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**Mesopotamian  
Merchants  
and Their Ethos**

Any group of didactic sayings concerning merchants is unique and requires a special treatment. Bureaucrats, with whom the wisdom literature is usually associated, show a fairly uniform ethos, whenever and wherever they have appeared.<sup>1</sup> But the ethos of merchants varies greatly according to their social position and the nature of their activity. What follows is an attempt to find a group of merchants who seem most likely to have been responsible for the emergence of such ethical teachings as are found in the didactic section of the great Shamash hymn.

More than thirty lines of the hymn<sup>2</sup> are directly related to the merchants of ancient Mesopotamia. There are at least three themes in these lines. The first is the protection by Shamash of the professional traveler (allaku), the sea-farer (ēbir tām̄ti), and the [šamall]û-merchant, who carries capital ([šamall]û nāš kīsi) (lines 65-70).<sup>3</sup> Mention may also be made of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Max Weber, Economy and Society, Vol. II (New York, 1968), p.477.

<sup>2</sup> For the latest edition of the text, see W.G. Lambert, BWL, pp. 121ff. Various translations of the text are listed in the end of the Appendix.

<sup>3</sup> Although Lambert restores the beginning of l. 69 as L[Ū DAM. GÀ]R, L[ŪŠAMÁN. LÁ] seems to be better fit to the following na-aš ki-si. Cf. LŪDAM.GAR al-la-ka LŪŠAMÁN. LÁ (šamallû) na-aš kīsi in l. 139 of the same hymn. šamallû, literally "carrier of the bag" (W.W. Hallo, "A Merchantile Agreement from the Reign of Gungunum of Larsa," Landsberger Festschrift, AS 16 [Chicago, 1965], p.199, note 5a), is translated variously as "agent," "helper," or

lines 138-139 which concern the traveling merchant (tamkāru allaku) and, again, the šamallû-merchant. The reference is clearly to merchants engaged in foreign trade by land or by sea. The second theme concerns investment (lines 103-106). The third is the use of double standards of measurement. The wicked merchant is said to suffer from untimely death and loss of his possessions and estate, while the honest merchant is promised a long life, a large family, great wealth, and everlasting continuation of his posterity (lines 107-121). The second and third themes constitute most of the didactic section of the great Shamash hymn.<sup>4</sup>

A few remarks must be made about the make up of the hymn as a whole and the didactic section (lines 99-121/2) in particular. First, despite occasional triplets and odd lines, the couplet is the most common grouping of the lines.<sup>5</sup> There does not seem to be a strict topical arrangement. We also note that similar themes are repeated, though not in the same words, as in the first theme mentioned above. Secondly, Lambert notes three possibilities which could account for the composition of the text: (1) a late reworking of an early text; (2) an original composition based on early materials; and (3) an expanded composition of an early kernel.<sup>6</sup> Any of these possibilities presupposes two or more stages of the process of composition of the hymn. This is clearly shown not only by the incongruent presence of a didactic section in the hymn but also by a very awkward transition from the hymnic section to that didactic section. For instance, lines 97-102 are consciously arranged according to the topic, but stylistically speaking, lines 97-98 are hymnic, unlike

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"retailer," but the exact meaning is not clear. Cf. W.F. Leemans, Merchant, pp. 22-35. The dispatching of a šamallû by a tamkārūm is connected with "a form of trade peculiar to large scale business" and is found only rarely in the time of Hammurabi and after (ibid., p. 125);

<sup>4</sup> Bohl has noted the difference in style between the section on merchants and the rest of the hymn and concluded that it was borrowed from a wisdom text (JEOL 8[1942], p. 673, as mentioned in Lambert, BWL, p. 123). Although we have reservations with regard to Bohl's final conclusion, we nevertheless think that his general argument is correct.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lambert, BWL, pp. 121f.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

lines 99-102 which are didactic. The refrain (line 100), tābi eli Šamaš balāta uttar, "It is pleasing to Shamash, and he (the judge) will prolong (his) life" (//lines 106 and 119) suggests that at least lines 99-100 were taken from a group, if not a collection, of didactic sayings which had existed prior to the composition of the present Shamash hymn.

Thirdly, two groups of didactic sayings, both of which greatly concerned the merchant class, existed side by side. At any rate another refrain, uštakazzab ana nēmelīma uḫallaq kīsa, "He will be disappointed about profit and will lose (his) capital" (lines 104-109), clearly shows that there had been a group of sayings concerning merchants. It should be added that these two refrains appear only in this didactic section and nowhere else in the hymn.

The didactic section of the Shamash hymn is not a totally isolated piece of evidence of the high ethical standards of the merchant class in Mesopotamia. In 1938, Oppenheim pointed out an important ethical concept embodied in a special usage of the terms awīlum (gentleman), lā awīlum (non-gentleman) and awīlūtum (gentlemanship).<sup>7</sup> Later he drew attention to occurrences of the same usage of the terms in the texts published in UET 5.<sup>8</sup> This usage of awīlum, lā awīlum, and awīlūtum is found almost exclusively in reference to merchants. Attention should further be drawn to the fact that these words are used for this concept more than twenty times in the Cappadocian tablets, and occasionally in reference to merchants of Ur engaged in foreign trade during the Larsa period. They rarely appear elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> This indicates that Assyrian merchants and merchants of

<sup>7</sup> Oppenheim, "Review of J. Lewy, Tablettes Cappadociennes, TCL 19 (Paris, 1935)," Or. NS 7 (1938), p. 133.

<sup>8</sup> Oppenheim, "The Seafaring Merchants of Ur," JAOS 74 (1954), pp. 12f.

<sup>9</sup> CAD, A<sup>2</sup>, pp. 55, 56a, 57, 62. A glance at the pages of CAD under amīlu and amīlūtu gives some idea about the wide range of the meaning of the words. awīlum and awīlūtum in the usage we are concerned with mean more specifically a member of the merchant class and his obligation or share in a common responsibility of a member of the kārum of awīlum-status (cf. CAD, A<sup>2</sup>, p. 55a). It is regrettable that this special usage of awīlum and awīlūtum is not mentioned under the heading, "Ethische Begriffe" in H. Hirsch, Altass. Rel., p. 74.

Ur were almost unique in the history of trade in Mesopotamia.

In a letter to Ea-nasir, a famous Telmun merchant, the merchant Nanni complains about the apparent dishonesty of Ea-nasir for not having honored his promise to send fine quality copper ingots as well as about his contemptuous attitude to Nanni.

What do you take me for, that you treat somebody like me with such contempt? I have sent as messengers gentlemen [mārī awīlī] like ourselves to collect the bag with my money (deposited with you) but you have treated me with contempt by sending them back to me empty-handed several times, and that through enemy territory. Is there anyone among the merchants who trade with Telmun who had treated me in this way? You alone treat my messenger with contempt!<sup>10</sup>

In another Old Babylonian letter, Ili-Atanah reprimands Apilum and Hattarum:

Is the thing you have done to me appropriate for a member of the class of gentlemen (ša mār awīlī)?... What you have done to me is such as one has never experienced from another.<sup>11</sup>

Pertinent to our discussion is an Old Assyrian letter which has been translated by Oppenheim in his Letters from Mesopotamia. Here business disputes were apparently considered to be better solved among the parties themselves without calling in the outside authority, unless it became inevitable. (We are also amazed at the long suffering of Silla-Labbum and Elani.)

A message from Silla-Labbum and Elani: Tell Puzur-Assur, Amua, and Assur-Samsi:

Thirty years ago you left the city of Assur. You have never made a deposit since, and we have never made you feel bad about this.... Please, do come back right away; should you be too busy with your business, deposit the silver for us.

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<sup>10</sup> UET 5 81, quoted from Oppenheim, Letters from Mesopotamia (Chicago, 1967), p. 82. The letter has also been translated by W.F. Leemans in Trade, pp. 39-40.

<sup>11</sup> CT 29 8a. Transliteration and translation are found in R. Frankena, Briefe aus dem British Museum (Altbabylonische Briefe) II (Leiden, 1966), pp. 88-89.

(Remember) we have never made you feel bad about this matter but we are now forced to appear, in your eyes, acting as gentlemen should not [atta ana lā awīlī ina ēnīka šaknāni]. Please, do come back right away or deposit the silver for us.

If not, we will send you a notice from the local ruler and the police, and thus put you to shame in the assembly of the merchants. You will also cease to be one of us.<sup>12</sup>

We can add a few more indications from some other Old Assyrian letters of the way a gentleman was expected to behave. In one letter, it is said that one should know how to behave with respect (palāham lū īdi), he should not look greedily on food and beer (ana aklim u šikārim lā idagqal), he should be a gentleman (lū awīl).<sup>13</sup> In another letter, a gentleman is said to be expected to heed the instructions of his boss (abīka).<sup>14</sup> In yet another letter, it is said that a gentleman should stop being angry (libbi awilim linuḥ).<sup>15</sup>

What were the conditions that enabled the merchants to develop such high ethical standards as described above? The fact that the didactic exhortations are found in a Shamash hymn seems to point out at least one such condition.

Shamash was greatly respected not only as the patron deity of justice, but also as that of diviners and people of professions which involved a great deal of danger and risk.<sup>16</sup> The merchants were not the least significant group among them.

Written on very small clay tablets, their business letters required the simplest format and the greatest economy of words. Although in many cases the message followed immediately the names of addressee and addressor, not infrequently the names of addressee and addressor were followed by the blessings, Šamaš liballiṭka (May Shamash keep you in good health!) or Šamaš u DN liballiṭka (May Shamash and DN keep you in good health!). Whoever the second deity might have been, the first deity seems almost always to have been

<sup>12</sup> TCL 19 1, quoted from Oppenheim, Letters from Mesopotamia, pp. 76-77.

<sup>13</sup> CCT 4 28a:33.

<sup>14</sup> KTS 1b:11.

<sup>15</sup> CCT 4 18b:14; all these references are found in CAD (see note 8).

<sup>16</sup> For example, the great Shamash hymn, ll. 140-155 in BWL, p. 134.



Shamash in the business letters of the Old Babylonian period.<sup>17</sup> We also know that in the Old Babylonian period, business accounts were usually settled in the temple of Shamash,<sup>18</sup> although in some cases they were settled at the kārum.<sup>19</sup> It may be added that a close relationship between the merchants and Shamash goes back even to the pre-Sargonic period. This is shown by a Neo-Babylonian copy of a dedication to Shamash by "[PN] the Marian, the merchant (DAM.GAR), son of Iddi'-il the scribe (DUB.SAR), son of Arshi-aha, the Sarramean." This dedicatory inscription (pre-Sargonic) was originally inscribed on a stone statue found in the debris of the Shamash temple in Sippar, according to the Neo-Babylonian colophon on the copy.<sup>20</sup>

The merchants' choice of Shamash, the god of universal justice, to be their patron god should not be considered accidental for the emergence of the high ethical standards which they maintained. The merchants could have chosen as their patron any deity from the Mesopotamian pantheon, as it happened that the scribes chose Nabu as their patron deity<sup>21</sup> and the incantation priests chose Ea and Asarluhi-Marduk as their patron deities,<sup>22</sup> while the physicians chose Ninurta

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<sup>17</sup> Leemans suggests that the second deity may, as a rule, be that of the place from which the letter was sent. See "Old Babylonian Letters and Economic History," JESHO 11 (1968), p. 200. There is one exception (UM VII 49) in which Shamash does not come first (Ashur, Shamash, and Marduk), although in another letter to the same person Shamash is first, followed by Marduk and Ashur (CT 29 24). The letters are translated in Leemans, Trade, pp. 99f. For the various forms of OB letters, see E. Salonen, Die Gruss- und Hoflichkeitsformeln in babylonisch-assyrischen Briefen (Helsinki, 1967), pp. 14ff. The term "Old Babylonian" in this paper refers to the general periods of Isin-Larsa, Hammurabi, and Samsuiluna.

<sup>18</sup> Oppenheim, "The Seafaring Merchants of Ur," JAOS 74 (1954), p. 11, note 18. Cf. also such a formula as found in ana ittišu (Landsberger, MSL I, 76:20-23).

<sup>19</sup> Oppenheim, JAOS 74 (1954), p. 12. Cf. also Leemans, Trade, p. 135.

<sup>20</sup> E. Sollberger, "Lost Inscriptions from Mari," Kupper (ed.), XV<sup>e</sup> RAI (La civilisation de Mari) (Paris, 1967), pp. 103-105.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. B. Meissner, BuA II, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-16. Cf. also dASAR.LÚ.ĪI=Marduk=šá šī-īp-tí in AN:(ilu)A-nu-u (CT 24 42:97).

and Gula.<sup>23</sup> The patronage of an impartial deity who was not limited to any locality or any interest group was imperative for the establishment of the primarily private trade carried out in large scale between distant localities.

However, a close relationship of Shamash and the merchants does not seem to have been found among the Assyrian merchants in Anatolia. The place for settling business accounts was the kārum,<sup>24</sup> and the most important deity invoked at the occasions of taking an oath seems to have been Ashur.<sup>25</sup> If so, the patronage relationship of Shamash and merchants cannot be totally responsible for the emergence of high ethical standards among the merchants.

Furthermore, unlike the merchants, the diviners did not produce any distinctly ethical teaching, despite the fact that they too paid great homage to Shamash along with Adad as their patron deities. This is probably because there were in the class of merchants certain conditions not found in the class of diviners which led the merchants to such an ethos.

We have already called to attention the fact that the special usage of awīlum, lā awīlum and awīlūtum occurs more than twenty times in the Cappadocian tablets, and occasionally in reference to Telmun-merchants of Ur, but rarely appears elsewhere. We think this is important: These merchants were well known for the private nature of their trade, and these same merchants employ a special ethical concept in their usage of awīlum, lā awīlum and awīlūtum.

The Assyrian merchants in Anatolia went so far as to have almost complete autonomy with regards to their own affairs through the kārum institution. Quite a different picture of this merchant colony in Asia Minor was presented by K. Polanyi some time ago. According to him, the trade in Asia Minor was basically non-market, risk-free and "dispositional" as against "transactional." The people engaged in such a trade, he said, were not traders in the sense that

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<sup>23</sup> B. Meissner, BuA II, pp. 9 and 31. Also cf. E.K. Ritter, "Magical Expert (=āšīpu) and Physician (=asû), Notes on Two Complementary Professions in Babylonian Medicine," in Landsberger Festschrift, AS 16 (Chicago, 1965), pp. 299ff.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. P. Garelli, Assyriens, pp. 182-184.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. H. Hirsch, Altass. Rel., p. 65.



they made a living from the profit derived from price differentials, but were traders by status who derived their revenue from the commission on the goods which they turned over. Further, the business was conducted within the framework of a governmental organization.<sup>26</sup>

Actually, merchants in Asia Minor earned their living from profit derived from the difference between the purchasing price and the selling price. M.T. Larsen has shown that an owner of a shipment, for instance, usually made a profit which amounted to about 50% of the shipment.<sup>27</sup> Further, he calculated that Shalim-ahum, a merchant in Kanesh, must have nearly doubled the money he put in one transaction in the course of a year.<sup>28</sup> It may be appropriate to quote here an emphatic remark of D.O. Edzard to indicate a more recent view of the merchants and their activities in Anatolia. He says, "One of the most important things we can learn from these [Cappadocian] texts is that the merchants for whom they were written were private entrepreneurs, working on their own account and at their own risk,..."<sup>29</sup>

A similar observation can be made with the Telmun-merchants of Ur, the port of entry for copper, during the Larsa period; their activity has been studied by Oppenheim.<sup>30</sup> The information about them is based on the texts from Ur dated to the period of the fifth through seventh kings of the Dynasty of Larsa. The Telmun-merchant, called alik Telmun, was provided with funds and merchandise by private persons, investing

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<sup>26</sup> K. Polanyi, "Marketless Trading in Hammurabi's Time," in K. Polanyi et al. (eds.), Trade and Market in the Early Empires (Glencoe, Ill., 1957), pp. 12-26.

<sup>27</sup> M.T. Larsen, Old Assyrian Caravan Procedures (Istanbul, 1967), p. 43, cf. p. 25. This profit should not be considered commission.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. BIN 4 61, translated and studied in Larsen, ibid., pp. 122-124, 166-169.

<sup>29</sup> The Near East: the Early Civilizations (New York, 1967) (Eng. trans. of Fischer Weltgeschichte 2), p. 197. Edzard continues his statement: "and not, as is often the case with the Babylonian merchants, on commission for the state." Existence of varied forms of trade in Babylonia will be briefly noted below. Edzard's statement here is especially true after the end of the Larsa dynasty.

<sup>30</sup> Oppenheim, JAOS 74, pp. 6ff.

capitalists, and was quite different from the Makkan-merchant of the previous period, designated  $g a . e \check{s}_4$   $a . a b . b a$ , who received his stock of trade from the temple or from the official in charge of the various specialized storehouses of the temple of Nanna in Ur.<sup>31</sup> It is true that they were not free from the taxes and duties levied by the central government, but even then it should be pointed out that they were, most likely, not guaranteed any political or military protection in return. It may also be noted that in Ur there existed a kārum, a locality in which business accounts were to be settled like the kārum in the Assyrian colonies in Anatolia.<sup>32</sup>

Now, there do not seem to have been many other groups of merchants known for their active engagement in the private foreign trade in Mesopotamia. It is true that after the end of the Ur III period private economy reached a stage of high development in Babylonia, but the degree of the development in various cities in Mesopotamia was far from being uniform. As W.F. Leemans shows, there was no chance of growth of private merchants in Sippar because of the dominant role of nadītu-priestesses of Shamash in the economy.<sup>33</sup> As for Babylon, we know very little about the activity of its merchants.<sup>34</sup> Thus, apart from Ur, Larsa would be the only city that saw any significant trade activity of the private merchants.<sup>35</sup>

This general agreement of the distribution of the occurrences of the special usage of awīlum, lā awīlum, and awīlūtum with the distribution of long-distance trade of basically private nature seems to be more than a mere coincidence. From this, the conclusion can be drawn that the basically private nature of the trade activity was the most important condition responsible for the emergence of high ethical consciousness which was epitomized by the special usage of awīlum, lā awīlum, and awīlūtum.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 14. Leemans has a slightly different view about this. He says, "...it seems probable that this 'big business' [like that of Ea-nasir] was a government concern just as it had been a temple concern in earlier periods." (Trade, p. 132.)

<sup>32</sup> Oppenheim, JAOS 74, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> Leemans, Merchant, pp. 96-106, 119.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 108f.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-95.

Let us come back to the question of the origin of the didactic sayings concerning merchants in the great Shamash hymn. The only indication as to their origin is that the merchants referred to in them are foreign traders.<sup>36</sup> But in the light of what we have been discussing, a class of private merchants engaged in a foreign trade, like the Assyrian merchants in Anatolia and the Telmun-merchants in Ur, seems to be the most logical place in which the didactic lines of the Shamash hymn could have originated.

The tradition of ethical teaching in Mesopotamia is usually attributed to the bureaucrats in the high echelon of the administrations of temples and palaces. The role of the bureaucrats in collecting the heritage of this tradition, enriching as well as transmitting it to the later generations cannot of course be overestimated, but it is important to recognize that merchants also contributed their share to this tradition.

The passage in the great Shamash hymn is one such example. It is debatable whether the great Shamash hymn properly belongs to the wisdom literature. Actually, we know little about the exact Sitz im Leben of the Akkadian hymns in general. But, as von Soden states, the Akkadian hymns seem to have had their origin in the Hofdichtung in Babylonia, and more expression tends to be found of the intellectualism of the court poets in these hymns than of their piety.<sup>37</sup> The great Shamash hymn is the most radical example of such a tendency. Thus it is most appropriate that an example of the ethos of a class of merchants is found in this hymn.

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36 Ll. 103, 105 (cf. Appendix). Also cf. ll. 65-70, 138-139.

37 A. Falkenstein-W. von Soden, SAHG, pp. 43f.

## APPENDIX

Lines 103-106 pose some problems. We tentatively accept the translation proposed in CAD, H (p. 14a), and E (p. 220a), and translate as follows.

nādin kaspa ana šiddī ḥabbilu minâ uttar  
 uštakazzab ana nēmelīma uḥallaq kīsa (KUŠ.NÍQ.ZÁ)  
 nādin kaspa ana šiddī rūqūti (SUD.MEŠ) mutter išṭēn šiqla ana še[na]  
 ṭābi eli šamaš balāta (TI.LA) ut[tar]

As for him who invests money on a (short) term and is lawless,<sup>1</sup>  
 what does he gain?

He is disappointed<sup>2</sup> about profit and loses his capital.

As for him who invests money on a long term and multiplies a shekel  
 to t[wo],<sup>3</sup>

it is pleasing to Shamash, and he (the investor) prol[ongs] (his)  
 life.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ḥabbilu is taken as modifying šid-di by some translators (Lambert, Schollmeyer and Stephens--see "Translations Consulted" below). However, we should take šid-di as plural in the light of ana šiddī rūqūti in the next line. This then excludes taking ḥabbilu (sing.) as modifying šiddī. Further, ḥabbilu is used only with regards to a person or a demon (CAD, H, p. 14a). We take ḥabbilu as an adjective modifying nādin. As for šiddī we find a variety of translations, such as "trading mission">"(foreign) region" (Lambert), "Gewinn?" (Schollmeyer), "Trug" (von Soden), "term" (CAD, H, p. 14a and E, p. 220a), "rate" (Stephens).

<sup>2</sup> We follow W.G. Lambert here, but there are other interpretations such as "sich betrügen" (Bezold, Glossar and Stephens), "Abbruch tun" (von Soden).

<sup>3</sup> Here we follow von Soden. Cf. ša 1 mana kaspi ana ša 1½ mana kaspi aḥūa lūtir, "Let my brother increase (the amounts of barley) from what (is worth) one mina of silver to what (is worth) one and half mina of silver" (TCL 9 141:27 from CAD, A<sup>2</sup>, p. 490a).

<sup>4</sup> Although balāta utturu is found elsewhere (cf. CAD, A<sup>2</sup>, p. 490a), the norm is rather balāta/balassu urruku (cf. CAD, A<sup>2</sup>, p. 225).

## Translations Consulted

- P.A. Schollmeyer, HGS<sup>v</sup>, pp. 80ff.  
 A. Falkenstein and W. von Soden, SAHG, pp. 240ff.  
 F.J. Stephens, ANET<sup>2</sup>, pp. 387ff.  
 W.G. Lambert, BWL, pp. 121ff.