious with me,
 My own god threw me over and disappeared,
 My goddess broke rank and vanished
 He cut off the benevolent angel who walked beside me 45
 My protecting spirit was frightened off, to seek out someone else
 My vigor was taken away, my manly appearance became gloomy,
 My dignity flew off, my cover leaped away.

Terrifying signs beset me
 I was forced out of my house, I wandered outside, 50
 My omens were confused, they were abnormal every day,
 The prognostication of diviner and dream interpreter could not explain what I was undergoing.

What was said in the street portended ill for me,
 When I lay down at nights, my dream was terrifying
 The king, incarnation of the gods, sun of his people 55
 His heart was enraged with me and appeasing him was impossible
 Courtiers were plotting hostile against me,
 They gathered themselves to instigate base deeds:
 If the first !I will make him end his life"

Says the second "I ousted him from his command"	60
So likewise the third "I will get my hands on his post!"	
"I will force his house!" vows the fourth	
As the fifth pants to speak	
Sixth and seventh follow in his train!" (literally in his protective spirit)	
The clique of seven have massed their forces,	65
Merciless as fiends, equal to demons.	
So one is their body, united in purpose,	
Their hearts fulminate against me, ablaze like fire.	
Slander and lies they try to lend credence against me	
My mouth once proud was muzzled like a . . .	70
My lips, which used to discourse, became those of a dead man.	
My resounding call struck dumb,	
My proud head bent earthward,	
My stout heart turned feeble for terror,	
My broad breast brushed aside by a novice,	75
My far-reaching arms pinned down by flimsy matting,	
I, who walked proudly, learned slinking,	
I, so grand, became servile,	
To my vast family, I became a loner,	
As I went through the streets, ears were pricked up at me,	80
I would enter the palace, eyes would squint at me,	
My city was glowering at me like an enemy,	
Belligerent and hostile would seem my land!	
My brother became my foe,	
My friend became a malignant demon,	85
My comrade would denounce me savagely,	
My colleague was constantly keeping the taint to his weapons,	
My best friend would pinch off my life.	
My slave cursed me openly in the assembly of gentlefolk	
My slave girl defamed me before the rabble.	90
An acquaintance would see me and make himself scarce,	
My family disowned me,	
A pit awaited anyone speaking well of me,	
While he who was uttering defamation of me forged ahead.	
One who relayed base things about me had a god for his help	95
For the one who said, "What a pity about him!" death came early,	
The one of no help, his life became charmed,	
I had no one to go at my side, nor saw I a champion.	
They parceled my possessions among the riffraff,	
The sources of my watercourses they blocked with muck,	100
They chased the harvest song from my fields,	

They left my community deathly still, like that of a ravaged foe.
They let another assume my duties,
They appointed an outsider to my prerogatives.

By day sighing, by night lamentation, 105
Monthly, trepidation, despair the year,
I moaned like a dove all my days,
I let out groans as my song,
My eyes are forced to look through constant crying,
My eyelids are smarting through of tears. 110

My face is darkened from the apprehensions of my heart,
Terror and pain have jaundiced my face.
The . . . of my heart is quaking in ceaseless apprehension.
. . . . like a burning fire,
Like the bursting of a flame falsehood beset me, 115
. . . . lamentation, my imploring!
The speech of lips was senseless, like a moron's,
When I tried to talk, my conversation was gibberish.
I watch, that in daylight good will come upon me!
The moon will change, the sun will shine! 120

TABLET II

One whole year to the next! The normal time passed.
As I turned around, it was more and more terrible,
My ill luck was on the increase, I could find no good fortune.
I called to my god, he did not show his face,
I prayed to my goddess; she did not raise her head. 5

The diviner with his inspection did not get the bottom of it,
Nor did the dream interpreter with his incense clear up my case
I beseeched a dream spirit, but it did not enlighten me,
The exorcist with his ritual did not appease divine wrath.

What bizarre actions everywhere! 10
I looked behind: persecution, harassment!
Like one who had not made libations to his god,
Nor invoked his goddess with a food offering,
Who was not wont to prostrate, nor seen to bow down,
From whose mouth supplication and prayer were wanting, 15
Who skipped holy days, despised festivals,
Who was neglectful, omitted the gods' rites,
Who had not taught his people reverence and worship,
Who did not invoke his god, but ate his food offering,
Who snubbed his goddess, brought her no flour offering, 20
Like one possessed, who forgot his lord,
Who casually swore a solemn oath by his god; I indeed seemed such a one!

I, for my part, was mindful of supplication and prayer,
Prayer to me was the natural recourse, sacrifice my rule.

The day for reverencing the gods was a source of satisfaction to me, 25
The goddess's procession day was my profit and return.
Praying for the king, that was my joy,
His sennet was if for my own good omen.

I instructed my land to observe the god's rites,
The goddess's name did I drill my people to esteem 30
I made my praises of the king like a god's,
And taught the populace reverence for the palace.

I wish I knew that these things were pleasing to a god!
What seems good to one's self could be an offence to a god,
What in one's own heart seems abominable, could be good to one's god! 35
Who could learn the reasoning of the gods in heaven?
Who could grasp the intentions of the gods of the depths?
Where might human beings have learned the ways of a god?
He who lived by his brawn died in confinement.

Suddenly one is downcast, in a trice full of cheer, 40
One moment he sings in exaltation,
In a trice he groans like a professional mourner.

People's motivations change in a twinkling!
Starving, they become like corpses,
Full, they would rival their gods. 45

In good times, they speak of scaling heaven,
When it goes badly, they complain of going down to hell.
I have pondered these things; I have made no sense of them.

But as for me, in despair a whirlwind is driving me!
Debilitating disease is let loose upon me:] 50
An evil vapor has blown against me from the ends of the earth,
Head pain has surged upon me from the breast of hell,
A malignant specter has come forth from its hidden depth,
A relentless ghost came out of its dwelling place.

A she-demon came down from the mountain, 55
Ague set forth with the flood and sea,
Debility broke through the ground with the plants.

They assembled their host, together they came upon me:
They struck my head, they closed around my pate,
My features were gloomy, my eyes ran a flood, 60
They wrenched my muscles, made my neck limp,
They thwacked my chest, pounded my breast,
They affected my flesh, threw me into convulsion,

They kindled a fire in my epigastrium,
 They churned up my bowels, they twisted my entrails 65

Coughing and hacking infected my lungs,
 They infected my limbs, made my flesh pasty,
 My lofty stature they toppled like a wall,
 My robust figure they flattened like a bulrush,
 I was dropped like a dried fig; I was tossed on my face. 70

A demon has clothed himself in my body for a garment,
 Drowsiness smothers me like a net,
 My eyes stare, they cannot see,
 My ears prick up, they cannot hear.

Numbness has spread over my whole body, 75
 Paralysis has fallen upon my flesh.
 Stiffness has seized my arms,
 Debility has fallen upon my loins,
 My feet forgot how to move.

A stroke has overcome me; I choke like one fallen 80
 Signs of death have shrouded my face!
 If someone thinks of me, I can't respond to the enquirer,
 "Alas" they weep, I have lost consciousness,
 A snare is laid on my mouth,
 And a bolt bars my lips, 85
 My way in is barred, my point of slaking blocked,
 My hunger is chronic, my gullet constricted.

If it be of grain, I choke it down like stinkweed,
 Beer, the sustenance of mankind, is sickening to me.

Indeed, the malady drags on! 90
 For lack of food my features are unrecognizable,
 My flesh is waste, my blood has run dry,
 My bones are loose, covered only with skin,
 My tissues are inflamed, afflicted with gangrene.

I took to bed, confined, going out was exhaustion, 95
 My house turned into my prison.
 My flesh was a shackle, my arms being useless,
 My person was a fetter, my feet having given way.

My afflictions were grievous; the blow was severe!
 A scourge full of barbs thrashed me, 100
 A crop lacerated me, cruel with thorns,
 All day long tormentor would torment me,
 Nor a night would he let me breathe freely a moment
 From writhing, my joints were separated,
 My limbs were splayed and thrust apart. 105

I spent the night in my dung like an ox,
I wallowed in my excrement like a sheep.
The exorcist recoiled from my symptoms,
While my omens have perplexed the diviner.

The exorcist did not clarify the nature of my complaint, 110
While the diviner put no time limit on my illness.
No god came to the rescue, nor lent me a hand,
No goddess took pity on me, nor went at my side.

My grave was open, my funerary gods ready,
Before I had died, lamentation for me was done. 115

All my country said, "How wretched he was!"
When my ill-wisher heard, his face lit up,
When the tidings reached her, my ill-wisher, her mood became radiant,
The day grew dim for my whole family
For those who knew me, their sun grew dark.120

TABLET III

Heavy was his hand upon me, I could not hear it!
Dread of him was oppressive, it me.
His fierce punishment. . . . the deluge,
His stride was. . . , it. . . .

Harsh, severe illness does not. . . . my person, 5
I lost sight of alertness, make my mind stray,
I groan day and night alike,
Dreaming and waking I am equally wretched.

A remarkable young man of extraordinary physique,
Magnificent in body, clothed in new garments, 10
Because I was only half awake, his features lacked form.

He was clad in splendor, robed in dread -
He came in upon me, he stood over me,
When I saw him my flesh grew numb.

[] "The Lady has sent me, 15
" []".
[] I tried to tell my people
"[] sent [] for me".

They were silent and did not speak,
They heard me in silence and did not answer. 20

A second time I saw a dream
In the dream I saw at night
A remarkable purifier []
Holding in his hand a tamarisk rod of purification.

“Laluralimma , resident of Nippur,
Has sent me to cleanse you”.
He was carrying water, he poured it over me,
He pronounced the resuscitating incantation; he massaged my body.

A third time I saw a dream,
In my dream I saw at night:
A remarkable young woman in shining countenance,
Clothed like a person, being like a god,
A queen among peoples []
She entered upon me and sat down. . . .

She ordered my deliverance [] 35
 “Fear not” She said, “I will. ,
 “Whatever one sees of a dream.”

She ordered my deliverance, “Most wretched indeed is he,
“Whoever he might be,. . . the one who saw the vision at night”
In the dream was Ur-Nintinugga, a Babylonian. . .
A bearded young man wearing a tiara,
He was an exorcist, carrying a tablet,
“Marduk has sent me!

“To Shubshi-meshre-Sakkan [the sufferer] I have brought swathe,
 “From his pure hands I have brought a swathe”.
 He has entrusted me into the hands of my ministrant.

In waking hours he sent a message,
He revealed his favorable sign to my people.

I was awake in my sickness, a healing serpent slithered by
My illness was quickly over, my fetters were broken
After my lord's heart had quieted,
And the feelings of merciful Marduk were appeased,
And he had accepted my prayers,
His sweet relenting

He ordered my deliverance:" He is greatly tried"	55
.... to extol...	
.... to worship and	
.... my guilt.	
.... my iniquity....	
.... my transgression....	60

He made the wind hear away my offenses

[The exact placement of the following lines is unknown]

He applied to me his spell which binds debilitating disease
He drove back the evil vapor to the ends of the earth,
He bore off the head pain to the breast of hell,
He sent down the malignant specter to its hidden depth,

The relentless ghost he returned to its dwelling 5
 He overthrew the she-demon, sending her off to a mountain,
 He replaced the ague in flood and sea.

He eradicated debility like a plant,
 Uneasy sleep, excessive drowsiness,
 He dissipated like smoke filling the sky. 10
 The turning towards people with "Woe!" and "Alas!" he drove away like a cloud, earth. . . .

The tenacious disease in the head, which was heavy as a millstone,
 He raised like dew of night; he removed it from me.
 My beclouded eyes, which were wrapped in the shroud of death,
 He drove the cloud a thousand leagues away; he brightened my vision. 15

My ears, which were stopped and clogged like a deaf man's,
 He removed their blockage; he opened my hearing.
 My nose, whose breathing was choked by symptoms of fever,
 He soothed its affliction so I could breathe freely.

My babbling lips, which had taken on a hard crust, 20
 He wiped away their distress and undid their deformation.
 My mouth, which was muffled, so that proper speech was difficult,
 He scoured like copper and removed its filth.

My teeth, which were clenched and locked together firmly,
 He opened their fastening, freed the jaws. 25
 My tongue, which was tied and could not converse,
 He wiped off its coating and its speech became fluent.

My windpipe, which was tight and choking, as though on a gobbet,
 He made well and let it sing its songs like a flute.
 My gullet, which was swollen so it could not take food, 30
 Its swelling went down and he opened its blockage
 My . . . which . . .
 . . . above . . .
 . . . which was darkened like
[three damaged lines, then gap]