

INSIGHTS FROM SUMERIAN MYTHOLOGY: THE MYTH OF ENKI AND NINMAĖ AND THE HISTORY OF DISABILITY*

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Öz

Sümer Mitolojisi Enki ve Ninmah Metnini Sakatlık Tarihi Açısından Değerlendirme

Günümüzde sakatlık çalışmalarıyla ve sakatlığın tarihiyle ilgili çalışmalar oldukça yeni sayılır. Dolayısıyla Asur bilimi alanındaki sakatlık çalışmalarının istenilen düzeyde olmadığını ve konuyla ilgili çalışmaların yeni yeni hız kazanmaya başladığını söyleyebiliriz. Eski Mezopotamya'nın sakatlık tarihi açısından oldukça önemli bilgiler barındıran en eski metinlerden birisi, belki de ilki, Enki ve Ninmah başlığıyla bilinen bir Sümer yaratılış mitidir. Bu metnin sakatlık tarihi açısından önemi birtakım sakatlık türleri ve hastalıklarla ilgili bilgiler içermesinin yanı sıra, özellikle sakat ve hasta bireylerin toplumsal bütünleşmelerinin üzerinde durmasıdır. Metin, yüzyıllar boyunca, günümüzde de bir yönüyle, devam eden sakatlığın sadece tıbbi ilgilendiren bir sorun olduğu anlayışının geçersizliğini, sakatlığın aslında toplumsal ve kültürel bağlamlarıyla olan ilişkisini içeren kanıtlarını sunarak ortaya koyar. Eski Mezopotamya toplumlarında sakatlar çoğu zaman şiddetli bir ayrımcılığa maruz bırakılmamış, toplumdan ve üretim mekanizmalarından tamamen dışlanmamış ve sakatlıklarından dolayı öldürülmemişlerdi. Bilakis bu kişiler devletin yönetim mekanizmalarının farklı katmanlarında görev aldılar. Ayrıca onlar doğumdan kaynaklı bozuklukları her zaman bir felakete ilişkilendirmemiş ve tanrısal bir cezalandırma olarak algılamamışlardı. Tanrısal mesajlar olarak algılanan bu zorlukları, refahın, bolluğun, ödülün, sınamanın, verimliliğin ve dayanışmanın da göstergesi olarak görmüşlerdi. Enki ve Ninmah, Eski Mezopotamya'da sakatlığın toplumsal inşası ile ilgili bilgiler içermesiyle sakatlık tarihine katkı sağlayabilecek bir içeriğe sahiptir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Enki ve Ninmah, Sakatlık, Hastalık, Sakat Bireyler, Umul*

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Abstract

Research concerning disability or the history of disability is only recently emerging. It can be stated that disability studies in Assyriology are not yet at the desired level. As far as it is known, one of the most ancient texts, perhaps the first that included vital information about the history of disability in the Ancient Mesopotamia, is a Sumerian creation myth, dubbed *Enki and Ninmah*. This myth is important for the history of disability since, not only did it refer to certain disability types and illnesses but it also emphasized the social integration of the ill and disabled individuals. Providing proofs that disability was related to societal and cultural contexts, the text refuted the understanding, which prevailed for centuries and one that prevails in part even today, that disability concerned only medicine. In ancient Mesopotamian societies, disabled individuals were neither exterminated due to their disabilities and nor were they comprehensively discriminated against in society, political life and various mechanisms of production. On the contrary, they participated in different levels of the state's administrative system. Moreover, they did not always perceive congenital disabilities as divine punishment and did not associate it with a catastrophe. Disabilities were perceived as good or bad divine signs about daily life practices of human and thus as an indicator of welfare, abundance, prize, challenge, productivity, and solidarity. Including information about the societal fabric of the disability, *Enki and Ninmah* has a content that can contribute to the history of disability.

Keywords: *Enki and Ninmah, Disability, Illness, Disabled Individuals, Umul*

Introduction

Committed to writing in the cuneiform script, Sumerian myths concerning the creation of humankind and earth have always been among the leading topics that have excited the attention of Sumerologists, Assyriologists, and scholars from other fields, also relating to issues handled in the Bible.¹ Critical information about different phases and features of creation, answering questions as to how, why and from what human beings were created were also addressed in mythological cuneiform texts.² Interest in the creation story was not limited to the Sumerians. This creation process, beyond human comprehension, had been a topic throughout the history of ancient Mesopotamia and its texts. One of the most ancient examples of these was the mythological narrative known today as "*Enki and Ninmah*",³ named after the Sumerian God of Wisdom *Enki* and the Mother Goddess *Ninmah*,⁴ mentioned in the creation of

¹ For the similarities between the forms of expression in the stories of creation and origin of mankind in the ancient Mesopotamian myths and Bible, see: Kikawada 1983: 43-45.

² When these texts are examined, it was observed that the god that created human beings was Enki (Ea). For the records related with Enki creating human beings, see: Espak 2015: 160-174.

³ The incipit of the myth of Enki and Ninmah is Sumerian ud re-a ("In those day").

⁴ The god of the wisdom, whose worship center was in Eridu, southern Mesopotamia, was also known as the god of underground sweet waters and creation. His name Enki meant "Lord of the Earth". Its Akkadian form Ea meant "life". The mother goddess Ninmah, invoked for her role in the creation and in particular the birth of human beings, meant "the Exalted Lady". She

the first human being.⁵

Enki and Ninmah

The main theme of Enki and Ninmah,⁶ composed of 141 lines,⁷ is the creation of human beings. The first human being was created to relieve the secular workload of the Mesopotamian gods, and even to completely free them from such burden. After the creation of the world, the lesser gods grew weary of the burden that was laid upon them by the great gods. Therefore, the goddess Nammu,⁸ who gave birth to the gods, conveyed their complaints to the creator of humanity, Enki. The solution to this problem was that Nammu, under the guidance of Enki, gave birth to the first human being, which she shaped from the clay taken from Apsu, the underworld fresh water ocean. The first half of

appeared as the mother goddess with different names in Sumerian and Akkadian texts. She appeared in Sumerian texts as Ninhursag and Nintur, and in Akkadian texts as Mama and Belet-ili. See: Ceccarelli 2016: 3-6.

⁵ The existence of this mythological text narrating the creation of human beings has been known for over 100 years. The text is known from various cuneiform tablet manuscripts, many dispersed, missing, and/or broken and in fragments. This prevented a comprehensive reading of the text and research to this end took very long. Those Sumerian and Akkadian fragments, which had also different versions, were spread over a timespan from the Old Babylonian to the Neo-Assyrian periods. It was not long time ago that this myth, which has a Sumerian and Akkadian bilingual version, was interpreted in terms of the history of disability. For the history of studies of dispersed pieces of texts, see: Lambert 2013: 330-332. However, the most comprehensive recent study of Enki and Ninmah was published by Manuel Ceccarelli. See: Ceccarelli 2016.

⁶ For the translation and comments of Enki and Ninmah, see: Lambert 2013: 330-345; Kramer 2000: 66-83; Kramer 1999: 130-141; Jacobsen 1987: 151-166; Klein 1997: 516-518; Benito 1969: 9-76; Westenholz 2010: 201-205; Sauren 1993: 198-208; Bottéro – Kramer 1989: 188-198; Pettinato 1971: 69-73 (only the translation and comments of the lines 6-38 were provided, considering the different versions); Römer 1993: 386-401; Ceccarelli 2016 (It was the first study handling the issue as a book).

⁷ Lambert (2013, p. 330) also states that “Enki and Ninmah is a Sumerian myth of some 150”. There are different manuscripts and copies of the myth. The texts range from Old Babylonian (CBS(‘a’) 2168 +11327 + 12738 + 13386 + N 1889; AO(‘b’) 7036; BM(‘c’) 12845) to Neo-Assyrian period (K 1711 + 2168 + 4896 + 5027 + 5054; K 4932; K 5066; K 13540). See: Lambert 2013: 330-345; Pittl 2015: 469. Ceccarelli categorizes texts as follows: Text A (Nippur): CBS 2168 + CBS 2202 + CBS 11327 + CBS 12738 + CBS 13368 + N 1889. Text B (Ninive): **B₁** (K 1711 + K 2168 + K 4896 + K 5027 + K 5054); **B₂** (K 4932); **B₃** (K 13540); **B₄** (K 5066). Text C (Unknown): AO 7036. Text D (Unknown): BM 12845. Text E (Nippur): CBS 2210. See: Ceccarelli 2016: 89-92.

⁸ The mother goddess, who was the creator of the great gods and human beings, was the mother of Enki. For detailed information about the relation between the goddess Nammu, mentioned in Enki and Ninmah, and her son Enki, and her functions in the creation of human beings, see: Sauren 1993: 198-208.

the myth ended with a celebration scene, which was held in honor of Nammu, who successfully and healthily gave birth to the first human being who shouldered the burden of the gods, and of her helper Ninmaḥ. On the following lines of the myth, it was observed that this first human being was physically and mentally healthy, contrary to the disabled and ill individuals to be created later. The name of this first human being is not mentioned in the text. However, he seems to have aligned with the purpose of his creation. He would successfully carry out works such as digging water channels to irrigate the agricultural lands of the gods and obtaining clay from the rivers to increase land fertility.

The second half of the text involves the “contest” of words between the god Enki and the goddess Ninmaḥ during the abovementioned celebration.⁹ Both of them were drinking beer, and it was understood from the scene that they were happy at the creation and birth of the human individual. At the end of their verbal contest, Enki and Ninmaḥ created seven human beings with different disabilities and illnesses. For a moment in the celebration scene, Ninmaḥ would say to Enki "It is for me to decide whether a human body should be good or bad. In accordance with my decision will I make a destiny good or bad". Enki responded "I shall assess the destiny you decide upon, whether it is good or bad".¹⁰ While the goddess started the dialogue, it was the god who turned it into a verbal contest. Enki sought to provide a balance. In other words, Enki emphasized his ability and intelligence by transforming the bad destiny of Ninmaḥ to a good one or vice versa. The goddess, who asserted her ability to create a good or a bad destiny, created disabled and ill individuals, granting them a bad “destiny” (Sumerian: nam-tar).¹¹ Enki would change disabled individual’s bad destiny in society in their favor. Thus, these individuals would receive a favorable divine destiny.

The relations between the physical and mental situations of the disabled and ill individuals destined by the gods and their societal and economic status determined by Enki, as they are narrated in the myth Enki and Ninmaḥ, form the main theme of this study which will discuss its content in relation to the history of disabled.¹² Although this is not the first study on the disabilities in the myth

⁹ Espak 2015: 162-163.

¹⁰ Lambert 2013: 338-339 (lines 17b-18b)

¹¹ Ceccarelli 2016: 40-42.

¹² Kellenberger 2017; Walls 2007: 16-20. For a Turkish translation of Walls’ study, see: Kağnıcı 2018b: 373-377. These two studies (by Walls and Kellenberger) refer to the myth of Enki and Ninmaḥ. They refer broadly to text genres with basic and common information about disabilities in Mesopotamia. Moreover, these studies sought to determine the limits and the extent of this texts. Kellenberger and Walls do not provide a comprehensive account of all the references in cuneiform texts, but their studies are a good starting point for this field.

Enki and Ninmah,¹³ this study will try to clarify and comment on certain less understood aspects of the present topic.

Why Disabled Individuals?

A discussion of disability types mentioned in the text and their societal and economic significance needs to be preceded by a discussion of how the text as a Sumerian myth treats disabled individuals. When the text is examined, the main reason of the creation of disabled and ill individuals is the verbal contest between the god Enki and the goddess Ninmah. The creation of disabled individuals was depicted as the result of this contest.¹⁴ It can be mentioned that this contest between the god and the goddess played an instrumental role in expressing the societal adoption of disabilities and illnesses. Some researchers have argued that the deities' intoxication after drinking beer during their celebration had an important role in creating the disabled and ill individuals.¹⁵ For instance, considering the effect of the intoxication, Jacobsen interpreted the creation of disabled individuals as an "irresponsible decision". According to Jacobsen, those individuals would not suit to the ideal world order of the Sumerians.¹⁶ Kramer seems to be supporting the same opinion. According to Kramer, creating individuals with disabilities "was not a wise attitude fitting to a god". Intoxication after beer must have caused this.¹⁷ Emphasizing the relation between the use of alcohol and giving birth to disabled individuals, another study suggested that the Sumerians wanted to show us this relation via a mythological narrative.¹⁸ As it is understood from all these studies, there is an inclination to relate the creation of disabled individuals with festive intoxication. However, one can dispute a "direct" correlation between the creation of disabled individuals and festive alcohol intoxication.

Exemplary warnings against drinking beer or other intoxicant beverages before making decisions, for example in the "Instructions of Shuruppak",¹⁹ may not necessarily lead to the interpretation that the intoxication of Enki and

¹³ Pittl 2015.

¹⁴ Lambert 2013: 334.

¹⁵ Pittl 2015: 472.

¹⁶ Jacobsen 1977: 165.

¹⁷ Kramer 2000: 67.

¹⁸ Ağartan and Öner 2010: 457-461. The beverage reported in the study as wine was consumed during the celebration. However, it was beer but not wine according to Enki and Ninmah. The Sumerian word 'kaš' in the text is translated as "beer" according to the Sumerian dictionary ePSD. For wine, the word 'geštin' was rather used.

¹⁹ In the text named as "Instructions of Shuruppak", one of the advices that the king Shuruppak, the king of Shuruppak city, gave to his son Ziusudra was "when you drink beer, don't pass judgment". See: Alster 2005: 78.

Ninmaḥ led to so-called "negative results". Even though it is known that the intoxicant beverages caused discussions among the gods in Sumerian mythology and literature, this Sumerian myth is not the only one that mentions the gods and goddesses drinking these beverages. Beer and other intoxicant beverages, which were being presented to the gods as the main beverages, were being consumed by the gods during celebration and times of happiness because of their delighting taste, as it was mentioned in Enki and Ninmaḥ.²⁰ Therefore, it should not be concluded that the creation of the disabled individuals was only due to intoxication. As mentioned by some scholars,²¹ it is possible to argue that drinking was a conscious and deliberate preference rather than a mistaken decision with unwanted results.

Instead of creating physically and mentally healthy individuals like Enki, Ninmaḥ created disabled and ill individuals. Was it because Ninmaḥ wanted to belittle Enki in the presence of the gods and to defeat him? Actually it is difficult to answer this question. However, Enki wanted Ninmaḥ to perform the task of loading the burdens of the gods on the first human being born by his mother Nammu.²² After the verbal contest, Ninmaḥ might have intended to create disabled individuals in order to limit or even nullify their ability to serve the gods. Thus, disabled individuals would have difficulties in carrying the burden of the gods, which would ultimately belittle Enki in the presence of other gods. Because it was he who wanted to create human beings in order to alleviate the burden of the gods. The ones created by Ninmaḥ should be evaluated in light of this perspective. All of these disabled individuals, who were created according to the plan of Ninmaḥ, would seem to be ill-destined due to their disabilities and illnesses. However, Enki would find them a societal position regardless of their physical or mental situations. Thus, they would be a part of the production mechanism like the healthy individuals, earning their livings without needing anyone.²³ As it is observed throughout the text, this "solution" of Enki would irritate and render the goddess helpless, ultimately leading her to accept that Enki was better in creating and determining the

²⁰ There are records related with similar situations in the texts such as the Sumerian "The Debate between the Sheep and the Grain" and "Enki's Journey to Nibru". See: Black et al 2004: 227, 332-333. It was observed that the gods drank intoxicating drinks and gave some decisions in the Babylonian Creation Epic of Enuma Elish. See: Adalı and Görgü 2016: 28 (iii 134-138).

²¹ Pittl 2005: 472.

²² Römer 1993: 391 (line 37).

²³ Budin 2015: 34.

destiny of the human individual.²⁴ Ultimately, Ninmah could not reach her aim, whatever specifically it may have been.²⁵

Disabilities and Illnesses

The creation of eight different human beings with different disabilities and illnesses are mentioned in the text. Seven of them were created by the goddess Ninmah, and one of them by the god Enki. We could learn only the name of the one who was created by Enki. The situation of this individual, who was known to be an ‘umul’,²⁶ was different from the disabled ones created by the goddess, to be further detailed in the ensuing parts of the myth. It is stated in the text that the goddess created these seven people one by one. In return, Enki determined a societal role for each one of them. Their societal roles were clearly explained in the text with the exception of the umul²⁷ created by Enki. Enki treated him and provided him with a craft. There are different suggestions as to the meaning of the word

The goddess created first a paralyzed human, who could not bend his wrist to take something and who was unable to use his hands to hold something.²⁸ The second one was created with a visual impairment, probably a blind (Sumerian: *igi-nu-du₈*).²⁹ The third one had a feet disability, probably a lame (Sumerian: *ġiri₃-hum, irgi*).³⁰ Next one was a "fool", who had mental problems (Sumerian: *lú-lil*).³¹ The fifth one was not a disabled, however, he had

²⁴ Lambert 2013: 338-341 (lines 44ac, 53c and 98ab).

²⁵ Römer 1993: 401 (lines 140-141).

²⁶ Ceccarelli transliterates as *u₄-ġu₁₀-ul*. See: Ceccarelli 2016: 61-66. The sign ‘*ġu₁₀*’ can also be read as ‘*mu*’. Jacobsen, on the other hand, transliterates as ‘*ud mu-ul*’, but ‘*u₄*’ can be more appropriate than the ‘*ud*’ reading.

²⁷ The etymological meaning of the word ‘*umul*’ will be discussed below.

²⁸ Ceccarelli 2016: 44 (Text C- line 23b: *lu₂ ge šu šu₂-šu₂ ša₂*; text C- line 73b: *di-de₃ nu-GAM*); Lambert 2013: 338-339 (line 22b: *šu šú-šú di-di-NE nu-gam*); Benito 1969: 26 and 39 (line 59); Jacobsen 1987: 159 and Ceccarelli 2016: 45 (line 23b).

²⁹ Ceccarelli 2016: 44 (Text A and C- line 26b: (*lu₂*) *ġešnu ge₄-ge₄ lu₂*; text ‘A’ and C- line 74b: *u₆-e*); Lambert 2013: 338-339 (line 25b: *ġiš nu₁₁-ġi₄-ġi₄ lú-u₆-e* and line 26b: *^den-ki-ke₄ ġiš nu₁₁-ġi₄-ġi₄ lú-u₆-e ‘igi-du₈-a’- [ni-ta]*). Although some scholars emphasize that this (the statement in line 25b) might be another type of visual illness, it was generally accepted that this was blindness. See: Pittl 2015: 473-474. If so, it is difficult to deduce the level of the blindness from the statement. On the other hand, the another word for the blindness in ePSD is *igi-nu-ġal₂* that not reported here.

³⁰ Ceccarelli 2016: 44 (Text A- line 30b: *lu₂ ġiri₃ 2 gegge* (or *ge₆ ge₆*) *ġiri₃*; text ‘A’ and ‘C’- line 75b: *dab₅-ba*); Lambert 2013: 338-339 (line 29b: [*^{lú}GĪR-MI-ġiš*] *ġir-dab₅-ba*); Römer 1993: 394 (line 66) and Benito 1969: 26 and 39 (line 66). Although Römer and Benito indicated that it was a feet illness to be healed in time, it seemed more possible that this was a "permanent" lameness, which prevented regular and fast walking.

³¹ Ceccarelli 2016: 44 (Text ‘B’ and D- line 33b: *lu₂-lil*); Lambert 2013: 338-339 (line 32ac: *lú-*

an illness such as sperm secretion or urinary incontinence (?).³² The sixth one was an infertile woman.³³ The last human that the goddess created was the one "without a male or female genital organ".³⁴

Among these seven people, who were ill-destined by the goddess, only one was woman. Another one was without any gender and the rest of them were men. Among these seven individuals, only the fourth did not have any physical disability or illness. This individual had a mental problem described as *lu₂-lil* in Sumerian or *lillu* in Akkadian. The number of the ones with physical disability is four, including the one "without gender". The other two, the infertile woman and the man with problems in genital organ, are different. It is not clear if their "illness" was permanent or temporary. However, it is significant for the societal and cultural norms of the Mesopotamians that a woman's infertility and the genital organ problems of the man are mentioned together with the individuals with apparent disability types.

The details of these disabilities and illnesses are not explained from medical point of view. There is no information about whether these individuals were disabled until their deaths or as to the levels of their paralysis, lameness, or blindness. Note, however, that except for one of them, there is no attempt to heal them by medical or magical treatments, including the surgical operations. Their societal roles, granted by Enki, proved to be sufficient for them to live for the rest of their lives without a medical treatment. Moreover, from a medical point of view, it was mostly impossible to heal permanent mental and physical disabilities at that time. Although some prescriptions for the treatment of eye illnesses such as blindness were proposed in Mesopotamia,³⁵ it can be surmised that such references did not refer to permanent or complete blindness.

It was observed that only one of these individuals, who were created by the goddess, was healed by Enki. Unlike the others, his "destiny" was to get rid of the illness by treatment.³⁶ Enki did not grant any societal or economic role for this individual. Since it was undesirable to be in society with his illness, his treatment was prioritized.³⁷ This was a man who had a problem with his genital

lil). Römer 1993: 394 (lines 68a and 68b).

³² Ceccarelli 2016: 44 (Text A, B and D- line 36b: *lu₂ a sur-sur (-ra / -re)*); Lambert 2013: 338-339 (line 35ac: *lu₂ a sur-sur*); Benito 1969: 27 and 39 (lines 69-70); Römer 1993: 395 (line 70).

³³ Ceccarelli 2016: 44 (Text A and D- line 39b: *munus nu-u₃-tu*); Lambert 2013: 338-339 (line 38ac: *munus-nu-ù-tu*); Benito 1969: 28 and 40 (line 73); Römer 1993: 395 (line 72).

³⁴ Ceccarelli 2016: 44 (Text A and D- line 42b: *lu₂ su-ba ġeš₃ nu-ġar*; text 'A'- line 79b: *galla₄ nu-ġar-ra*); Lambert 2013: 338-339 (line 41ac: *lu₂-su-ba ġiš nu-ġar gal₄-la nu-ġar*); Benito 1969: 28 and 40 (line 75); Römer 1993: 395 (line 75).

³⁵ Soden 1966: 81.

³⁶ Lambert 2013: 338-339 (line 37ac: *a mu₇-mu₇ mi-ni-in-tu₅ nam-tar su-bi àm-ma-ni-in-zi*).

³⁷ In the another text (STT 238), the incontinent patient was healed by the goddess *Ninmah*,

organ. Some scholars assert that this illness was related with urinary incontinence.³⁸ Others relate it to sperm secretion.³⁹ It is a well-known fact that the undesirable secretions from the genital organ are symptoms of a specific illness. This illness, which was healed by the god by means of sacred or blessed water, was probably "gonorrhoea". Similar records matching up with the symptoms of this illness, seen in both men and women and particularly transmitted sexually, are mentioned in medical texts.⁴⁰ The most important symptom of this illness was the frequent gleet secreting from the genital organ. This secretion is not urine or semen; however, it is in the form of a thickened liquid sometimes in greenish yellow sometimes in plain colour of water. An individual with this illness needs to urinate frequently and feels pain while urinating. For woman, it can be transmitted to the baby during childbirth, damaging the baby's sight. Moreover, it can cause infertility in both genders when not treated.⁴¹ Since it can be sexually transmitted, it can infect numerous members of society. Therefore, the treatment of this illness is a must, since it threatens not only the individual but also his spouse and close relatives. Considering that Enki provided societal integration by granting different types of status for disabled and ill individuals, the motive behind his healing this illness was probably that this illness was infectious and had the potential to threaten the society. Moreover, the next individual, who was created by the goddess after this individual, was an infertile woman. This was contextually significant considering her mention with the possible gonorrhoeal man.

Another individual, who did not need Enki's healing, was the infertile woman. There were medical, magical, and herbal prescriptions to heal such kinds of problems in the ancient Mesopotamia.⁴² However, instead of healing her, Enki sent her to the women house,⁴³ granting her a societal role as he did to

instead of Enki. See: Verderame 2018 (see especially for a comparison: 797-798).

³⁸ Lambert 2013: 338-339 (line 37); Jacobsen 1987: 160; Römer 1993: 394 (line 69); Pittl 2015: 476.

³⁹ Benito 1969: 27 and 39 (line 70); Bottéro and Kramer 1989: 191 (line 70); Ceccarelli 2016: 51 (line 36); Klein 1997: 518. Both of the statements in the text evaluated to be related with the illness. See: Walls 2007: 18; Kellenberger 2017: 49.

⁴⁰ Scurlock and Andersen 2005: 88-91.

⁴¹ Kollar and Shmaefsky 2005: 50-54.

⁴² The Myth of Etana concerns Etana, who was among the kings of Kish after the flood in the Sumerian kings list. This myth narrates that the wife of king Etana, who was infertile, got pregnant by means of "a birth plant", called *šammu ša alādi* in Akkadian. Furthermore, medical texts refer to female fertility. See: Dalley 2000: (III, 196-200); Stol 2000: 35-36, 53-56; Scurlock and Andersen 2005: 260-261.

⁴³ According to Klein, what was intended with the word *e2-munus* (female[s] house) was probably the household of the queen or the royal harem. See: Klein 1997: 518.

the other disabled. The infertility, which was medically not apparent from physical appearance, could occur in both genders. However, it was often that of the women mentioned in ancient Mesopotamian sources. The medical texts' basic diagnosis for this illness was the inability to get pregnant.⁴⁴ It was an illness, which was to be avoided by future mothers and fathers.⁴⁵ Since having a baby was important in society. Many issues are implicated by healthy birth, such as the continuation of progeny, welfare of the household, elderly care, local population growth, the state's need for military and labour manpower, and royal succession. When a woman had a child, she would experience societal, legal, and economic changes in her favor.⁴⁶ Men who would not have babies from their spouses, would adopt a child or tend towards other women.⁴⁷ In brief, Enki tried to secure the rights of an infertile woman, since she did not bear the basic societal role of the woman who became a mother. Ultimately infertility threatened to damage the norms and traditions in societal and cultural aspects. The destiny that Enki determined over this female in the myth Enki and Ninmah was to save her from this societal pressure.

Societal Consolidation of the Disability

According to the Enki and Ninmah myth, Enki determined a societal role for all disabled and ill individuals except one. It was clear that there were no certain or systematic relation between the mentioned disabilities and illnesses.⁴⁸ It is not clear why these specific disabilities and illnesses are mentioned but not others. However, it can be stated that there was a systematic relation between the societal roles that were determined for them by Enki. According to the text, these five individuals, one with a hand disability, one visually impaired, one

⁴⁴ Scurlock and Andersen 2005: 260-261.

⁴⁵ Infertility was also mentioned in curses. In the closing part of the legal code of the Old Babylonian period king Hammurabi (1792-1750 B.C.), the king curses his future successors and administrators who would ignore his rules. Among the curses deemed effective is one whereby Hammurabi prays that goddess Nintu will refuse giving new successors to negligent kings and rulers, disallowing their fertility that would enable them progeny. A earlier and similar curse is from the closing part of a Sumerian law and those who neglect the king's rules are cursed as follows: "may his city be a city despised by the god Enlil; may the main gate of his city be left open (and undefended). May the young men of his city be blind; may the young maidens of his city be barren...". See: Roth 1997: 139 (lines 40-49) and 39 (lines 15-20).

⁴⁶ There was an article in the codes of the king Lipit-Ishtar (c. 1870-1860 B.C.) about a man, who did not have a baby from his wife, having baby from a prostitute. According to this, the man would have to support the prostitute economically and the child from that woman would be his heir. See: Roth 1997: 31 (article 27).

⁴⁷ Stol 1995: 125; Stol 2016: 160-162. An example of letter (ICK I 3) from Old Assyrian period, see: Heffron 2017: 77.

⁴⁸ Kellenberger 2017: 49.

with a mental disease, one with infertility, and the fifth one without a gender, were all sent to the king and his family. Even the first three of them had the chance to work in the personal service of the king, who is not named in the text. At first glance the question may arise as to why these people, who had some physical and mental deficiencies, let alone having any outstanding feature, were promoted to these royal posts. However, it can be observed that in the cuneiform tablets that individuals with such kinds of illnesses had been in the service of the kings and the queens in different periods of the ancient Mesopotamia. Moreover, there were also such kinds of individuals in the service of the temples, supporting the economy of the temple. There are also records of hearing impaired individuals in the personal service of the king.

For example, in one of the meetings of Old Babylonian king Hammurabi with the mission of the king of Mari, Zimri-Lim (c. 1775-1761 B.C.), there was neither a senior official responsible for the domestic or foreign issues nor a secretary accompanying the king of the Babylonia. In one of the meetings, the third person accompanying the commander from Mari and the king Hammurabi was a deaf individual.⁴⁹ One of the royal inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian king Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.) describe the king as "one who goes to the aid of the weak/disabled (*alik tapput aki*)" in addition to many other features.⁵⁰ As far as it is understood, disability types and societal roles similar to the ones mentioned in the myth Enki and Ninmah had been traditionally known in ancient Mesopotamia, including the period that this text was written.⁵¹ Whatever the reason, the disability types and illnesses mentioned in the text were ultimately the reality of Mesopotamia.

It is interesting that the specific occupation of the individual who hand is paralyzed, who was among the "lucky" individuals at the service of the kingdom, is not explicitly stated in the text. It is only stated that he was under the service of the king. The visually impaired individual was a musician in the palace. Enki granted him competence in music art and appointed as musician of the king. There is no information as to this individual's ability to play an instrument or whether he only sang. His responsibilities towards the king are not mentioned in the text. However, from other cuneiform text references to the existence of blind individuals either as musicians or singers can provide an estimation. Blind or visually impaired individuals are mentioned in Sumerian or Akkadian texts dating to from the third millennium to the first millennium B.C.

⁴⁹ Charpin et al 1988: 140.

⁵⁰ Grayson and Novotny 2012: 60 (4/1), 111 (16/1), 128 (17/1).

⁵¹ The main text is based on three manuscript dated from Old Babylonian period. But the text or parts of the text of the myth can be earlier than the same period.

There were visually impaired men and women,⁵² some of whom were prisoners of war, captured and blinded, mentioned in various texts about temple economy and in legal documents, royal inscriptions as well as omen texts. For example, male prisoners of war, captured during the campaign embarked on against Šīmanum in the Zagros Mountains by one of the Third Dynasty of Ur kings, Šu-Sin (c. 2037-2029 B.C.), were blinded and employed in the temple gardens.⁵³ Most of them were men who were blinded. These prisoners of war were regarded as workers employed in the service of the kingdom and temples.⁵⁴ There were singers and musicians among these blind individuals.⁵⁵ Congenital or adventitiously blind individuals were raised up as musicians.⁵⁶

Another one, with foot disability, mastered metalwork (silverwork). Numerous Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform records refer to foot disabilities,⁵⁷ such as lameness that limit the ability to move.⁵⁸ Metalwork, considered appropriate for certain individuals mastering a technical field, was an occupation that did not necessitate much mobility. Silver was a metal in demand and it was much used in daily life.⁵⁹ Therefore, it could be easily argued that the mastery of silverwork was a prestigious occupation. However, serious and permanent health problems arise for individuals dealing with silverwork such as muscle atrophy and the loss of reflex.⁶⁰ Considering this fact, it is significant that Enki grants mastery of silverwork to a man with foot disability. Although it was not clearly stated in the text, this individual was also to be employed in the service of the kingdom.

One of the individuals employed in the service of the king by Enki was lu₂-lil. The first meaning of this word was fool, moron or idiot, whose Akkadian equivalent was *lillu* (feminine *lillatu*).⁶¹ Therefore, this individual was thought to have a mental disability.⁶² Walls emphasized the probability of deafness for this Sumerian word instead of a cognitive disability.⁶³ However, Ceccarelli

⁵² There were blinds among the female servants in the Women's House (e₂.munus) in Lagash city in the Early Dynastic Period (approx. 2900-2350 B.C.). See: Karahashi 2016: 64.

⁵³ Copper 2010; Lafont 2016: 161.

⁵⁴ Farber 1985: 222-223.

⁵⁵ Gelb 1973: 87; Heimpel 2009: 45.

⁵⁶ Stol 2016: 362-363.

⁵⁷ <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu>; Kellenberger 2017: 53.

⁵⁸ In this issue, one of the oldest but a short study was that of Hallo. See: Hallo 1969: 66-70.

⁵⁹ Oppenheim 1977: 86.

⁶⁰ Nemet-Nejat 1998: 294.

⁶¹ <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu>; CDA 2000: 182; CAD/9-L: 189.

⁶² For further discussion on the *lillu* word, see: Kağnıcı 2018a.

⁶³ Walls 2007: 18. Deafness and some mental disabilities were sometimes mentioned with the same word, as in the Akkadian *sukkukutū* example. See: CDA 2000: 327; AHw II: 1056.

confirmed that this word was related with a mental disability based on another manuscript of the text.⁶⁴ Ultimately, this individual was employed in the service of the king, too. Records,⁶⁵ which attest to a *lillatu*, refer to one among the royal workers in the Mari palace in Syria, indicating that it was normal for disabled individuals to be in royal service.

Frequently attested in omen or literary texts, this word (*lillu/lillatu*) is not included in medical texts.⁶⁶ This may relate to an “imperception in understanding” the events rather than a medical problem such as serious mental disability. Therefore, this word should be translated as “fool” (أحمق (*’ahmaq*) in Arabic). In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh of Uruk deplores for the demise of his friend Enkidu and takes to the roads seeking the immortality, ultimately lamenting the fact he missed immortality. The wise man Utnapishtim identifies this continuous, sad and miserable manner of Gilgamesh as a misplaced and wrong behavior. He emphasizes that death is inevitable. He mentions that behaving in this manner prevents wisdom which helps differentiate good and bad.⁶⁷ Gilgamesh reflects on the situation of a *lillu* who cannot see the whole picture, one cannot consider the consequences, and misses the focal point. This manner does not befit a hero who has to avoid foolish behaviors. There is a similar situation in the Babylonian Theodicy about the *lillu*. This text dates to the second millennium B.C. A wise man tells his friend, who is in an agonizing and rebellious mood, that human beings are unable to understand the decisions and judgements of the gods.⁶⁸

In the both examples, advices of a wise man attracts attention. An individual with wisdom (*nēmequ*), while advising one with no or little wisdom and tries to lead him to true wisdom. From these references, it can be argued that a *lillu*, who lacks the ability to understand what is going around him, is an

⁶⁴ Ceccarelli 2016: 50. For a long time the number of the disabled individuals created by the goddess Ninmah was thought to be six. However, after finding another cuneiform manuscript, which was among the missing parts of the text, the number of disabled individuals turned out to be seven. Therefore, for example, Bottéro and Kramer have not mentioned the lu₂-lil in their book named *Lorsque Les Dieux Faisaient L’Homme: Mythologie Mésopotamienne* printed in 1989.

⁶⁵ Kellenberger 2013: 460.

⁶⁶ Kellenberger mentioned that this word had never been mentioned in a cuneiform script related with medical or illnesses. See: Kellenberger 2013: 451. This absence might be explained with a view that the ancient Mesopotamians did not perceive this situation as a medical disability or an illness.

⁶⁷ George 2003: (Tablet X, lines 266-275, p. 695); Dalley 2000: (Gil., tablet X/v, 107-108).

⁶⁸ Kağnıcı 2018a: 54-57. Example is given from the story of the two brothers with their destinies decided by the god: “the first one is born as a *lillu* and the second as a successful hero-warrior”. It is not clear the exact meaning of this statement. This can at least in part be related to the wisdom of gods. See: Lambert 1996: 86-87 (XXIV, 262-263); Foster 1997: (XXIV, 494).

individual who also does not have intelligence. It can be stated that by being employed in the service of the king, the god of wisdom, Enki provided the opportunity to a *lillu* to benefit from the wise actions of the king and his attendants. Accordingly, the kings of ancient Mesopotamia were depicted as wise men with wisdom granted by Enki (Ea).⁶⁹

The last individual employed by Enki to the service of the king was the one without "a male or female genital organ". This recalls the eunuch, mentioned frequently in cuneiform texts.⁷⁰ Eunuchs were mentioned more frequently in the cuneiform texts dated to the Middle Assyrian (approx. 1400-950 B.C.) and Neo-Assyrian (950-612 B.C.) periods. For example, when the palace orders of the Middle Assyrian period are examined, it can be observed that the eunuchs had a voice in particularly Assyrian palaces and harems where women were in the majority.⁷¹ Moreover, they had important and senior positions in Assyrian society, administration, and army. The physical problems of the eunuchs could have origins in both birth or after being prisoners of war where their genital organs were damaged.⁷² Although their situations initially seem negative and undesirable, it is remarkable that their societal and political roles are highly better than many disabled, even able-bodied people. However, it is necessary to state that the statement "one without a male or female genital organ" in the myth of Enki and Ninmah does not include an argument a process of real castration.

Umul

Because of the destinies determined as a solution by Enki for the seven individuals created by Ninmah, the goddess was infuriated and lapsed into silence.⁷³ Reorganizing their destinies so that they live better, Enki wanted Ninmah to do the same thing. Enki wanted the goddess to determine a "good" destiny for a human being that he would create, as he did many times according to the myth. Ultimately he brought a newborn baby, who was called Umul, in front of her. It was asserted that Umul was a disabled male child who was born from a woman, who was granted fertility by Enki.⁷⁴ According to Pittl, the child's gender is unclear.⁷⁵ There are different suggestions as to the meaning of

⁶⁹ Hurowitz 2008: 64-94; Glassner 2009: 157-170.

⁷⁰ Ceccarelli 2016: 53.

⁷¹ For detailed information on the symbolic connections between eunuch and/or *ša reši* and Istar cult, see: Siddall 2007.

⁷² Grayson 1995: 91-98.

⁷³ Lambert 2013: 338-339 (line 44ac).

⁷⁴ Kilmer 1976: 265-266; Kilmer 1972: 165-166.

⁷⁵ Pittl 2015: 479.

the word *umul*. Lambert suggested "at Death's Door",⁷⁶ Jacobsen "the day was far off",⁷⁷ Benito "my day is remote".⁷⁸ Considering these suggestions, Ptilt suggested "shining day".⁷⁹ In any case, there are problems in almost the entire body and internal organs of Umul. There were disabilities on his head, face, and neck. His ribs were not formed completely. Lungs, heart, and internal organs were in a bad condition. He was not able to hold his head up and could not even bring food to the mouth. His backbone, buttocks, and anus were not formed completely. His legs were so powerless that he could not walk.⁸⁰ Witnessing this condition of Umul, Ninmah could do nothing to heal him,⁸¹ accepting that Enki was better than her and admitting her failure in the contest.

As is seen, the defined physical posture of the Umul was different from the ones created by the goddess. He was not like the individuals with one missing organ or ability. He had many physical deficiencies and incomplete physical integrity. Therefore, he could be "an abortion or a premature".⁸² The disabilities and the illnesses of the individuals created by the goddess did not create too many difficulties in living daily life. However, this was not the case for the Umul. There is no information about the umul's societal role. Towards the end of the text, Enki wanted Umul's name to be praised in songs and hymns, mentioning that he was a message for future generations.⁸³ Although the myth of Enki and Ninmah has been known in later periods, there is no text with a mythological content yet known which praises the name of Umul. One takes note here, however, of the proposal that Umul was the Ziusudra (since one of the proposed etymologies of umul may compare with Ziusudra's name which means "the life of long days" in Sumerian) in the Sumerian Flood story, comparable with Atrahasis, from a creation and flood story dating to Old Babylonian period, or Umul was Utnapishtim (which means "who rejoined to life" in Akkadian) who was one of the heros of the Epic of Gilgamesh.⁸⁴

There is no information whether or not Umul, "from whom Enki wanted to build his house",⁸⁵ continued his life after being purified from all of his

⁷⁶ Reads as u4-mu-ul. Lambert 2013: 338-339 (line 54abc).

⁷⁷ Reads as ud-mu-ul. Jacobsen 1987: 152.

⁷⁸ Reads as u4-mu-ul. Benito 1969: 15. Ceccarelli, who reads the word as u4- ĝu10-ul, thinks the same. See: Ceccarelli 2016: 65. Römer translates this in plural ("Meine Tage sind fern"). See: Römer 1993: 387.

⁷⁹ Reads as ud-mul. Pittl 2015: 479.

⁸⁰ Lambert 2013: 338-341 (lines 54-58abc); Walls 2007: 19.

⁸¹ Lambert 2013: 341 (line 70b).

⁸² Stol 2000: 110; Römer 1993: 387.

⁸³ Lambert 2013: 342 (line 104ab).

⁸⁴ Kilmer 1976: 267-268.

⁸⁵ Lambert 2013: 342 (line 110a).

disabilities and illnesses. However, it could be understood that the text assumed by umul someone who may appear in real life. Although "building a house" statement, according to Westenholz, cannot be interpreted as a construction activity literally,⁸⁶ it can be inferred that Enki attributed a different value to umul based on the statement about Enki's request for the umul to be a part of this process.

Conclusion

In Sumerian and Babylonian mythology, Enki, the god of wisdom who created human beings, had always been their supporter and always found solutions for them in their difficult times. This is similar to what happened in the story of the Flood, where he advised a man so that humankind survives extinction.⁸⁷ From this point of view, his role in the Enki and Ninmaḥ myth is in agreement with his wisdom. Since he also had the knowledge of medical science, it was he who granted surgical and medical ability to the goddesses of health and granted the ability of diagnosis about medical issues to humankind.⁸⁸ However, despite his competence and knowledge, he also helped the "disabled" individuals who were created by Ninmaḥ, for their societal integrity and psychological recovery rather than healing them medically. Determining a societal and economic role for each of them, he provided their societal integrity. Accordingly, the only way that could help disabled individuals to integrate them into society was to actively take part in social life and work in certain branches of economic activity.⁸⁹ The complaint of Ninmaḥ, who could not overcome Enki, was probably due to the fact that she could not determine a societal role for him. A similar perspective was also observed in the mythological narrative named Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Underworld. According to the narrative, among the ones in the bleak and dark underground world were an infertile woman and a palace eunuch. The palace eunuch was standing uselessly in a corner of the underground world and the infertile woman was thrown to a corner in an undesirable situation.⁹⁰ As far as it was understood, these disabled individuals, who had no societal roles, were left to their fate and left alone with their disabilities.

According to ancient Mesopotamians, disability, which was not a personal preference, was a situation determined (whatever the reason) by the

⁸⁶ Westenholz 2010: 203.

⁸⁷ Foster 1996: (Tablet I, lines 365-395, p. 171-172).

⁸⁸ Heeßel 2004: 101; Beaulie 2007: 18; Black et al 2004: 254.

⁸⁹ Pittl 2015: 474.

⁹⁰ Black et al 2004: 38 (lines 268-271).

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gods. However, this determination did not necessitate the disabled person to be isolated individually and to be excluded from the society. Although disability was perceived as a miserable and unfortunate situation, the will of gods might turn the tide. Orienting them towards the fields that they could use their abilities, society sought to integrate them rather than leaving them isolated and obsessed about their disabilities. The message that the myth of Enki and Ninmah gave, at least for the history of disability,⁹¹ is that disabled individuals could indeed have a societal role and could earn their livings.⁹² The text was perhaps related to this question: If human beings could come into the world with their physical or mental abnormalities caused by the gods or goddesses, what would life be for them? The answers (solutions) given to this question in the text also show the way of thinking of the Mesopotamians concerning the life of the disabled individuals or different kind of disabilities.

TABLE

Disabilities and Illnesses	Types of Disabilities and Illnesses	Gender	Societal Status
Paralysis (hands)	Physical	Male	Service of the king
Visual disability	Physical	Male	Service of the king (Musician)
Disabled (feet)	Physical	Male	Silverwork
Imperception	Mental	Male	Service of the king
Illness in genital organ (gonorrhoea?)	Physical	Male	No stated societal role, but healed from the illnesses.
Infertility (infertile?)	Physical	Female	Women's house
Eunuch (?)	Physical	Uncertain	Service of the king
Umul (abortion or premature?)	Physical	Male or female, not stated	Perhaps a worker in the construction of Enki's Temple.

⁹¹ Some scholars indicated that this text can be a parody about disabled and ill individuals in the institution that this text was written or in another one. See: Kellenberger 2017: 56. But this proposition, to my mind, does not change the message of social perception of disability to a great extent.

⁹² Westenholz 2010: 202.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AHw W. von Soden, Akkadisches Handwörterbuch (Wiesbaden 1959-1981).
- CAD: The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
- CDA: Jeremy A. Black – A. R. George – J. N. Postgate, A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian, Harrasowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden, Second Edition, 2000.
- ePSD: The Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary (<http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd1/index.html>).