

HOW IŠUM GOT HIS NAME

Eli Tadmor (New Haven)

Abstract

CT 15: 5–6, an Old Babylonian tablet of unknown provenience, tells of the origins of Išum, the divine night watchman: Ninlil bore him to her grandson Šamaš, set him on fire, and left him in the street. We learn of these events from words that Ištar, whom we find fostering the newborn in Ekur, addresses to Enlil. First, this article proposes that Ninlil’s setting alight of Išum and his subsequent fostering by Ištar serve as a native Babylonian explanation for the long-since noted similarity between the name Išum and the word *išātum*, “fire”: Ištar, finding a baby on fire, named him after fire itself. Second, the article defends its preference for translating the key verbal form *uštāhizma* as “set ablaze.” Third, it argues that CT 15: 5–6 reflects a Mesopotamian, and more broadly ancient Near Eastern, motif of a young woman rescuing and naming a foundling. Fourth, it highlights the perennial difficulty of ascertaining the social reality underlying sources pertaining to Mesopotamian foundlings. And fifth, it reanalyzes *Emar 256*, an administrative document reflecting that difficulty.

Introduction

CT 15: 5–6, a tablet of unknown provenience inscribed in Old Babylonian script, tells how a goddess set her newborn son aflame.¹ The tablet’s first column is broken. What is preserved in Column ii describes the conception, birth, and growing up of the moon god Sîn, son of Enlil and Ninlil. Columns iii–vi are either broken or too fragmentary to make sense of. Eight lines of Column vii (2’–9’) are preserved; as they open, Ištar is walking around in Ekur:

vii 2’	[tār]īatma aḥaš tunas[sas]	Acting as a [nurse]maid, she is rock[ing] her brother,
vii 3’	[kīm]a tārītim ittanallak qerbum ekur	[Lik]e a nursemaid she is walking to and fro ² within Ekur:

1. I thank Andrew George, Benjamin Foster, Eckart Frahm, Jackson Petty, Jana Matuszak, Jerrold Cooper, Sergio Tang, Selena Wisnom, Yoram Cohen, and the peer reviewers for their feedback regarding the manuscript and its underlying ideas; and Seth Richardson for his editorial help and guidance. The only abbreviations in this article not part of the standard Assyriological literature are eBL (electronic Babylonian Library), MKG (Hamburger Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe), and SEAL (Sources of Early Akkadian Literature). CT 15: 5–6 was first edited by Römer (1966). An online edition can be found as SEAL no. 7514. It is also discussed in Edzard and Wilcke 1976, 142; Attinger and Krebernik 2005, 30; Weiershäuser 2010, 370–71; and George 2015, 7–8.

2. One might interpret [*kīm*]a tārītim ittanallak qerbum ekur in at least two ways. The first is to take the line to refer to Ištar walking to and fro with Išum as one does with a baby, thus agreeing with the CAD (T *tārītu* A s. 1a, p. 232), which translates “She paces back and forth within Ekur like a nursemaid (with a restless child).” The second is to construe the line as referring to the same kind of free access to temples hoped for in a prayer seal (NCBS 276, edition Beltz 2022) of Bā’il-Marduk, son of Kurīgalzu: “May he walk aro[und] in the temple, may he live long (lit. be long in life)” (lines 5–6: *ina é-ti du-d[u] ti-la diri*); and in DT.83 (<http://www.ebl.lmu.de/library/DT.83>), an acrostic hymn to Babylon found in Nineveh, which wishes the following for a king of Babylon: “May he walk around in well-being within his temples, may he complete their rites” (line 9: *qerbi ekurrātīšu šalmeš littallik lišallimmā paršīšun*). The expression [*kīm*]a tārītim, “[lik]e a nursemaid,” would then refer to free access afforded to nursemaids (on whom see Karahashi 2017) to different parts of a temple or palace.

vii 4' <i>anāku aḥī tēriāku aḥī ša ana aḥīya waldu</i>	“Am I to be nursemaid to my brother— my brother to my brother born?”
vii 5' <i>enlil pāšu ipušamma</i>	Enlil made to speak,
vii 6' <i>issaqqar ana lābatim ištar</i>	(And) said to Lioness Ištar:
vii 7' <i>ayyam aḥāki tāriāt aḥāki ša ana aḥīki waldu</i>	What brother of yours are you nursemaid to, your brother to your brother born?
vii 8' <i>išam</i> (^d <i>i-ša-am</i>) <i>ninlil ana šamaš ulidma</i>	“Išum! Ninlil to Šamaš bore (him),
vii 9' <i>uštāḥizma ina šulīm izibšu</i>	“Set (him) alight, ³ and left him in the street.”

In these eight lines we learn of a scandalous family affair: Ninlil, the wife of Enlil, bore a child to Šamaš (who, being the son of Sîn, was her grandson),⁴ and left the newborn in the street. There, one presumes, Ištar, the sister of Šamaš, found him—and then took him to Ekur, where her conversation with Enlil takes place.⁵ As scholars have observed, this sequence of events fits well with what we otherwise know of Išum.⁶ It is only fitting for that beneficent and justice-loving deity,⁷ the night watchman of the gods who patrols in the darkened streets with torch held high,⁸ to be the son of Šamaš the sun god and be left as a newborn in the street.

(I thank Benjamin Foster for this idea.) The former option is followed here in view of a later parallel in which the simile *kī tāriiti* is used specifically to refer to a nursemaid carrying a child: a declaration by the goddess Mullissu to Ashurbanipal that “I will carry you on my hip like a nursemaid” (SAA 9: 7 [K.883] rev. 7: *kī tāriiti ina giššīya aššika*). One speculates that Ištar’s walking around may be a play on—and thus serve to anticipate—Išum’s epithet *muttalliku*, “one who walks around.” This epithet, related to Išum’s function as the night watchman of the gods (on which see George 2015, 2–4), is known to be given to him twice directly: *Götteraddressbuch* (K.252, edition Menzel 1981, 113–25) ii 8: *“Išum muttalliku*, “Išum, he who walks around”; and *Erra I* (<https://www.ebl.lmu.de/corpus/L/1/5/SB/I>) 22: *engidudu bēlu muttallik mūši*, “Engidudu: The Lord Who Walks About at Night.” And once indirectly: as pointed to by Kynthia Taylor (2017, 38 n.88), a tablet of the medical series *Šagig* implicitly describes Išum as one who “walks around,” and notes that a plant by name of “ha[nd of ...] who walks around the street” is likewise called “the plant of Išum” (š[*U* ...] *mu-tal-lik* SILA KIMIN šU ^d*i-šum* [HeeBel 2000, 356, line 76]). On walking or wandering about in ANE texts, though as a signifier of depression, see Barré 2001.

3. On the interpretation of *uštāḥizma*, see below.

4. As Manfred Krebernik writes of the *Sonnengott* (2009, 602): “Der S. wird meist als Sohn des Mondgottes, hinter dem er in mehreren Götterlisten eingeordnet ist, und als Bruder der Inanna/Ištar angesehen; beider Großeltern sind dann Enlil und Ninlil. Zuweilen wird er jedoch als Sohn (oder Abkömmling?) des Himmelsgottes An bezeichnet ... der nach alternativer Tradition auch Vater der Inanna/Ištar ist.” The tradition reflected in CT 15: 5–6 appears to be the former one.

5. CT 15: 5–6 vi, the column immediately previous to that relating the conversation between Ištar and Enlil in Ekur, appears to contain a conversation between a female interlocutor and the god Pabilsag. Only the beginning of CT 15: 5–6 vi 6', is preserved: *a-na mi-nim al-q[ī]*, “Why did I take?” It is tempting to suppose that these are words spoken by Ištar and are part of her asking—perhaps of herself—why she had earlier taken Išum from the street. That she is unsure that this was a wise thing to do is also indicated by the question she addresses to herself in CT 15: 5–6 vii 3' (quoted above): *anāku aḥī tēriāku aḥī ša ana aḥīya waldu*, “Am I to be nursemaid to my brother—my brother to my brother born?”

6. Römer (1966, 146) points to the aptness of Shamash’s paternity of the likewise-justice-enforcing Išum. Edzard and Wilcke (1976, 142) argued that the tale serves as an etiology for Išum’s protecting people as they walk the street. Attinger and Krebernik (2005, 30 n. 12; 32) likewise point to the episode’s connection to Išum’s role as herald and protector, and his Šamaš-like love of justice and fiery aspect; Weiershäuser observes much the same (2010, 371). And George, whose analysis of the myth is excerpted below, writes (2015, 7–8), “For the present discussion, it is significant that Išum was a product of the fire in the sky, a little bit of sun on earth,” and interprets the story as an etiology of street lighting, with Išum representing stationary lamps set up in the street.

7. Hēndursanga/Išum’s love of righteousness is most clearly highlighted in two compositions. The first is the Hymn to Nanše, known from Old-Babylonian copies (edition Heimpel 1981 and ETCSL 4.14.1), in which he is called *lugal niġ-si-sa ki-āġ*, “The king who loves justice” (line 207), and *lugal niġ-ā-zi ḥul-giġ*, “The king who hates violence (lit. ‘hand-raising’)” (line 219); and said to know good and evil deeds (lines 85–89), and to punish evil and enforce the rights of the widow and orphan (lines 183–193). The second is a Neo-Assyrian text known as the Underworld Vision (SAA 3 no. 32), in which Išum is hailed (rev. 16) as *mukil abbuti ętir napišti rā'im kināti*, “Intercessor, saver of life, lover of truth.” Išum’s beneficence is also expressed in his function of torch-carrying night watchman, on which see George 2015, 2–4 and 5–7.

8. On Išum’s function of torch-carrying night watchman, see George 2015, 2–4 and 5–7, with citations from a broad array of primary sources—god-lists, incantations, and literary texts—and references to secondary literature.

For Išum to be set alight (*uštāḥizma*) likewise makes literary sense. Pascal Attinger and Manfred Krebernik remark (2005, 30 n. 12): “Il est vraisemblable que le passage contient un jeu de mots entre Išum (ici décliné!) et *išātam aḥāzum* (G, N, Št) ‘prendre feu = s’enflammer.’” And Andrew George writes (2015, 8):

the point here is that the fiery Išum was left in the street *as a flame*.... This raises the prospect that Babylonian night watchmen not only carried lights as they walked, but also that they or other parties left lamps to light the paths of those out late at night. Accordingly, this Old Babylonian fragment provides another mythological aetiology of street-lighting, this time perhaps specifically of fixed street-lamps.

This article proposes a complementary explanation for Išum’s being set alight in CT 15: 5–6. More than a century ago, Édouard Dhorme wrote, while citing the very passage under discussion (1909, 114–15):

Un autre dieu, portant un nom sémitique, est, selon nous, le dieu *I-šum*. On reconnaît l’accusatif de ce nom dans *I-šā-am* de CT, XV, pl. 6, VIII, 7. On sait aussi qu’il s’agit spécialement d’un dieu du feu. Nous sommes donc en présence du mot *išû*, masculin de *išātu* ‘feu’. À cette forme *išû* correspond l’hébreu ישו.

The tale of the newborn Išum in CT 15: 5–6 may serve to explain precisely this phonetic similarity between Išum and *išātum*.⁹ Per this explanation, Išum was abandoned in the street by Ninlil, who, having chosen to forsake her newborn, would not have given him a name, and was then found by someone, most likely Ištar, who chose to name the baby after fire because he was found aflame.¹⁰ That this was Ištar’s rationale in naming Išum may be implied by the very grammar of her answer to Enlil. As Attinger and Krebernik note (2005, 30 n. 12, quoted above), the name ^d*i-šā-am* is “ici décliné,” and thus treated like a masculine singular noun rather than an indeclinable proper name. Thus, Ištar may be speaking of Išum as if he were the masculine form of fire itself.¹¹

As a caveat, it should be stressed that this article stakes no position as to whether or not Išum’s name is actually derived from *išātum*, a question long debated by Assyriologists and still unresolved.¹² Nor does it claim that CT 15: 5–6 may be invoked to support such a derivation. Rather, it argues that the author(s) of CT 15: 5–6 perceived such a derivation to exist, and that Išum’s story in CT 15: 5–6 functions as an explanation for it.

Below, this article defends its preference for *uštāḥizma* as “set ablaze” over two alternative interpretations offered in the literature. It places the tale of the newborn Išum in the context of other Assyriological—and to a lesser extent, biblical—evidence regarding foundlings, arguing that CT 15: 5–6 reflects a Mesopotamian, and more broadly ancient Near Eastern, motif of a young woman rescuing and naming a foundling. Then, moving to the general topic of foundlings, it highlights the perennial difficulty of ascertaining the social realities underlying Mesopotamian sources seeming to pertain to them. Finally, it also

9. On Mesopotamian explication of divine names, with history of research, analysis of ancient hermeneutical methods, and a case study, see Bennett 2021.

10. In the rest of this article, the choice to name Išum after fire is spoken of as made by Ištar, with Ištar likewise being taken to be the one who rescued Išum from the street. This is done only because it is Ištar who seems most likely to have rescued Išum in the broken portion of the story. It should be stressed, however, that the main thesis of the article, namely that CT 15: 5–6 gives an etiology for Išum’s fiery name, does not hinge on it being Ištar specifically who rescued and named him.

11. It should be noted, however, that the declension of names ending in *-um* in Old-Babylonian sources, while rare, is not exceptional. As John Huehnergard (2011, 113) writes, “Usually, PNs, even those ending in *-um*, are indeclinable ... there are many exceptions, however.” The above-given interpretation of the writing ^d*i-šā-am* may therefore be unwarranted.

12. Edzard 1976–1980 (with bibliography regarding this question up to 1973); Attinger and Krebernik 2005, 22–23; George 2015, 4; and Taylor 2017, 130–31 (likewise with bibliography).

offers a reanalysis of *Emar 256*, an administrative text reflecting this difficulty. A philological commentary on *Emar 256* is then given as an appendix.

A Fiery Crux

While scholars have generally agreed in their interpretations of the grammar and syntax of CT 15: 5–6 vii 2'–9', there is one notable point of contention: *uštāḥizma* (CT 15: 5–6: vii 9'). The verb has been interpreted along three lines. The first is that of CAD A/1 (*aḥāzu* v. 10a), which tentatively proposes “to be induced” as one of the meanings of *šutāḥuzu* and translates: “She was induced (by someone) to abandon him in the street.” (CAD A/1 puts forward no other citations to support such a meaning for *šutāḥuzu*.) The second line has to do with marriage, with *uštāḥizma* taken to be a Št-passive form of *aḥāzu*, “to marry (more literally: to take [a wife]).” In the commentary appended to his *editio princeps*, Willem Römer (1966, 146) wavered between CAD A/1’s understanding and that of AHW (1:19: “etwa: sie wurde verheiratet??”), and cautiously followed AHW in his translation (1966, 140: “Išum hat Ninlil dem Šamaš geboren und als sie verheiratet wurde [??], hat sie ihn auf die Strasse hinterlassen!”). Frauke Weiershäuser (2010, 370–71), implicitly interpreting the verb similarly, writes in her summary of CT 15: 5–6: “Išum ... auf der Straße ausgesetzt worden war, als Ninlil verheiratet wurde.” And *Sources of Early Akkadian Literature* (SEAL) translates: “When she got married(?), she left him in the street.” The third approach is that of Attinger and Krebernik (2005, 30), who, followed by George (2015, 7), understand *uštāḥizma* to be derived from *šutāḥuzu*, “to set on fire” (on which see Streck 1994, 166–67), with the implication being that Ninlil set Išum on fire before abandoning him in the street.

Of these interpretations, the latter is here judged more likely, based on two lines of reasoning. The first is syntactical: The subject of both *ulidma* and *izibšu* is clearly Ninlil, and their object Išum. As these verbs bracket *uštāḥizma*, one would expect the same to be true of this verb as well. Yet if *uštāḥizma* is a Št-passive form, whether in the sense of “to be incited/induced” or of “verheiratet werden,” Išum could not be the verb’s object. The second is thematic and weightier. There is no indication that Ninlil was induced by someone to abandon Išum in the street, and translating *uštāḥizma* as “als sie verheiratet wurde” runs into a major difficulty: it would make little sense for Ninlil to marry anyone after bearing Išum to Šamaš and immediately before abandoning the newborn in the street, because she was already married to Enlil.

Yet one may endeavor to obviate the latter objection, and thus strengthen the case for *uštāḥizma* being related to marriage rather than fire, by construing the verb as referring precisely to Ninlil’s past marriage to Enlil. This is done by Jerrold Cooper (2002, 98 n. 49; followed in Taylor 2017, 129 n. 7), who translates *išam ninlil ana šamaš ulidma // uštāḥizma ina šulim izibšu* as “Ninlil bore Ishum to Shamash, but already having been married, she left him in the street.” Invoking the aforementioned syntactical line of reasoning, a proponent of a fiery interpretation of *uštāḥizma* may respond to this change by arguing that to analyze *ulidma*, *uštāḥizma*, and *izibšu* as being consistent in subjects and objects produces more straightforward syntax than that of Cooper’s translation. To this it might be added that taking the three verbs to describe three consecutive actions flows more naturally than understanding *uštāḥizma* to refer to an action that took place far earlier than both *ulidma* and *izibšu*.

But these objections are by no means overwhelming, and the weightier aspect is again the thematic rather than the grammatical or syntactical. On this plane, one might argue that Enlil would hardly have needed reminding by Ištar that Ninlil had already been “taken as a wife” in the past. Nor, for that matter, would ancient readers of the poem, who would presumably have been well aware of Ninlil’s marriage to Enlil and its implications for Ninlil’s predicament. In contrast to this “old news,” to inform Enlil and the readers of CT 15: 5–6 that Ninlil had set Išum on fire would be “breaking” indeed. Yet to this one may retort that while the baby Išum being set alight would doubtless be news, it makes no sense on the level of

the story: what could possibly motivate Ninlil to set her own child on fire? What ends could it serve? And would Išum not simply die after being ignited?

Here one touches upon a key point. It cannot be denied that Ninlil's ignition of Išum appears to serve little practical purpose, though one wonders if she may have endeavored to incinerate, and thus make disappear, the living proof of her infidelity. (As for how Išum would have survived being set on fire, his superhuman nature or an intervention by Ištar might serve as explanations.) Yet the strangeness of this event may be accounted for in at least two ways. First, by reference to the divine powers of Išum's parents. Ninlil, being the wife of Enlil, may well have been linked to wind. And as pointed out by George (2015, 7), Išum is connected to the celestial fire of the sun by virtue of his being the son of Šamaš. Taking these two facts together, one may deduce that Ninlil's igniting of Išum is a mythological expression of the fanning of flames by wind.¹³ Yet one should note that it is a matter of long-standing scholarly disagreement as to whether or not Enlil (EN.LÍL), and by extension Ninlil, were thought of as connected to wind before the first millennium, from which time, but not earlier, we have sources explicitly making such a connection.¹⁴

The second way to account for Ninlil's lighting of Išum would be by reference to its proposed literary function, namely to explain Išum's fiery name and his connection to fire generally. This would be in keeping with the other details of the narrative, since they were shaped by the same etiological drive. As indicated by previous discussions of CT 15: 5–6, summarized above, Išum's being the son of Šamaš and his abandonment in the street serve to foreshadow his future role as the benevolent street-patrolling torch-wielding night watchman of the gods. Etiological considerations may likewise account for the choice of *šutāḥuzu* (*aḥāzu* Št) over other, and more common, verbs meaning "to burn." These verbs, *qamû*, *qalû*, *šarāpu*, bear little resemblance to the name of Išum, yet *šutāḥuzu*, as indicated by Attinger and Krebernik's above-quoted observation (2005, 30 n. 12), would have served to bring to the reader's mind the phrase *išātam aḥāzum*, "to catch fire," and thus the word *išātum*, "fire," itself. The associations of *uštāḥizma* may have been richer still, with the verbal form serving to evoke, this time via phonetic similarity, not only *išātam aḥāzum* but also, at the same time, *aššatam aḥāzum*, "to take a wife."¹⁵ Such wordplay may have brought to mind that Ninlil set Išum on fire (*išātam uštāḥiz*) because she had been taken (*uštāḥiz*) as a wife (*aššatum*) by Enlil. If true, this would conform to both the marriage- and fire-centric interpretations of the verb offered by scholars! The choice of *šutāḥuzu* may be accounted for by reference to yet another consideration: it possibly served to signify that Išum was "set on fire" rather than "burned," with this implying that the fire was just beginning to spread when Ištar found him, and could be put out before Išum was consumed by it.

In light of these considerations, the translation "set alight" for *uštāḥizma* appears more likely than "was taken as a wife." Yet the latter option is by no means ruled out if the marriage in question is taken to be that between Enlil and Ninlil rather than an entirely new, and nonsensical, marriage. Until a duplicate of CT 15: 5–6 is found, and the rest of its text recovered, neither interpretation can be excluded.

13. I thank Jana Matuszak for suggesting this idea. The connection between wind and fire—lexically encapsulated in the verb *napāḥu*, which means both "to blow" and "to flare up"—is highlighted by Heimpele (1986, 142).

14. Jacobsen (1989), Tinney (1996, 129–30), Michalowski (1998), and Edzard (2003), with a summary of the debate in Stone 2024. Stone surmises (under "Functions"): "The Sumerian word 'lil', whose Akkadian equivalent is *zaqīqu*, means 'ghost, phantom, haunted' ... but a translation of Enlil's name as 'Lord ghost' makes little sense in the context of his mythological attestations. The interpretation of *lil* as 'wind' is apparently a secondary development of the first millennium BCE." This *vexata quaestio* is beyond the scope of this article, yet it may be noted that further evidence regarding this problem has recently been highlighted by Fadhil and Jiménez (2025, 2, with discussion in n. 5). A line, partially reconstructed based on a parallel text, in the Nineveh commentary fragment 1881.0204.419, equates Enlil with wind (*šarū*): *ša-a-ru* ⁴[*en-lil* ...] (line 7; edition <https://www.ebl.badw.de/library/1881%2C0204.419>).

15. I likewise thank Jana Matuszak for this idea.

Water and Flame

George writes of CT 15: 5–6 (2015, 7): “There is an obvious allusion here to the practice of abandoning unwanted babies in public places: in this regard, Išum was a foundling, even though it was his aunt who ended up looking after him.”¹⁶ If Ištar did indeed rescue and name Išum, then CT 15: 5–6 may be taken as a mythological expression of a broader ancient Near Eastern motif: an unmarried woman rescuing and naming a foundling. This motif is evidenced in four other sources; these instances are given below, along with speculations as to why the young woman chose to name the foundling as she did.

The first source (CBS 11324) is a tablet hailing from Old Babylonian Nippur and published by Jacob Klein and Tonia Sharlach (2007). It contains descriptions of three model court cases.¹⁷ The first of these (i 1–25), Klein and Sharlach observe (2007, 4), is unusual both in that it describes an adoption of a child by an unmarried woman,¹⁸ and that, in describing the foundling, it appears to quote from **Ki-ulutin-bi-šè**/Ana ittišu IV iii 30–37 (a passage given and discussed below). CBS 11324 begins in this way (i 1–7):

[dumu-nít]a-gaba [túl-t]a ‘pà-da’ ka ur-gi₇-ra-ta kar [a]d-da nu-tuku ama nu-tuku nin, nu-tuku šeš nu-tuku ù šeš-bar-ra nu-tuku ¹ištar-ri-im-ti-í-lì nam-dumu-a-ni-šè ‘ba-da-an’-ri ¹i-lí-tu-ra-am ‘mu-ni mu-sa₄’

A suckling [male chil]d—found [i]n (lit. [fr]om) a [well], snatched from a dog’s mouth, who has no [fa]ther, mother, sister, brother, or *stepbrother*—Ištar-rīmti-ilī (“Ištar is the wild cow of the gods”) adopted (him) as her son (and) named him Ilī-tūram (“My god, return to me!”).¹⁹

One wonders if the names Ištar-rīmti-ilī and Ilī-tūram, both attested in other Old-Babylonian sources, were selected by the composer of this model court case to suit its events.²⁰ Concerning Ištar-rīmti-ilī, perhaps the maternal associations of *rīmtu*, “wild cow,” were at play;²¹ tempting as it is to suppose that the name’s invocation of Ištar alludes to Ištar’s rescue of Išum, such an allusion seems unlikely. Because it means “My god, return to me,” Ilī-tūram is a fitting name for an abandoned child, though not so fitting as to manifestly have been picked on account of said abandonment.

The second source (MKG 1983.286) is a clay foot inscribed with Middle-Assyrian script;²² its shape may be explained by reference to the practice of pressing foundlings’ feet into clay to mark their adoption.²³

16. On the topic of foundlings, see Wunsch 2003–2004 (with references to previous literature); Malul 1990, 2001.

17. As Klein and Sharlach remark (2007, 2), these cases’ lack of witnesses and dates indicates that they are likely model cases rather than actual events (as does, one might add, the fact that they are all on the same tablet and that of the adoption case presented in i 1–7 describing the foundling as having been rescued in two different ways).

18. Klein and Sharlach write (2007, 4), “In contemporary adoptions from Nippur, it is very rare for a single woman, especially one who is not identified as a priestess, to adopt a child.” They continue in a reference (2007, 4 n. 15): “So too, in the Neo-Babylonian period, adoptions of boys or men by a single woman were seldom. The adoptees in these cases were usually relatives, children from a former marriage or slaves.” CBS 11324: 1–25 finds parallels, however, in a Middle-Assyrian adoption text (MKG 1983.286, published Franke and Wilhelm 1985) discussed below, in which a baby is rescued by an unmarried woman and then adopted by her; and in VS 6: 116, a Neo-Babylonian text likewise discussed below relating the past adoption of a foundling by an unmarried woman.

19. The translation “stepbrother” follows Klein and Sharlach, who write in their commentary (2007, 8): “The term *šeš-bar*, literally ‘outside brother,’ is somewhat obscure; the tentative translation ‘stepbrother’ is based largely on context.”

20. In his study of Old Babylonian names, Alpin Wendell Bowes (1988) listed the name Ištar-rīmti-ilī as attested in Larsa (YBC 4739: 11) and Nippur (Ni.10524 ii 1), and Ilī-tūram as attested in Ur (UET 5: 455 obv. 3), Larsa (TCL 10: 32 rev. 32; VAS 13: 77 rev. 7), Nippur (PBS 8/2: 142 rev. 31), and Sippar (CT 4: 48b u.e. 29).

21. On the maternal associations of the cow in Mesopotamian (as well as Egyptian) sources, see Steinert 2017. She writes (2017, 226): “The textual references show that the image of the domesticated cow is the most popular metaphor to express aspects of motherhood in Mesopotamian culture.”

22. MKG 1983.286 was published in Franke and Wilhelm 1985 and was discussed in Malul 1990 (116 n. 23 and 224 n. 94) and 2001 (355, 358, and 363–64).

23. On this practice, see Zaccagnini 1994; Malul 2001; and Baker 2004, 248 n. 9f.

The text relates that a woman by the name of ^dḪU-TI-*rēmīni* (“ḪU-TI, have [fem.] mercy on me”²⁴), a servant of Kuršiptu (a “palace woman” [munus é.gal]), “lifted from a river” and “raised” a boy by the name of Nāru-erība (íd.su), “The river compensated me.”²⁵ The text declares Nāru-erība to be the son of ^dḪU-TI-*rēmīni*, outlines steep penalties against any who would challenge that fact—the giving up of six sons, no less!—and invokes the gods Šin, Šamaš, Ištar, and Gula as witnesses.²⁶ The exact nature and purpose of this text, which one may characterize as a divinely enforced adoption certificate, is difficult to determine. Was it a judicial document, officially sanctioned, or rather a private artifact of magical purpose, unilaterally produced by ^dḪU-TI-*rēmīni* and meant, as it were, only for her eyes and those of the gods?²⁷ Whatever the answer, it seems from the details of MKG 1983.286 that ^dḪU-TI-*rēmīni* gave the child she rescued a name reflecting the place whence she reportedly saved him: the river.

The third source, VS 6: 116 (Baker 2004 no. 191), a legal text written in Šabaṭu of Cambyses II’s accession year, records the rescue of a foundling by an unmarried woman yet does not specify whether it was she who named it.²⁸ It runs:

*mukīnnē ša*²⁹ *ina pānīšunu ša nabû-nādīn-šūmi apilšu ša mūšēzib-marduk u gaḫal u šīrāya aššatīšu māraṣsu ša [nabû-bān-zēr]i riksu ša šēpētāya*³⁰ *ša šīrāya ultu suqqi taššamma turabbû ša*³¹ *šēpēša ina*

24. ḪU-TI appears to be the name of a goddess, yet no goddess with such a name is known (Franke and Wilhelm 1985, 22).

25. The text describes ^dḪU-TI-*re-mi-ni* as she “who raised Nāru-erība from the river,” and says that she “‘raised’ him” (*turtabbīšu*; lines 2–4: *ša i+na nāri nāru-erība ... taššīani turtabbīšu*). The English “raised” would give the impression that ^dḪU-TI-*re-mi-ni* had already spent years rearing Nāru-erība by the time of the writing of the text, yet this was not necessarily the case. Malul wrote of the use of *rubbû* in this context (1990, 107): “The common use of this verb in adoption contexts and its frequent juxtaposition with this adoption formula has resulted in its becoming coloured by these contexts and assuming some of the formula’s legal meaning, so that at times it functions within the technical meaning ‘to adopt,’ rather than in its literal meaning ‘to raise up.’” This is an attractive interpretation, not least in light of a case, discussed below, of a Neo-Babylonian adopter being described as *ša ultu suqqi taššamma turabbû u šēpēša ina ṭīṭṭi taškunu*, “She who lifted (the child) from the street and ‘raised’ (her), and placed her feet in clay” (VS 6: 116 [Baker 2004 no. 191] lines 7–10). If Malul is correct, this would mean that MKG 1983.286 may well have been drawn up shortly after ^dḪU-TI-*re-mi-ni* assumed care for Nāru-erība rather than years later.

26. While the handing over of six sons may seem so steep a punishment as to preclude the text having any legal validity, it is, as Franke and Wilhelm noted (1985, 24) partially paralleled by a Middle-Babylonian slave sale (HS 2068, published in Petschow 1974, 11–14), which stipulates: “He who goes against (lit. alters) this judgment shall give over four sons” (lines 22–23: *ša dabāba annā innū 4 mārī inamdin*). That such a harsh penalty may be found in a legally binding text may also be explained by reasoning applied by Viano (2023, 210) to *Emar 256*, discussed below, namely that it: “stipulates artificially high penalties to guarantee the irrevocability of the contract and prevent any claim.”

27. See discussion in Franke and Wilhelm 1985, 24–25; and Malul 2001, 355, 358, and 363–64. Franke and Wilhelm described the text as a “fiktiven Vertrag” whose “Rechtscharakter ... nur Fiktion ist,” and wrote that ^dḪU-TI-*rēmīni*, “Tatsächlich sucht ... Absicht nicht mit rechtlichen, sondern religiösen Mitteln zu erreichen” (*ibid.*, 24). Later, they characterize (*ibid.*, 24–25) the text as a “Versuch des Menschen, jenseits seiner Machtmöglichkeiten einen unbekanntem Feind durch die Bindungskraft des Wortes und die Evokation göttlichen Eingriffs zu strafen.” This implies that the production of the text was a strictly individual enterprise on the part of ^dḪU-TI-*rēmīni*, and that it is a magical rather than a legal—and thus communal—artifact. Malul, following Franke and Wilhelm, likewise took the contract to be a fictive artifact created by ^dḪU-TI-*rēmīni* to magically shore up her claim over Nāru-erība against any and all claims (1990, 124–25 n. 94; 2001, 355 and 363–64). While this seems likely, it is conceivable that, rather than being a unilaterally produced artifact, it was produced to mark ^dḪU-TI-*rēmīni*’s official adoption of Nāru-erība.

28. The text was published in Joáannes 1989; and has been discussed in Malul 2001, 357–62; Baker 2004, 22, 73; and Wunsch 2003–2004, 181–82.

29. Baker has <<šá>> (2004, 248), yet Joáannes’s translation of *ša* as “representatives” (1989, 82) can account for the presence of the particle and is followed here.

30. This individual is referred to as ^fše-BIT-*ta-a* in VS 6: 116 obv. 6 and ^fše-PI-*ta*-*a-a* in *Nbn* 990 obv. 10. Scholars have variously taken the name underlying these spellings as Šēpītāya (Joáannes 1989, 82); Šēpītāya (Malul 2001, 361; Baker 2004, 23 and *passim*); and Šēpetāya (Cousin and Watai 2024, 60). Yet, following the CAD in taking the plural of “feet” to be *šēpētu* (CAD Š/2 *šēpu* s.); adopting the long-standing scholarly proposal whereby this name is a shortened form of names of the Šēpēt-DN-ašbat, “I grasped the feet of DN” type (Tallqvist 1905, 202 and Cousin and Watai 2024, 60; on such shortened names in NB and LB sources, see Cousin and Watai 2024, 63; and Giessler 2024, 51–53); and bearing in mind that the expected hypocristic ending is -āya- (Giessler 2024, 53), we arrive at the normalization Šēpētāya.

31. Joáannes (1989, 82) has *u*, “and,” yet Baker has ‘šá’’. Joáannes’s proposal makes better syntactical sense, yet the copy of the admittedly damaged sign aligns better with Baker’s transliteration (no photo of the tablet is available).

tiṭṭi taškunu ilsû . . .

(These are) witnesses before whom representatives (lit. those of) of Nabû-nādin-šūmi son of Mūšēzib-marduk, Gaḥal, and Širāya, his wife, daughter of Nabû-bān-zēri, read their decree concerning Šēpētāya, whom Širāya raised from the street, (and) “reared,” (and) whose feet (Širāya) placed in clay: (list of names).

Though the text mentions Širāya’s husband, a man by the name of Nabû-nādin-šūmi, it is unequivocal in ascribing the adoption to Širāya alone. This coheres perfectly with a different text: the marriage contract of the selfsame Širāya and Nabû-nādin-šūmi (*Nbn* 990, Baker 2004 no. 3). This text, which bears a date formula noting it to have been written on November 19th, 540, ten years before VS 6: 116, mentions a slave woman by the name of Šēpētāya.³² Because *Nbn* 990 marks Širāya and Nabû-nādin-šūmi’s union, this means that Šēpētāya had already been taken in—though as a slave, not a daughter—by Širāya by the time of Širāya’s marriage (Malul 2001, 357; Baker 2004, 90 n. 1; Wunsch 2003–2004, 190).³³

The choice to name the foundling Šēpētāya, likely, though not certainly, made by Širāya, may be explained in at least two ways. The first is proposed by Meir Malul with reference to Šēpētāya’s feet having been placed in clay as part of her adoption (2001, 362): “It seems clear that this name is to be construed as deriving from the word *šēpu* ‘foot’ and should then mean something like ‘She-of-the-foot.’” However, if, as proposed by Knut Leonard Tallqvist (1905, 202) and followed by Laura Cousin and Yoko Watai (2024, 60), Šēpētāya is but a shortened form of names of the Šēpēt-DN-ašbat, “I grasped the feet of DN” type, then it cannot mean “She of the foot.”³⁴ Yet, as Malul indicates, while yet acknowledging this very possibility (2001, 362 n. 47), the foundling may still have been given this name on account of her adoption ritual’s having involved feet. In any case, Tallqvist’s proposal points to a second, less wholesome possibility. Johann Stamm speculated that, when borne by slaves, the names Šēpēt-^dbēl-ašbat and Šēpēt-^dbēlti-ašbat refer not to divine lords but rather to the slaves’ flesh-and-blood owners (1939, 200 n. 5). If Stamm was correct, and if in this case “Šēpētāya” stood in specifically for Šēpēt-bēlti-ašbat, then this name may have been chosen to mark the foundling’s future servitude. The feet it refers to would then be Širāya’s, which Šēpētāya would “seize” forevermore.

The fourth source tells of literature’s most famous foundling. George observes, in the context of CT 15: 5–6, that “The foundling whom destiny contrives to be nursed by a close relative is perhaps a folklore motif: cf. Moses” (2015, 7–8 n. 51). Malul, in discussing the aforementioned adoption of the boy Nāru-erība, writes (1990, 116 n. 23), “This connection between the etymology of the name and the situation which dictated it is of course reflected in the folk etymology of Moses’ name.” That etymology is given by pharaoh’s daughter, as Exod 2:10b relates: ותקרא שמו משה ותאמר כי מן המים משיתהו, “And she named him Moses [משה] and said: ‘because I drew him [משיתהו] from the water.’” Ištar’s declaration to Enlil—“Išum! Ninlil to Šamaš bore (him), / Set (him) alight, and left him in the street”—may be interpreted as fulfilling the very same function: to name the foundling and explain his new caretaker’s choice for his name. It may also be said, combining the observations of George and Malul, that Išum resembles Moses, who, being the one to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, was, incidentally, also a guide, both in that Išum was a foundling destined for greatness and in that he was said, by way of a post hoc explanation, to have been named by a young woman after the state in which she found him: not floating on the water, but aflame.

32. On Šēpētāya, see Baker 2004, 73.

33. The fact that Širāya took in Šēpētāya not as a daughter but as a slave is stressed by Wunsch (2003–2004, 181 n. 40), as it shows that “rearing” (*rubbū*) and “placing feet in clay” (*šēpē ina tiṭṭi šakānu*) need not signify adoption in its conventional sense, but rather convey more general assumption of authority over a child.

34. I am aware of no proof that Šēpētāya is in fact a shortened form of names of the Šēpēt-DN-ašbat, e.g., the same person being referred to with both names. Neither Tallqvist nor Cousin and Watai supply references for their construal of the name.

Yet this may serve to overstate the similarities between the two texts. The names of Moses and Nāru-erība, as well as other names discussed immediately below, refer to the rescue of foundlings by invoking the place whence they were brought in. While Išum's name would likewise relate to his rescue by Ištar, it would do so in a different way, for it would be chosen by Ištar simply because Išum was on fire. The similarity between CT 15: 5–6 and the four aforementioned sources may therefore be limited to the fact that Ištar rescues Išum and names him, thus, to the occurrence of the motif at hand.

One wonders how commonly this motif played out in real life, yet the aforementioned five sources do not permit a confident answer. This is not only because they are few in number, but also because, apart from VS 6: 116, they are all removed from daily life in some way. CBS 11324 is a pedagogical text. The nature and purpose of MKG 1983.286 is unclear. CT 15: 5–6 and Exodus are literary-mythological narratives. Thus, it is unclear what these sources mean for the fates of actual children. As reviewed below, this problem besets all seemingly foundling-related texts.

From a Dog's Mouth

When analyzing the ancient Mesopotamian evidence seemingly related to foundlings, one is never sure how literally to take it. To explain why that is, one may begin with the evidential *locus classicus* on the topic: the fourth tablet of **Ki-ulutin-bi-šè**/Ana ittišu (edition MSL I). The series, best preserved in Neo-Assyrian copies yet known to have been created in the Old Babylonian period, most likely in Nippur, describes the generic foundling as follows:³⁵

- IV iii 30–31 ad-da-a-ni ù ama-a-ni nu-un-zu-a // *ša abbašu ummašu lā idû*
 IV iii 32–33 túl-ta pà-da sil-t[a ba-an-t]u-ra // *ina bûrti atû šû³⁶ ina sūqi šûrub*
 IV iii 34–35 ka-[ur-gi,-ra]-ta ba-an-[da]-kar // *ina pî kalbi ekim šû*
 IV iii 36–37 ka-ug[a]-ta mi-ni-ib-ta-šub // *ina pî āribi ušaddi*
 IV iii 30–31 He who knows not his father and mother,
 IV iii 32–33 Found in a well, brought in from the street,
 IV iii 34–35 Snatched from a dog's mouth,
 IV iii 36–37 (Whom) one caused to be dropped from a crow's mouth.

35. The section quoted below is attested in two manuscripts: almost fully in K.199 (MSL I, 32–50 [E]), and very partially in VAT.9552, a Middle-Assyrian tablet for which a line-drawing (made by Klaus Wagensommer) is found on CDLI (<https://cdli.earth/cdli-tablet/258>). The Old-Babylonian forerunner Ana ittišu, still unpublished, is known as the “Nippur Phrasebook” (on which see Veldhuis 2014, 88–89 and 93–95).

36. The words normalized here as *atû šû* are found as A TU ŠU on the tablet K.199 v 32. In his edition of Ana ittišu, Benno Landsberger normalized the signs as *a-tu-šu* and translated iii 32 as “In der Brunnen ist er gefunden,” with “er” being the foundling (MSL I, 44). Yet the Akkadian one would expect to correspond to this translation, as well as to Sumerian **túl-ta pād-da**, is *ina bûrti atû*, with no *-šu-* suffix attached to the stative; and this is indeed the phrasing found in another lexical list, **ĤAR-ra ĥubullu** (II 3: *i-na bur-tum a-tu*, edition MSL V). The same problem arises in iii 35, where we find E KI IM ŠU (K.199 v 35) where one would have expected only *e-ki-im*. In this case Landsberger likewise normalized *e-ki-im-šu*, yet here translated “hat er ihn entrissen” (MSL I, 44), with the subject being the child's eventual adopter, the clear subject of *ušaddi*, “He caused to drop,” in iii 37. Yet unless *e-ki-im-šu* is an Assyrianizing preterite, the initial *-e-* indicates a stative, and therefore a passive (rather than Landsberger's active) verb, matching the *-ba-* prefix in **ba-an-[da]-kar**. And indeed, one likewise finds the expected *ina pî kalbi ekim* in **ĤAR-ra ĥubullu** (II 5). One may explain the apparent presence of anomalous *-šu-* suffixes on *atû* and *ekim* in at least three ways. The first, tentatively followed here, is to take ŠU to denote the pronoun *šû*, “he,” with the referent being the foundling. The second is either to construe *atûšu* and *ekimšu* as errors, either with both being simple mistakes or *atûšu* being such a mistake but *ekimšu* rather an Assyrianizing preterite. The third is to take *-šu-* in both cases as a dative rather than an accusative suffix, with the indirect object being the adopter of the child. The phrase *ina bûrti atûšu* would then mean something like “He (the baby) was found for him (the adopter),” and *ina pî kalbi ekimšu* “was snatched for him,” on account of the child being rescued and then ending up in the adopter's care.

This passage seems to fit with onomastic evidence, since an assortment of names attested as early as pre-Sargonic Lagash and as late as the Neo-Babylonian period refer to their bearers having been found in wells, brought in from the street, or snatched from the mouths of dogs. In pre-Sargonic Lagash, we find an attestation of a woman named *túl-ta-pà-da*, “Found in a well.”³⁷ The name is also attested, and commonly so, in the Sargonic and Ur III periods.³⁸ Later, Neo-Babylonian texts attest to the following names: *Ša-pî-kalbi*, “That of a dog’s mouth” (though note that Streck rather translates “Mit einer Hundeschнауze” [2001, 114]); *Ina-pî-kalbi-irīḫ*, “He was left over from a dog’s mouth”; *Sūqāya/Sūqā’itum*, “He/She of the street (*sūqu*)”; *Šulāya*, “He of the street (*šulū*)”; and *Ḫārišānu*, “ditchling.”³⁹

Scholars have long taken these names to be those of foundlings.⁴⁰ This view is implicit already in the scholarship of Stamm (1939, 320–21), and is spelled out explicitly by Malul, who takes it as “fact” that “foundlings’ names in ancient Mesopotamia followed the exact circumstances of the situation where they were found or how they were found” (2001, 361–62). Francis Joannès writes similarly yet less emphatically (2024, 19): “Foundlings are named after the specific circumstances of their discovery (e.g., *Ša-pî-kalbi* ‘Out of the mouth of a dog’).” While this interpretation makes sense, it is not directly evidenced. This is because we have no source documenting the giving of these names to foundlings, nor, conversely, do we have sources noting a person with such a name *not* to be a foundling.⁴¹ And one wonders whether, even if these names were in fact given to foundlings, they referred not to the specific finding place of a given child, but rather to the places whence foundlings were stereotypically (or rather metaphorically) rescued. The name *Ša-pî-kalbi* points in this direction: how many children were literally pried from a dog’s mouth?

There is cause to think that such names should be taken less literally still. A. Leo Oppenheim wrote of Stamm (1943, 36):

He ... considers *Ša-pî-kalbi* as a characteristic name of a foundling, describing its discovery as an exposed child in the street, threatened by the roving dogs of an Oriental city. In my opinion, however, this name is too frequent to favor such a rather sentimental interpretation....

Oppenheim offered an alternative interpretation, drawing on BM 77461 (Wunsch 2003–2004, no. 4), composed on twenty-third Tebētu Nebuchadnezzar 33 (January 20, 571). It states (lines 1–5):

37. SRU 43 (= RTC 16) i 2, cited by Thomas Balke in his discussion of *túl-ta-pà-da* (2017, 397). For a detailed discussion of the linguistic nuances of the name, see Balke 2006, 148–49 and especially n. 645.

38. Balke 2017, 397 n. 1327, with references to attestations. He translates the name as “Findling,” and writes (2017, 397 n. 1327): “Die Tatsache, dass dieser PN bis in die Ur-III-Zeit weiterlebt und als häufiges Anthroponym nachweisbar bleibt, dokumentiert gleichermaßen die enorme Anzahl von Findelkindern, d.h. von den Eltern ausgesetzten Säuglingen in der Gesellschaft; eine entsprechende Benennung ohne solche spezifische ‘Fundumstände’ scheint doch recht unwahrscheinlich.”

39. For *Ša-pî-kalbi*, *Ina-pî-kalbi-irīḫ*, *Sūqāya/Sūqā’itum*, and *Šulāya*, see discussion in Stamm 1939, 251 and 320–21 with references. The name *Ša-pî-kalbi* is also discussed by Wunsch (2003–2004, 182–83). For *Ḫārišānu*, see Streck 2001, 114.

40. E.g., Stamm (1939, 320–21), Malul (1990, 105; 2001, 361–62), and Joannès (2024, 19 and 31). Michael Streck (2001, 114) takes the names *Sūqāya*, *Šulāya*, and *Ḫārišānu* (which he translates “Der vom Stadtgraben”) to be those of foundlings, yet understands *Ša-pî-kalbi* rather to mean “Mit einer Hundeschнауze.”

41. I am not aware of socioprosopographical studies of *Ina-pî-kalbi-irīḫ*, *Sūqāya/Sūqā’itum*, *Šulāya*, and *Ḫārišānu*, but only of *Ša-pî-kalbi*, undertaken by Cornelia Wunsch (2003–2004, 182–83). She summarizes, “Die Belege zeigen, daß ein *Ša-pî-kalbi* durchaus Angehöriger gutsituierten städtischen Familie sein kann, wenngleich sich die meisten Träger dieses Namens unter Sklaven, Abhängigen und einfachen einer Leuten finden” (2003–2004, 183). In her article, Wunsch presents five documents appearing to deal with foundlings (2003–2004, nos. 1–5). Of these, only one (BM 94589, Wunsch 2003–2004, n. 1) gives the name of the child said to have been “lifted from a dog’s mouth”: *Nabû-bullissu* (“Nabû, keep him alive”), a standard Babylonian name and plea for well-being of a kind similar to the name *Ili-tūram* in CBS 11324. That one data point does not by itself disprove an association between names such as *Ša-pî-kalbi* and foundlings. Only documents stating the bearers of such names *not* to be foundlings could do that. Yet such information would hardly have been relevant to the transactions the records of which attest to these names.

[an]nātu mukinnê ša ina pānīšunu šīraya ... mārāša (text: šu) ana [x] kalbi tassuku [nū]r-šamaš [u]ltu pî kalbi iššûma [urab]bû
 [Th]ese are the witnesses before whom Šīrāya ... cast her son to the [x] dog (and) [Nū]r-Šamaš lifted [f]rom the dog's mouth (and) [‘reare]d’: (list of witnesses).

Oppenheim wrote (1943, 37):

I propose therefore the following somewhat different view suggested by a contemporary legal tablet. I suppose that the personal name *Ša-pî-kalbi* is therefore more likely to refer to the just described particular type of adoption than to the fact that the named person escaped the ignominious death of being devoured by the dogs.

Thus, those bearing the name *Ša-pî-kalbi* may not have been foundlings at all!

Oppenheim's interpretation of *Ša-pî-kalbi* (discussed in Wunsch 2003–2004, 178, 182) is far-reaching in its potential implications. Interpreted à la Oppenheim, the names *tûl-ta-pà-da*, *Ina-pî-kalbi-irīh*, *Sūqāya/Sūqā'itum*, *Šulāya*, and *Ḫārišānu* would reflect a purely legalistic arrangement; *Šīrāya's* rescue of *Šēpētāya* in VS 6: 116, and *ḪU-TI-rēmīnni's* of *Nāru-erība* in MKG 1983.286, would likewise be purely metaphorical. Yet Oppenheim's insight need not hold true across the board. It stands to reason that some foundlings were in reality rescued from wells, streets, rivers, and so on. And the reasons for their rescue may not have been in the least bit sentimental. As in the case of *Šēpētāya*, a foundling may make for a slave, and a particularly convenient one at that: cost-free, not liable to be the subject of ownership disputes, and without anyone or anything to run away to. Rather than being representative for all children supposedly rescued from the dogs, BM 77461 is therefore more readily interpreted as documenting a legalistic version of actual, spontaneously occurring foundling rescue—this in line with scholarly *communis opinio* (e.g., Malul 2001 and Wunsch 2003–2004). All the same, BM 77461 serves as a note of caution, urging vigilance lest one take ancient “foundling language” too literally and so misconstrue its underlying reality.

Well illustrating the difficulty of ascertaining that reality is *Emar 256*.⁴² The text states:

¹ištu ūmi annîm ²addu mār awiru ³kīam anumma ⁴ḫulāyu mārī ⁵<<2>> ḫaṭṭašu ⁶šebrat ul mārī šūt ⁷u inanna ḫulāyu emūt ⁸u MÍ.NITA.MEŠ-šu ⁹ana ribīti šalû ¹⁰ana šatti ša nukurti ¹¹u abī-kapī mār ḫam[sī x-x]-mi-du-ni ¹²MÍ.NITA.MEŠ-šu ša ḫu[lāy]u [mār ad]du ¹³ištu ribī[ti] ¹⁴iššīšunu ¹⁵u šumma ur[ram] ¹⁶šēram aḫū[šu] ¹⁷ša ḫulāyu ¹⁸mārī ¹⁹aḫīšu upaṭṭe[r] ²⁰1000 kas[pi] ²¹iṭṭerīšunu ²²lidd[in] lilqi ²³ištu ūmi annī[m] ²⁴abī-kapī ²⁵mār ḫamsi ²⁶kīam iqbi anumma ²⁷aḫiu u išarte ²⁸u aḫami ²⁹mārī ḫu[lā]yi ³⁰ana mārīya ³¹u 2 mārīya ³²aškunšunu

^{1–4}As for the future (lit. from this day), (says) Addu son of Awiru thus: ^{5–6}Ḫulāyu, my son—his staff is broken, he is no son of mine. ^{7–10}Now: Ḫulāyu died, and his children were cast to the street in the year of hostility. ¹¹And Abī-kapī son of Ḫam[su] [...] ^{12–14}(and) lifted the children of Ḫu[lāy]u son of [son of Ad]du from the st[reet]. ^{15–22}And if at any time to come (lit. in the morning), a brother of Ḫulāyu would free his brother's children, he should hand over a thousand shekels of silver (as) their release price, giving (the sum) and taking (the children).

42. Copy Arnaud 1985, 69. No photo available. Edition: Arnaud 1986, 251–53. Discussions: Durand 1990, 76; Zaccagnini 1995, 102–3; Bellotto 2009, 147–49; and Viano 2023, 209–10 (with transliteration and translation of lines 7–14 in 2023, 148). Selected lines from the text are also translated in Seminara 1998, *passim*. The text was written during the reign of Zu-Ištar, whose reign is dated by Cohen and d'Alfonso in their study of Emar chronology to around 1270 (2008, with summary table on p. 20).

^{23–32}As for the future (lit. from this day), Abī-kapī son of Ḥamsu said thus: I take Aḫiu, Išarte, and Aḫami, the children of Ḥulāyu, as my own son and two daughters.⁴³

What events, concrete and symbolic, underlie this text, and in what order did they occur? Carlo Zaccagnini (1995, 102–3), Nicoletta Bellotto (2009, 147–48), and Maurizio Viano (2023, 210), agree in proposing the following sequence: Addu (here, the grandfather) disowned his son, Ḥulāyu. Ḥulāyu then died, and his children were cast into the street. A man named Abī-kapī rescued the children from the street, and took them into his household. He then adopted them, with *Emar* 256 being produced to ratify the adoption and outline its stipulations (with these including the unusually, well-nigh impossibly, high price of a 1000 shekels of silver to be paid by any brother of Ḥulāyu wishing to buy back his nephews).⁴⁴ This reconstruction makes sense: it would, as Zaccagnini writes, be “no surprise” (1995, 102) that the literally fatherless, legally grandfather-less children were cast into the street in a year of hostility (*šatti ša nukurti*). Yet an anonymous peer reviewer, in bringing this text to my attention, outlined a different sequence: “A grandfather declares that his deceased son is no longer his son and his grandchildren have been abandoned in the square.” According to the reviewer’s interpretation, the grandfather’s disavowal of his son’s paternity did not occur in the past, but is rather proclaimed as part of the drafting of *Emar* 256, and the text’s talk of the grandchildren’s abandonment is likewise not an account of former occurrences but, in agreement with Oppenheim’s interpretation, symbolic language denoting the grandparent’s giving up of his rights to them before handing them over for adoption by Abī-kapī. The phrase *ana ribīti šalū*, “They are cast into the street,” should then be taken just as literally as *ḥaṭṭašu šebret*, “his staff is broken,”⁴⁵ that is to say not at all.

One may propose yet another reconstruction that combines elements of both positions. The fact that the grandfather’s declaration is preceded by *ištu ūmi annīm*, “as of (lit. from) this day,” implies that the grandfather’s disavowal of paternity is, as the reviewer proposes, newly made and concerning a deceased son. This seems even more likely in view of the fact that the only other statement in the text introduced with *ištu ūmi annīm* is Abī-kapī’s declaration of presently adopting the children. Yet the fact that the children being cast out into the street (**mí.nita.meš-šu ana ribīti šalū**, lines 8–9) is spoken of directly after the statement of the father’s having died (*ḥulāyu emūt*, line 7), and is linked to it by the conjunction *u*, “and,” indicates that said expulsion occurred in the past (as in the interpretations of Zaccagnini, Bellotto, and Viano). The mention of *šatti ša nukurti*, whatever its exact significance in the narrative,⁴⁶ likewise seems too specific to denote orphaning of the kind referred to by Oppenheim and described in the above-quoted BM 77461. Combining these two observations, one may propose the following sequence of events. The father died. His children were cast out, and subsequently taken in by Abī-kapī. And when Abī-kapī moved

43. A philological commentary on *Emar* 256 is given in the appendix.

44. Bellotto writes (2009, 148–49; translations from Italian my own): “It is interesting to observe that this is the only text in which the amount of 1,000 shekels of silver is established as the ransom. In contracts of enslavement, in fact, to free a person from the condition of servitude one had either to hand over to the master a number of slaves equal to twice that number, or to pay double the sum that had previously been paid to purchase the slave to be freed. The reason for such a high amount in *Emar* 256 is perhaps due to the fact that the children are adopted. It should also be noted that in no adoption contract is a price established to be paid for the possible redemption of the adoptee.” And Viano writes (2023, 210): “This clause seems to combine the penalty clause typical of Syrian contracts, which stipulates artificially high penalties to guarantee the irrevocability of the contract and prevent any claim, and the redemption clause known from the Syro-Hittite documents. At any rate, this clause seems to suggest that the children were subject to some form of dependency.”

45. As pointed to by Viano (2023, 147, n. 592), in ME 105 (edition Arnaud 1987, 240–41): 6–7, one finds the expression *ul mārī šū ḥaṭṭašu šebret*, nearly identical to *ḥaṭṭašu šebret ul mārī šū* (*Emar* 256: 5–6). In his note on the latter phrase, Durand wrote (1990, 76 n. 166): “Le *ḥaṭṭu* est bien connu comme un insigne de commandement.” In an expression denoting a father’s renunciation of paternity over his son, it seems probable that the breaking of a staff had phallic meaning. If so, one wonders if the staff stood in not only for the son’s penis, symbolically broken by the rejecting father, but also at the same time that of the father, with its breaking serving to symbolically obviate his past begetting of the son.

46. Zaccagnini argues (1995, 102) that it was specifically due to the “hostility” of that year that the children were abandoned, yet the syntactical opacity of lines 9–10 precludes certainty on this point.

to formally adopt them, the grandfather renounced his paternity over his deceased son, thus giving up any claim over his grandchildren and shoring up Abī-kapī's adoptive paternity.

On a comparative note, it may be observed that in *Emar 256*, as in VS 6: 116, a foundling's rescue is commented upon not immediately after it occurred, but rather when its occurrence was invoked to buttress a legally binding act involving parental authority: in *Emar 256*, foundlings' formal adoption by their rescuer; in VS 6: 116, a decree (*riksu*) of unspecified nature.⁴⁷ The same such use of the past is made in another, far more famous document: Esarhaddon's *Apology*, which recounts his accession to the throne. As Hayim Tadmor argued (1983, 38–45), that text was likely written not immediately after Esarhaddon's coronation, but rather in the summer of his eighth year (673–672); and its probable purpose was to legitimize Esarhaddon's succession arrangements—since these privileged Ashurbanipal, his younger son, just as Sennacherib selected Esarhaddon from among his older brothers.

Conclusion

CT 15: 5–6, an Old Babylonian tablet of unknown provenience, speaks of the origin of Išum: Ninlil bore him to her grandson Šamaš, set him on fire, and left him in the street. We learn of these events from words that Ištar—whom we find fostering the newborn in Ekur—addresses to Enlil. This article proposed that Ninlil's lighting of Išum in CT 15: 5–6 and his subsequent fostering by Ištar constitute an explanation for Išum's fiery name: Ištar, finding an abandoned baby on fire, named him after fire itself. It argued that *uštāhizma* is most readily interpreted as describing Ninlil's setting Išum on fire—this in line with Attinger and Krebernik (2005) and George (2015) over Cooper (2002), AHw, CAD A/1, Römer (1966), *SEAL*, Taylor (2017), and Weiershäuser (2010). It put forward that CT 15: 5–6 is a mythological expression of a Mesopotamian, and more broadly ancient Near Eastern, motif of a woman rescuing and naming a foundling. It highlighted the general difficulty of ascertaining the social reality underlying Mesopotamian documents pertaining to foundlings. And it reanalyzed *Emar 256*, a text reflecting this problem, as documenting a grandfather's post-hoc renunciation of paternity over his dead son, made in order to allow a third party to formally adopt the grandfather's grandchildren, who, upon their father's death, were rendered homeless and taken in by said third party.

Appendix: A Philological Commentary on *Emar 256*

Arnaud = Arnaud 1986; Seminara = Seminara 1998; Durand = Durand 1990; Zaccagnini = Zaccagnini 1995; Bellotto = Bellotto 2009; Viano = Viano 2023, with these together referred to as “all translators.” Commentary organized by line number.

4. *ḫulāyu mārī*: Here, as in line 6, one finds DUMU-*ia* where one would normally expect *mārī*, yet in *Emar DUMU-ia* is a *comunissima scrittura* for *mārī* (Seminara 1998, 41).

47. Malul writes of VAS 6: 116 (2001, 357): “What is being carried out in front of the witnesses, according to this document, is merely the recitation of some formal declaration attesting to Šēpētāia's status, which was predicated upon her having been formerly picked up from the street and adopted. If we follow this understanding of the circumstances concerning Šēpētāia's whereabouts, we must assume that she was the object of a claim that the present document tries to reject.” Yet one need not assume that the formal declaration was specifically made to rebuff an assault on Šēpētāia's status. Restating the nature and underlying circumstances of Šēpētāia's position may conceivably have served to buttress any manner of claim hinging on Širāya and Nabū-nādin-šūmi's authority over Šēpētāia.

5. <<2>> *ḥaṭṭašu*: Arnaud transliterates “2^{gis} *ḥa-aṭ-tá-šu*” and translates “ses deux batons.” Yet I follow Durand and all subsequent translators in taking “2” as an error and translating *ḥaṭṭašu* as singular noun, and thus in the expected agreement with *šebat* (line 6).

8. *u* MÍ.NITA.MEŠ-*šu*: With the exception of Bellotto, who opts for “figlie (e . . .) figli,” all translators render MÍ.NITA.MEŠ as “children”: “enfants” (Arnaud, Durand), “children” (Zaccagnini, Viano), “i figli” (Seminara). To my knowledge, scholars have not yet proposed an Akkadian reading of MÍ.NITA.ME, and this compound is therefore left unrendered.

9. *ana ribīti šalū*: (a) Arnaud, Zaccagnini, Bellotto, and Viano understand *ša-al-ú* to mean “cast” (from *šalā’u*). Yet Durand and Seminara (p. 606) emend to *ša-al-lu*”, “couchaient”/“dormivano” (from *šalālu*). The majority derivation makes better thematic sense and does not require an emendation. It is therefore followed here. (b) All translators have taken line 9 to be modified by *ana šatti ša nukurti*, “in the year of hostility.” This is likewise done here, yet only tentatively. As Durand noted regarding lines 10–11, “La syntaxe est inhabituelle: le verbe paraît être en milieu de phrase.” It is possible that it is not *šalū* that is modified by *ana šatti ša nukurti*, but rather the uncertain verb [x-x]-*mi-du-ni* (line 11). However, this is contraindicated by line 11 opening with *u*, for that conjunction implies a break from line 10.

10. *ana šatti ša nukurti*: The line reads *a-na* MU.KÁM *ša* KÚR.MEŠ *nu-kúr-ti*. (a) All translators take *ana šatti* to mean “in the year.” This goes against standard usage of *ana*, yet is well-paralleled at Emar (see citations in Seminara 1998, 466, under “Valore temporale”). (b) As Seminara notes (1998, 33), the Sumerian KÚR.MEŠ is likely glossed by *nu-kúr-ti*, with the combination of two words then standing in for “war.” With the exception of Zaccagnini (“enemies and war”), all translators have rendered the phrase this way without flagging it as containing a gloss.

11. *abī-kapī mār ḥam*[*si* x-x]-*mi-du-ni*: The signs given here as [x-x]-*mi-du-ni* are reconstructed by Arnaud as [*i-la*]-*mi-du-ni* and translated “[l’ap]prit.” Durand emends to [*e*]-*mi-du-ni* based on the following reasoning (1990, 76 n. 169): “*i-la-mi-du-ni* offre le double inconvénient d’une vocalisation (*i*) inhabituelle et d’une forme subjonctive plurielle (*-uni*) inattendue. *emēdu* serait ici construit directement.” Zaccagnini and Bellotto follow Durand, albeit tentatively. Zaccagnini wrote as follows (1995, 102 n. 36): “I tentatively follow Durand’s restoration of line 11 ([*e*]-*mi-du-ni*) although the absence of *ana* before the personal name raises difficulties; further note the absence of any syntactical connection between line 11 and the phrase of lines 12–14.” Based on the same considerations, together with the fact that action described in line 11 seems too great in potential narrative importance to reconstruct without high confidence—consider how great the change is from Arnaud’s “Abī-kāpi [l’ap]prit” to Durand’s “ils [ses enfants] cherchèrent refuge chez Abī-kapī”—the sign preceding -*mi-* is left as “x.”

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