

Counting Lines in *Erra*

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This article utilizes line counting—in the sense both of noting a line’s number within a tablet and of delineating sections of text thematically and hypothesizing as to the significance of and symmetries between their lengths—to shed light on the structure and meaning of the Babylonian poem *Erra and Išum*. It puts forward three arguments: First, line counting indicates conspicuous roles in the text for the numbers five and fifty; second, line counting reveals symmetrical structures in *Erra*; and third, line counting indicates the construction of *Erra*’s first tablet to be in line with prior insights regarding the importance of halfway points in Akkadian poetry, indicating that it has structural similarities to other great Akkadian epics.

1. INTRODUCTION

As scholars have recovered more and more of the poetic masterpieces of Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria, they have paid increasing attention to their structure. One especially striking observation on the subject is offered in Sophus Helle’s analysis of invocations in the Sumerian poem *Nin me šár-ra*, otherwise known as *The Exaltation of Inanna*:

The beginning of the poem . . . consists of five seven-line stanzas, four of which are introduced by the invocation “My lady!” and the last of which begins with the threefold repetition of the same sign. In fact, the audience is warned in advance that the text will be divided into groups of seven lines. The line just before the first occurrence of the phrase *nin-gu*₁₀, l. 5, reads: *me imin-be*₂ *šu sa*₂ *du*₁₁-ga, “You who took hold of the seven cosmic powers!” The number seven can signify totality, implying that Inana has seized all cosmic powers (Sumerian *me*), but in this context, it also serves to announce the structure of the immediately following text (Helle 2023: 193).

Anne Draffkorn Kilmer likewise analyzes Mesopotamian poetry while focusing on line counting, although working on Akkadian rather than Sumerian texts and arguing along different lines. She proposes that Akkadian poetic works, and in fact each of their tablets, “placed significant events at symmetrically spaced points in the texts,” namely, at quarter-, half-, and three-quarter points (2006: 209).

This article utilizes line counting—in the sense both of noting a line’s number within the tablet (as done by Kilmer) and of delineating sections thematically and hypothesizing as to the significance of and symmetries between their lengths (as done by Helle)—to analyze *Erra and Išum*, a Babylonian poem telling of the wrath of Erra, a god of violence and pestilence, who resolves to annihilate all humans because he believes that they hold him in contempt.¹ By investigating *Erra* in this way, this article seeks to add to the rich interpretive literature on the work. To name five notable examples from the past two decades:

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1. An edition and analysis of *Erra and Išum* can be found in Taylor 2017. An updated edition of the poem is under preparation as part of the eBL (electronic Babylonian Literature) project, headed by Enrique Jiménez at Ludwig Maximilian Universität, Munich. An edition of Tablet I can already be found on the eBL site (<https://www.ebl.lmu.de/corpus/L/1/5/SB/I>).

Jeffrey Cooley (2008) analyzes references in *Erra* to celestial omens; Yoram Cohen (2013) proposes that ten lines found in the poem's first tablet (I 109–118), in which Erra praises his own power in the highest terms, foreshadow the rest of the poem; Andrew George (2013) discusses the poem's perspicuous and unsparing portrayal of war and its effects; Selena Wisnom (2019: 158–252) examines possible allusions in *Erra* to *Atrahasis*, *Gilgamesh*, *Anzû*, and *Enūma eliš*, as well as its possible connection, further discussed below, to the Sumerian *Lamentation for the Destruction of Sumer and Ur*; and Helle (2020: 206–8) analyzes the poem's structure, proposing that its plot can be divided into two complementary acts, in line with structural divisions found in multiple other works of Akkadian literature.

The analysis given below is divided into three sections, organized according to what line counting may reveal in each case. Section 2, “Numerology,” utilizes line counting to shed light on the significance of two numbers in the poem—five (§2.1) and fifty (§2.2)—and discusses implications thereof for the poem's relationship to other compositions, chiefly *Enūma eliš*. Section 3, “Symmetry,” analyzes three cases in which the lengths of adjacent sections form symmetries when juxtaposed, with these symmetries involving chiasm (§3.1), serving to highlight complementary contrasts (§3.2), and reinforcing the impression of rhetorical artfulness (§3.3). And section 4, “Plot Structure,” discusses a major event in the poem's first tablet, whose location in that tablet coheres with Kilmer's 2006 thesis.

2. NUMEROLOGY

2.1. Five

The first five lines of *Erra* are as follows:

I 1 [ša]r gimir dadmē bānū kib[rāti . . .]

I 2 ḥendursanga apil ellil rēš[ū . . .]

I 3 nāš ḥaṭṭi širti nāqid šalmāt qa[qa]di rēš[ū] [tenēšēti]

I 4 išum tābiḥu na'du ša ana našē kakkīšu ezzūti qātāšu asmā

I 5 u ana šubruq ulmīšu šērūti erra qarrād ilānī i-nu-šū² ina šubti

I 1 [Kin]g of all inhabited regions, creator of the la[nds . . .]

I 2 Ḥendursanga, firstborn[n] son of Enlil [. . .]

I 3 Bearer of the august scepter, shepherd of the black-hea[ded] people, herdsman [of the peoples],

I 4 Išum, zealous slaughterer, whose hands are fit to wield his furious weapons,

I 5 And at the flashing of whose fearsome axes, Erra, warrior of the gods, quakes in (his) abode.

While scholars have generally agreed that I 1–4 serve to invoke *šar gimir dadmē*, “King of All Inhabited Regions,”³ there has been considerable disagreement as to whether, and if so to what extent, this is also true of I 5. Some translators have understood either the line's latter half, or the line as a whole, to not be part of the invocation but rather to lead up to I 6, *irissūma libbašu epēš tāḥāzi*, “His (Erra's) heart urged him to do battle.” Stephanie Dalley (2000: 285) translates I 4–6 as “. . . Išum pious slaughterer whose hands are adept at carrying his furious weapons / And making his fierce axes flash! Erra, warrior of gods was stirring at home / His heart urged him to make war,” and Benjamin Foster (2005: 881) “O Ishum, ‘zealous slaughterer,’ whose hands are suited to brandish fierce weapons / And to make his sharp spear flash, Erra, warrior of the gods, was restless in his dwelling, / His heart urged him to

2. On this form, see below.

3. The referent of this epithet is most likely Išum, although Marduk and Erra have also been proposed. For discussions of this question and references to previous literature, see George 2013: 48–49; Taylor 2017: 21–24.

do battle!” Other scholars, in contrast, take all of I 5 to conclude the invocation: e.g., George 2013: 49 (with further discussion and bibliography p. 66 n. 6); Taylor 2017: 26–27; and eBL.

The latter understanding is followed here, based on the following reasoning: That I 5 as a whole can be taken as separate from I 1–4 and lead up to I 6 (as in Foster’s translation) runs against the presence of the conjunction *u*, “and,” at the beginning of I 5, for it indicates that at least part of I 5 should go with I 4. To construe *u ana šubruq ulmīšu šērūti* as belonging with I 4 but *erra qarrād ilānī i-nu-šú ina šubti* with I 6 (as with Dalley) runs into a separate problem, for it splits the line into two disconnected units and thus leads to highly inelegant syntax. A difficulty with both of these approaches has to do with *i-nu-šú*, a form derived from *nāšu*, “to shake” (CAD N/2 113–15), and known from one manuscript, the only one to preserve this part of the line (VAT 9162 i 3’). The form appears to be in the subjunctive and hence to be governed by *ša* in I 4 and go with the opening invocation. Yet one can, like Luigi Cagni (1969: 141), explain the verb’s final *-u* as an overhanging vowel, of the kind common in *Erra* (see discussion in Cagni 1969: 146–49), with the verb then being normalized as the preterite *inūš*. Or one can construe it as reflecting the indicative durative form *inuššu*, which would end in *-u* in any case.

Yet here a more significant problem with Dalley’s and Foster’s interpretations comes in, thematic rather than grammatical. Based on the references collected by the CAD, the verb *nāšu* is often used to refer to terrified shaking (CAD N/2 113–14) but never to agitated shuffling of the kind that might anticipate Erra’s desire for battle. Two close parallels to I 5 strengthen the impression that the former sense is meant here as well. The first, noted by Cagni (1969: 141) and Taylor (2017: 27), is *Enūma eliš* VI 146: *ana šumīšu ilū lištar’ibū linūšū ina šubti*, “at (the mention of) his (Marduk’s) name, may the gods be made to tremble, may they quake in (their) abode” (VI 146). The second is found in an inscription of Shalmaneser III, where he hails the god Adad in the following terms: *ša ina rigimšu i-nu-šú ḥuršāni isabbu’ā tamāte*, “by whose voice the mountains quake and the seas tremble” (RIMAP 3 A.0.102.12: 6). (Note the spelling *i-nu-šú*, identical to Erra I 5, as well as the subordination by *ša* and the verb’s present-future sense paralleled by *isabbu’ā*.)

In light of all this—the presence of *u* at the beginning of I 5, the inelegance of syntactically splitting up the line, other attestations of *nāšu*, and close parallels to I 5—the line should be taken to describe Erra’s terrified shaking in the face of Išum’s weapons and to conclude the poem’s five-line opening invocation. The spelling *i-nu-šú* would then reflect a subjunctive, and most likely durative, form (*inuššu*), as in Taylor 2017: 398 n. 8, and paralleling the present-future subjunctive use of *i-nu-šú* in the Shalmaneser III inscription quoted above—although “And at the flashing . . . Erra has quaked (*inūšu*) in his abode” is also possible.

To my knowledge, it has not been pointed out by those scholars who have taken *Erra*’s opening invocation to be five lines, as done here, that this length is conspicuous in light of the poem’s length of five tablets. It would certainly be fitting for the author Kabti-ilāni-Marduk to design the opening of the poem to match its length in this way. Yet why five tablets to begin with? Wisnom proposes a connection with *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur* (LSU):

This [LSU] is the only lamentation to have five *kirugus*: the *Ur Lament* has eleven, the *Eridu Lament* has at least eight, the *Uruk Lament* has at least twelve, and the *Nippur Lament* has twelve. . . . Similarly, five tablets is an unusual length for the author of *Erra and Išum* to have chosen. There is no standard format or length for Akkadian heroic poetry, but the other models that influence *Erra and Išum* are quite different: *Anzū* has three, *Enūma eliš* has seven, *Atraḥasīs* three in the Old Babylonian version and at least six in the Standard Babylonian version, and

Gilgameš twelve (or eleven if Tablet XII is not counted as part of the main story). There is thus no Akkadian precedent for *Erra* and *Išum*'s arrangement over five tablets (2019: 221).

Wisnom marshals other lines of evidence in arguing for a direct textual relationship between *Erra* and LSU (2019: 217–44)—for instance, offering a detailed comparison of the events of each tablet of *Erra* with those of the corresponding kirugu of LSU (2019: 220) and noting, among other similarities, that the fourth chapter of each composition contains each poem's major account of destruction and that the restoration of both Ur and Babylon is ordained in LSU Kirugu 5 and *Erra* V respectively.

Yet rather than point to an affinity with LSU, the length and structure of *Erra* may invite comparison with Akkadian compositions, namely, *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* and *Enūma eliš*. Before detailing this comparison, it is important to note that these texts are not only known to have been in circulation alongside *Erra* but can be said with a high degree of confidence to have been in circulation at the time of *Erra*'s likely composition, making textual links between the three compositions more likely.

What is known and hypothesized regarding the time of the texts' individual composition is, in broad strokes, as follows: The earliest datable manuscripts of *Erra* are from Sultantepe (ca. 718–612 BCE) (Hruška 1974: 355). Scholars have variously proposed the poem to have been composed in the ninth (Lambert 1957–58: 397–98), eighth (von Soden 1971: 256; Beaulieu 2001), and seventh (Gössmann 1955: 88–90; Franke 2014) centuries BCE.

The earliest datable manuscripts of *Ludlul* are from Ashurbanipal's Library (Oshima 2014: 5). The composition is centered on Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, a high-ranking official of the time of the Kassite king Nazi-Maruttaš (1307–1282 BCE), a king praised by name in the composition (V 99).⁴ Some scholars take this as clear proof that the composition was composed at that time: Foster writes, "it would be hard to imagine better evidence" (2024: 273). Others are far less confident: Amar Annus and Alan Lenzi surmise, "The precise date of the poem also eludes us. We would be naive to allow the mention of a Kassite king's name or his official to dictate to us the date the text was composed. These names merely set the *terminus post quem*," yet they also state that "It seems most likely that the poem was composed . . . sometime during the late Kassite period, between the reign of Nazimurutaš and the mid-twelfth century BCE" (2010: xviii).

Enūma eliš is likewise known from Ashurbanipal Library copies, considered by Lambert (2013: 442) to be the earliest datable manuscripts. Yet one tablet from the city of Assur, KAR 317 = VAT 10346, has been judged on paleographic grounds by Stefan Maul (apud George 2005–6: 87) to have been written around the end of the second millennium (for a discussion, see McGrath 2024: 404–5 n. 1360). The conventional dating of the poem is that of Lambert, who argued that the text was composed during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (e.g., 1965: 291), yet other dates have also been proposed. (For a recent discussion of the dating of the poem with a reassessment of prior scholarship, see McGrath 2024: 402–6.)

To summarize: scholars have hypothesized *Erra* to have been written in the ninth century BCE at the earliest, while the composition of *Enūma eliš* has conventionally been placed toward the end of the second millennium BCE and that of *Ludlul* can be located with confidence in the twelfth or eleventh century BCE. Links between *Erra* and the latter two texts are therefore historically plausible.

Now to the comparison itself. *Ludlul* was long estimated to comprise four tablets yet it has been demonstrated by Takayoshi Oshima (2014: 6) to be composed of five (the fourth of

4. On Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, see Annus and Lenzi 2010: xvi–xvii. For an up-to-date edition of *Ludlul*, Härtinen 2022.

which remains poorly attested). This means that *Erra*'s division into five tablets is not unique in Akkadian literature, rendering it less conspicuous and thus decreasing the degree to which it indicates a direct connection to LSU.

As for *Enūma eliš*, one should first point out that although *Enūma eliš* is seven tablets long, its main conflict—that between Marduk and Tiamat—takes place only in its first five, with Tablets VI and VII concerning matters related to but distinct from that conflict: the creation of humankind, the construction of Babylon, and the naming of Marduk, events setting up the “post-war” Mesopotamian world order. Second, the main action of both poems takes place in their fourth tablet, though Marduk's battle with Tiamat is admittedly much less like Erra's decimation of Babylonia than the events described in LSU Kirugu 4. Third, after having demonstrated their supreme power, both Marduk and Erra hold court over the awe-struck assembly of the gods in Tablet V of their compositions, concluding the main conflict of the two poems in a similar way (*Enūma eliš* V 85–89; *Erra* V 1–3). That Marduk is presumably one of the gods standing in fearful subservience before Erra can be taken as a subversion of the corresponding scene in *Enūma eliš*; that he isn't even mentioned, all the more so. And fourth, if it turns out that the incomplete *Erra* II and III are chiefly composed of dialogue rather than action, they would parallel the dialogue-focused *Enūma eliš* II and III. In light of this, one may follow Wisnom's lead in proposing an intertextual explanation for *Erra*'s structure yet center that explanation on *Enūma eliš*, a composition argued by Wisnom (2019: 182–97) and others (e.g., Frahm 2010: 6–10) to be the target of many other textual subversions on *Erra*'s part.

2.2. Fifty

The first fifty lines of *Erra* IV may be connected to Marduk's fifty names, bestowed on him by the other gods in *Enūma eliš* VI–VII. Such a connection is indicated by three lines of evidence:

1) In IV 1 Išum tells Erra: *qurādu erra ša rubê marduk zikiršu lā tašḫut*, “Warrior Erra, you did not fear Sovereign Marduk's name (*zikru*).” “Marduk” is, as one would expect, Marduk's literal first name.

2) In IV 50–51 Išum speaks of Erra's destruction of Sippar, saying in IV 50 that Sippar was once spared from the Deluge by *bēl matāti*, “Lord of the Lands”: *ša sippar āl šāti ša bēl matāti ina aqār pānīšu abūbu lā ušbi'ūšu / ina balu šamaš dūršu tābutma tattadi samīssu*, “As for Sippar, the primeval city, over which the Lord of the Lands did not let the cataclysm (*abūbu*) sweep, out of his favor (for it): / you wrecked its walls and cast its parapet down!” While scholars agree that the referent of *bēl matāti* is either Enlil or Marduk, they are divided as to which of the two it most likely is, as are they in regard to the nature of the *abūbu*, “cataclysm” spoken of here: Some have argued it to be the primordial *abūbu*, i.e., the Deluge, described in *Atraḫasīs* and SB *Gilgamesh* XI as having been caused by Enlil; others posit that it is the *abūbu* Marduk speaks to Erra (I 129–46) of having once unleashed, which involved drought and various other disasters, but not flooding. There is also disagreement as to whether these are two different cataclysms to begin with or whether Marduk's *abūbu* is in point of fact the primordial deluge differently told, with Marduk taking Enlil's role while decimating earthly life by different means.⁵ These questions cannot be resolved at present,

5. Cagni (1969: 184–87) cautiously advocates for a distinction between the two disasters, with the primordial flood being referred to in IV 50; his opinion is followed by eBL (see the note on I 132 there). Others, including Gössmann (1955: 65), Taylor (2017: 203 n. 22), and Wisnom (2019: 194) take Marduk's *abūbu* and the Deluge to be one and the same. The particular thorniness of this question stems from the fact that any and all differences

yet what is most important for this discussion is not whether Enlil or Marduk is the referent of *bēl matāti* but that we know from *Enūma eliš* that *bēl matāti* is Marduk's fiftieth name, given to him by Enlil.⁶

3) The second Akkadian word for “name,” *šumu* (CAD Š/3 284–97), can also refer to a line of text.

In light of these facts, it is tempting to suggest that the first fifty *šumū* (lines) of *Erra* IV might echo the fifty *šumū* (names) of Marduk, whose *zikru* (name) Erra does not fear—with Marduk's first and fiftieth names bookending the passage. Such a connection would be all the more resonant because the first forty-nine lines of this passage describe Erra's destruction of Babylon, Marduk's city.

An observation along similar lines has been made by Wisnom:

There may even be a subtle mocking of Marduk's 50 names in *Erra and Išum* V.44, where the author Kabti-ilānī-Marduk assures us that he accurately reproduced the text Erra revealed to him in a dream: *e-da šu-ma ul u₂-rad-di ana muḫ-ḫi*, ‘not a single line did he add to it.’ . . . It may be possible to read this as an ironic dig at Marduk, hinting that Erra does not need a heaping-up of names to establish his supremacy (2019: 239).

This observation, incidentally, would cohere with *Erra*'s structure having been modeled on the first five tablets of *Enūma eliš*, for Marduk's fifty names are only found in *Enūma eliš* VI and VII, which *Erra*'s author, Kabti-ilānī-Marduk, would have refrained from drawing on.

3. SYMMETRY

3.1. Chiasm

Erra IV 40–74 describe upheaval, brought about directly or indirectly by Erra, in five cities—Babylon, Sippar, Uruk, Parsâ (Dūr-Kurigalzu), and Dēr—with their number appearing conspicuous in light of the length of the poem and of its opening invocation. The passage can be divided in the following way (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Lines

IV 40–44	I	Marduk Laments Babylon	5	a
IV 45–49	II	Marduk Punishes Babylon	5	a
IV 50–51	III	Destruction in Sippar	2	b
IV 52–62	IV	Violence in Uruk	11	c
IV 63–64	V	Destruction in Parsâ	2	b
IV 65–69	VI	Ištaran Laments Dēr	5	a
IV 70–74	VII	Ištaran Punishes Dēr	5	a

between the “classical” Deluge and Marduk's *abūbu* can equally be taken either as evidence of subversion of the former by the latter or of the two being unrelated events. One line of evidence that, to my knowledge, has not been brought to bear on this question is the use of the verb *ba'û* (CAD B 178–82), “to go through/sweep over,” of which *ušbi'ūšu* is a Š-stem form. The fact that this verb is used elsewhere in *Erra* to refer to destructive water (I 71: [*m*] *û illūnim-ma iba'û māta*, “the [wa]ters will rise and sweep over the land”) but occurs nowhere in Marduk's account of the *abūbu* he caused—which involved a general failure of cosmic functioning rather than destructive forces “sweeping over”—may indicate that it is the Deluge that is referred to in IV 50. Yet this is hardly conclusive evidence, and in any case would not settle the identity of *bēl matāti*: Marduk may well have been taken by the author of *Erra* as having caused the Deluge rather than Enlil even if the *abūbu* he describes to Erra in Tablet I was a separate event.

6. *Enūma eliš* VII 136: *bēl mātāti šumšu ittabi abu enlil*, “‘Lord of the Lands’ Father Enlil declared his (Marduk's) name to be.”

This is a chiasitic A–A–B–C–B–A–A construction: 5–5–2–11–2–5–5. This is one of at least five symmetries in the passage. The second is that it begins and ends with a ten-line speech of a deity who spends five lines lamenting and then five lines punishing his ruined city.⁷ The next has to do with the specifics of the speeches of Marduk and Ištarān, the latter of whom speaks of the punishment of Dēr in this way:

IV 70 *anāku aššu āliya dēr*

IV 71 *dīnī kītti ul adān purussē ul aparras*

IV 72 *ūrta ul anamdimma ul upatti uzni*

IV 73 *nišū kītta umašširāma iṣbatā parikta*

IV 74 *mīšara*⁸ *īzibāma lemutta kapdā*

IV 70 I myself, on account of my city, Dēr,

IV 71 Will render no true verdicts, make no judgments,

IV 72 Give no direction, inspire no insight,

IV 73 The people have spurned truth, and taken up violence,

IV 74 They have abandoned justice, and plot evil.

The grammar of this passage indicates that although the people's abandonment of justice is described after Ištarān's withholding of justice from the land, it preceded rather than followed it. Ištarān declares his intent using three durative verbs (*adān*, *aparras*, *anamdimma*), and one seemingly in the preterite (*ū-pat-ti* for *upatti*). The part of IV 72 containing the latter verb is only preserved in one manuscript, IB.212 (ii 72). The verb's final -i- may, as Cagni argues (1969: 237), be explained not as a preterite tense marker but as a quirk of spelling—viz., the “overhanging vowel” spoken of above, with one in fact found in the line immediately previous in IB.212 (*a-da-ni* for *adān*, IB.212 ii 71). In that case, *ū-pat-ti* would have a present-future rather than a past sense. This means that Ištarān declares his intent in three unequivocally durative verbs and one equivocally preterite one. In contrast, he speaks of the people's behavior using three preterite verbs (*umašširāma*, *iṣbatā*, *īzibāma*) and one stative (*kapdā*). This indicates that his declaration concerns the future while the people's conduct occurred in the past.

In light of this, a third symmetry can be pointed out: the speeches of Marduk and Ištarān mirror each other chiasitically, for while Marduk speaks of Babylon's ruined state (IV 40–44) before uttering his punishment of the Babylonians for having devastated their city (IV 45–49), Ištarān announces his punishment of Dēr, i.e., the withholding of justice, *before* noting its cause, the people themselves having abandoned justice. Such chiasitic bookending, it may be observed, is also found in IV 1 and 19, Išum's description of Erra entering Babylon and manipulating its inhabitants into rebelling against their governor—IV 1 begins and IV 19 ends with the vocative address *qurādu erra*, “Warrior Erra!” Taking after an observation made by Vogelzang (1996: 174) and cited by eBL (note on IV 40), one may take this repetition as a poetic “frame,” which Vogelzang defines as the “repetition of the same sentence

7. The equivalence between the speeches of Marduk and Ištarān is not exact. While five lines are each devoted to Marduk and Ištarān's laments over the destruction of their cities (IV 40–44 and IV 65–69 respectively), Marduk's cursing of Babylon takes up five lines (IV 45–49), while Ištarān describes his punishment of Dēr in two lines (IV 70–71) but devotes three lines to describing the cause of that punishment (IV 72–74).

8. The first sign of IV 74 is not preserved in any manuscript except for K.2619 (ii 30'), which begins the line with *'i'-šá-r[a]*. This appears to be a confusion between *mīšaru*, “justice,” and *išaru*, “straight/just (man).” Incidentally, such an error can also be found in a Kouyunjik manuscript of a *Bīt-rimki* kiutu (K.4804 [Baragli 2022: BR6]: obv. 7'), where another manuscript has the expected *mīšaru* (CBS.1556 [Baragli 2022: UNB3]: obv. 18').

or phrase at the beginning and/or the end of a certain stanza in a poem, a (sometimes large) section of a text, or of a poem as a whole.”⁹

A fourth symmetry of the passage is that the punishments imposed by both Marduk and Ištaran operate by *lex talionis*, itself a form of symmetry: the filling of Babylon’s river with the blood of the privileged citizens (*šābī kidinni*) is punished by drought, and the abandonment of justice by the people of Dēr is punished by Ištaran’s withholding of his justice from them. And a fifth is that the logic guiding divine judgment in both cases is itself the same, for the citizens of both Babylon and Dēr have, through their violence, misused what the gods gave them—the river’s water and divine justice—and so are deemed unworthy of it.

3.2. Complementary Contrast

Jean Bottéro has argued (1977–78: 155), and Andrew George concurs (2013: 61–62), that Erra, as he is portrayed in the poem, represents “la Guerre pour la Guerre” while Išum symbolizes “la Guerre positive.” As George notes, this opposition is evidenced by the specific character and purpose of the violence done by Erra and Išum: That inflicted by the former upon Babylonia is senseless and described in unsparing detail, while that done by the latter to the Suteans is beneficial and narrated in bloodlessly mythological terms (2013: 62). The poem’s juxtaposition of negative and positive violence is especially apparent in IV 103–49, the final forty-seven lines (almost the latter third) of Tablet IV. These lines can be divided into two passages, each of which can be subdivided into two parts forming complementary pairs. In IV 103–12 Išum speaks of the countless Babylonians whom Erra has senselessly butchered (A_a), while in IV 127–35 Erra ordains that the enemies of Babylonia will fight among themselves, slaying each mercilessly, and then be subjugated by Babylonia (B_a).¹⁰ And in IV 113–26 Išum outlines Erra’s ambitions for universal destruction (A_b), while in IV 136–49 Išum demolishes Mount Šaršar, likewise to Babylonia’s benefit (B_b). The two adjacent passages mirror each other thematically: The first describes senseless violence already accomplished and then destruction planned for the future, and the second positive violence ordained for the future and then destruction already carried out, producing a chiasmic PAST–FUTURE–FUTURE–PAST ABBA sequence.

Reinforcing this complementary contrast, the passages mirror each other in their overall length as well as that of their subdivisions, as in Table 2.

Table 2. Mirrored Passages

Negative	A (IV 103–26, 24 lines) = A _a (V 103–12, 10 lines) + A _b (IV 113–26, 14 lines)	
	PAST	FUTURE
Positive	B (IV 127–49, 23 lines) = B _a (IV 127–35, 9 lines) + B _b (IV 136–49, 14 lines)	
	FUTURE	PAST

9. Vogelzang adopted the term “frame” from Black (1992) but applied it to poetry rather than prose.

10. George describes this decree of Erra as a continuation of his destructive plans: “Next Erra vows to destroy the seat of cosmic government so that all voices of moderation are silenced . . . And the effect of Erra’s ambition then becomes yet more terrible, as he launches on the world a conflict that will bring all countries to civil war . . . Only then will Erra permit the carnage to cease, when a new ruler will arise in Babylonia” (2013: 57). Yet Erra’s wish to march upon Marduk’s abode and his unleashing of global conflict should not be taken together, for while the former is spoken of by Išum as the final item in Erra’s cataclysmic plan, the latter is pronounced by Erra himself after he is convinced by Išum’s words (I 128–29) and thus swayed from his former, purely destructive, plan of action. In context, the coming civil strife is a purely positive development, for it will affect only Babylonia’s rivals—the Sealanders, Subarians, Elamites, Kassites, Suteans, and Gutians (IV 131–35)—and culminate in the universal supremacy of *akkadū*, “the Akkadian” (IV 136).

3.3. Rhetorical Artfulness

The Seven are enraged (I 45) and deliver a speech to Erra in an effort to incite him to war. The artfulness of their speech is reflected in its neat division into three arguments of nearly identical length. In the first (I 46–59, 14 lines) the Seven extol the virtues of the military life over that of the city. In the second (I 60–75, 16 lines), they speak of what Erra will achieve should he decide to go to war: the awe-struck admiration and terrified subjugation of all living beings. And in the third (I 76–91, 16 lines), they speak of all that has gone wrong because Erra has refrained from fighting: The very beasts hold the Seven (and perhaps Erra as well) in contempt, the Anunnaki cannot sleep, wild beasts terrorize the herds, and the Seven have lost their martial power for lack of exercising it. The beginning of each of these three arguments is marked by a direct address by the Seven to Erra: I 46: *tebi izizma*, “Rise, stand!”; I 60: *qurādu erra šīma turuk kakkīka*, “Warrior Erra, go out and make your weapons clatter!” and I 76: *qurādu erra minsu šēra tumašširma tušib ina āli*, “Warrior Erra, why do you spurn the steppe and stay in the city?”¹¹

4. PLOT STRUCTURE

One can observe that Erra’s reaction to the Seven’s speech—his being pleased with their arguments that he should go to war and then ordering Išum to facilitate the carrying out of that war (I 92–99)—comes at the halfway point of the Tablet’s 191 lines. Since this reaction sets the rest of the plot in motion, its position in the tablet is in line with Kilmer’s observation that important events in Akkadian narratives often occur at the halfway point of a tablet—for instance, the death of Ištar in *Ištar’s Descent* and Marduk’s birth in *Enūma eliš* I (2006: 209 and 214, respectively). This indicates that the construction of *Erra* I is in line with the broader conventions of Akkadian literature, much like its probable division into two acts (Helle 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

Line counting adds to our understanding of *Erra* and *Išum* in at least four ways: First, it sheds light on the significance of certain numbers in the poem, namely, five and fifty, with the former being the line length of *Erra*’s opening invocation (I 1–5), the number of its tablets, and the number of named cities devastated by Erra in Tablet IV, and the latter being the length of the opening section of Tablet IV, which is bookended by Marduk’s first and fiftieth names and of which forty-nine lines describe the downfall of Babylon, Marduk’s city. The roles of both numbers serve as further indicators of *Erra*’s subversion of *Enūma eliš* and its protagonist Marduk. Second, line counting reveals symmetrical structures in the poem, with these involving elegant chiasm (as in the case of IV 74), reinforcing the complementary contrast between the senseless violence of Erra and the constructive aggression of Išum (IV 103–49) and highlighting the rhetorical artfulness of the speech of the Seven, which incites Erra to war and thus sets the main plot of the poem in motion. And fourth, it indicates the construction of *Erra* I to be in line with Kilmer’s insights regarding the importance of halfway points in Akkadian poetry, and thus links the structural similarities in *Erra* to other

11. It should be remarked, however, that the Seven also address Erra in the vocative in I 78, *qurādu erra niqabbikumma atmūni limruš elīka*, “Warrior Erra, we will speak to you and may what we say disturb you!” One could take this to mark the start of a new argument; the Seven’s third argument would then be made in I 76–77 and center on the contempt the very beasts of the field feel for them (and possibly also Erra), and their fourth argument would be made in I 78–91 (14 lines) and revolve around overpopulation in humans as well as in predators such as lions and wolves.

great works of Akkadian literature, such as *Gilgamesh* and *Ištar's Descent*, complementing Helle's ideas regarding the two-act structure in Erra and other Akkadian works.

ABBREVIATIONS

- CAD *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. University of Chicago, the Oriental Institute, 1956–2010.
 CBS Siglum of the University Museum, Philadelphia.
 eBL *electronic Babylonian Library*, <https://www.ebl.lmu.de/corpus/L/2/1>.
 IB Siglum of the collection of the Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Rome.
 K Siglum of the Kouyunjik Collection, British Museum, London.
 KAR Ebeling, Erich, et al. *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur Religiösen Inhalts*. Hinrichs, 1915–19.
 RIMAP 3 Grayson, A. Kirk. *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC II (858–745 BCE)*. Univ. of Toronto Press, 1996.
 VAT Siglum of the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin.
 All other bibliographic abbreviations follow the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*.

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