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Paper #1: The Importance of Naming Traditions in Mesopotamian Myth and Culture

From the names and destinies commanded of mountainous rocks to the myriad titles bestowed on deities and heroes, the use of naming customs for purposes beyond simple identification is a theme apparent in many examples of ancient literature. The appearance of a ceremonial naming tradition applied to humans and objects in several myths exemplifies the value Ancient Mesopotamian culture placed on names as a way of determining destinies, defining fundamental natures and granting power.

The connection between an individual's name and his or her destiny is not something normally considered in modern Western culture. Parents might consult a baby naming book or conduct several Internet searches for name meanings, yet no one truly expects a child to grow up to be stoneworker just because his name is Mason, or a young girl to be prodigiously gifted in sewing and embroidery solely because her name is Taylor. In Ancient Mesopotamia, however, a stronger connection was drawn between naming customs and an individual's destiny. The most direct example of this idea is illustrated in a conversation between the title characters of the myth "Enlil and Namzitarra." Enlil, whose own name is often associated with the epithet "the one who decrees fates," proclaims the destinies assigned to Namzitarra and his offspring by saying, "May your fate be assigned according to your name: leaving the house of your

master, let your heirs come and go regularly in my temple.” Other instances of naming customs are not as blatantly stated, yet the connection between names and destinies prevails. In the myth “Enki and Ninmah,” Enki is able to determine both names and fates for all of the deformed clay figures crafted by Ninmah, which cements their place in the Ancient Mesopotamian social order. However, when the womb goddess is faced with Enki’s creation of Umul, whose name alludes to having no discernible future, she is not able to reverse the affect his name has on his future — or in this case, lack thereof — and is forced to forfeit the competition. Furthermore, the definitive function of the Tablet of Destinies takes advantage of the power names hold. Indeed, once the user of the tablet names an object, its destiny can be shaped to the controller’s will. Conversely, during the battle between Ninurta and Anzu, when Anzu did not know that it was Ninurta attacking him, the Tablet of Destinies was rendered useless against his opponent. Thus, the link between names, identities and predetermined futures was further strengthened through these examples in mythology.

Names were also seen to directly influence expectations of the fundamental properties of natural elements and phenomena. In the myth “Ninurta’s Exploits,” the warrior god assigns names to members of the rock army that engaged in a previous mountain battle against the monster Azag. He determines their natures based on their actions in the battle — the ones who supported him were given noble natures while the ones that opposed him were given humiliating natures and uses. This section serves as an explanatory tale that could have been used to aid in the understanding of basic scientific properties and uses of specific natural materials. On the other hand, the importance of using names to describe intrinsic qualities of objects and beings can also be seen in the

myth of “Enki and Ninhursaga.” In this story, Enki attempts to determine the fundamental natures of plants he had not yet encountered by tasting them. Although the sickness Enki contracts after this experiment is attributed to Ninhursaga’s trickery, the danger of the nameless plants serves as a cautionary tale. A plant or element without a name is therefore seen to be something to approach with skepticism. The importance of assigning objects names that were associated with distinct properties and uses made the ancient world safer, as well as more predictable and manageable.

Finally, in several myths, the tradition of naming heroes and deities brought with it a sense of power and high regard. Both the Babylonian hero Marduk and the warrior god Ninurta received several names as a reward for defeating monstrous challenges. With each new moniker bestowed upon them, Marduk and Ninurta were elevated to higher positions of power over vast expanses of people and lands. For example, following Marduk’s victory over Tiamat and the Tablet of Destinies, the gods rejoice and bestow upon him many names, saying, “As for us, no matter by which name we call him, he shall be our god. Come, let us call him by his fifty names!” By associating so many names with Marduk, this text ensures that admiration of Babylon’s hero is universal; indeed, the relevance of Marduk, and by association Babylon, transcends cultural or dialectical differences between cities.

The association of names with destinies, inherent qualities and power no longer holds as much prevalence over modern views of life and circumstances as it did in Ancient Mesopotamia; however, by studying the influence naming customs had in popular myths of that time, it becomes clear that the use of names aided in the development of individuals’ applicable perception of the world.