

READING 9-1

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The Disputation Between the Hoe and the Plow

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This piece is undoubtedly the finest example of the genre. It has long been recognized as one of the first poetic, if heavily rhetorical, statements of the case of the common man against the rich and mighty. But its most striking qualities are the sheer excellence of the argumentation (plow is deftly hoist with its own petard), the heavy satire on the pretences of the mighty, the earthy but clever humor, and most of all the irreverent but highly effective “reworking” of the format: the traditional cosmogonic introduction is turned into a story the workmen tell at night, when resting and drinking! It is to be regretted that we still have no adequate edition. The present translation is based upon all published texts and some quotes from secondary literature.

Hey! Hoe, Hoe, Hoe, tied up with string;
 Hoe, made from poplar, with a tooth of ash;
 Hoe, made from tamarisk, with a tooth of sea-thorn;
 Hoe, double-toothed, four-toothed;
 Hoe, child of the poor, bereft even of a loin-cloth;

Hoe picked a quarrel with the Plow.
 Hoe and Plow—this is their dispute.

Hoe cried out to Plow
 ”O Plow, you draw furrows—what is your furrowing to me?
 You make clods—what is your clod making to me?
 You cannot dam up water when it escapes.
 You cannot heap up earth in the basket.
 You cannot press clay or make bricks.
 You cannot lay foundations or build a house.
 You cannot strengthen an old wall’s base.
 You cannot put a roof on a man’s house.
 O Plow, you cannot straighten a street.
 O Plow, you draw furrows—what is your furrowing to me?
 You make clods—what is your clod-making to me?”

The Plow cries out to the Hoe
 ”I, I am Plow, I was fashioned by the great powers, assembled by noblest hands!
 I am the mighty registrar of God Enlil!
 I am the faithful farmer of Mankind!
 At the celebration of my harvest-festival in the fields,
 Even the King slaughters cattle for me, adding sheep!
 He pours out libations for me, and offers the collected liquids!

Drums and tympan sound!
 The king himself takes hold of my handle-bars;
 My oxen he harnesses to the yoke;
 Great noblemen walk at my side;
 The nations gaze at me in admiration,
 The Land watches me in Joy!

The furrow I draw is set upon the plain as an adornment;
 Before my sheaves, erected in the fields,
 Even the teeming herds of Shakan kneel down!
 Before my ripened grain, ready for harvesting...
 The shepherd's churn is filled to the brim;
 With my sheaves scattered over the fields
 The sheep of Dumuzi are sated.
 My stacks adorning the plains
 Are like so many yellow hillocks inspiring awe.
 Stacks and mounds I pile up for Enlil;
 Dark emmer I amass for him.
 I fill the storehouses of mankind;
 Even the orphans, the widows and the destitute
 Take their reed baskets
 And glean my scattered grains.
 My straw, piled up in the fields
 People even come to collect that,
 While the beasts of Shakan go about.

O Hoe, miserable hole-digger, with your pathetic long tooth,
 O Hoe, always burrowing in the mud,
 O Hoe, whose head is always in the dust,
 O Hoe-and-brickmold, you spend your days in mud, nobody ever cleans you!

Dig holes! Dig crevices! O navel-man dig!
 O hoe, you of the poor man's hand, you are not fit for the hand of the noble!
 The slave's hand is adorned with your head!
 And you dare to insult me?
 When I go out to the plains, every eye is full of admiration"

Then the Hoe cried out to the Plow:
 "O Plow, my smallness—what is that to me?
 My humble state—what is that to me?
 My dwelling at the river bank—what is that to me?
 At Enlil's place, I precede you!
 In Enlil's temple, I stand in front of you!
 I make ditches, I make canals;
 I fill the meadows with water;
 And when the water floods the canebrake,
 My small baskets carry it away.
 When a canal is cut, or a ditch,

And the water rushes out as a rising flood,
 Making everything into a swamp,
 I, the Hoe, dam it in,
 So that neither southern nor northern storm can blow it away.

The fowler samples eggs;
 The fisherman catches fish;
 And they all empty bird-traps
 Thus is wealth spread everywhere by my doing.

Moreover, after the water is drained from the meadows
 And the work in the moist earth is to be taken in hand,
 O Hoe, I come out to the field—I start that before you!
 The opening up of the field—I start that before you!
 The sides and the bottom of the dyke I clean for you!
 The weeds in the field I heap up for you!
 Stumps and roots I heap up for you!
 Only then you work the field, you have your go!
 Your oxen are six, your people four—you yourself are merely the eleventh!
 The side-boards *take away* the field.
 And you want to compare yourself with me?

When you finally come down to the field after me,
 Your single furrow already gladdens your eye!
 When you finally put your head to the task,
 Your tongue gets caught by brambles and thorns.
 Your tooth breaks, and your tooth is renewed;
 You will not keep it for long.
 Your plowman calls you “This Plow is broken again!”
 And , again, carpenters have to be hired, people...
 The whole chapter of workers is milling around you.
 The harness-makers scrape another green hide for you,
 Twisting it with pegs for you.
 Without stopping they turn the tourniquet for you,
 And finally a foul hide is put upon year head.

Your work is slight, though your ways are great!
 My turn of duty is twelve months;
 The time you are idle is eight months;
 So you are absent twice as long as you are present!
 And then, on the boat you make a hut;
 When you are put aboard, your ‘hands’ sever the boards
 So that your face has to be pulled out of the water like a wine-jar.
 And only after I have make a pile of logs
 Can my smoke and fire dry you out!
 Your seeding-funnel—what is then its importance?
 Your ‘important ones’ are thrown upon a pile
 As implements to be destroyed.

But I, I am the Hoe, and live in your city!
 No one is more honored than I am.
 I am but a servant following his master;
 I am but the one who builds the house for his king;
 I am but the one who broadens the stalls, who expands the sheepfolds!

I press clay, I make bricks;
 I lay foundations, I build houses;
 I strengthen the base of an old wall;
 I repair the roof of the honest man;
 I, I am Hoe, I lay out the streets!

When I have thus gone through the city and built its solid walls,
 And have made appear the temples of the great gods therein,
 Embellished them with red, yellow and streaked wash,
 I go to construct the royal dwelling in the city,
 Where overseers and captains dwell.

When the weakened clay has been built up, the fragile clay buttressed,
 They can rest because of me in a cool, well-built dwelling.
 And when the fire-side makes the hoe gleam, and they lie on their side,
 You are not to go to their feast!
 They eat and drink;
 Their wages are paid out to them Thus I enable the laborer to support his wife and children.
 For the boat-man I make an oven, I heat pitch for him;
 And when I have fashioned Magur and Magilum boats,
 I have enabled the boatman to support his wife and children.

For the householder I plant the garden;
 And when the garden has been encircled, the fences been put up, the agreements reached,
 People again take up the hoe.
 When wells have been dug, and poles set up,
 The bucket-bar hung, I straighten the beds
 And fill their ditches with water.
 When the apple-tree has blossomed and the fruits appear,
 These fruits are put up as an ornament in the temples of the gods.
 Thus I enable the gardener to support wife and children!
 When I work at the river with the plow, strengthening the banks,
 Building a hut on its banks,
 Those who have passed the day in the fields
 And the shift which has done the same at night,
 They enter their huts.
 They revive themselves as in a well-built city;
 The water-skins I made they use to pour water
 And so they put life into their hearts again.

And you, Plow, think to insult me (by saying) 'Go, dig a hole!?'
 On the plains, where no moisture is found,
 When I have dug up the sweet water,
 The thirsty ones come back to life at the side of my wells!

And what then says the one to the other? What do they tell one another?
 'The shepherd's hoe is surely set up as an ornament on the plains!
 For when An had ordered his punishment,
 And the bitterness had been ordained over Sumer,
 And the waters of the well-built house had collected in the swamp,
 And Enlil had frowned upon the Land,
 Even the shepherd's crook of Enlil had been made felt,
 When great Enlil had acted thus,
 Enlil did not restrain his hand.
 Then the Hoe, with its single tooth, struck the dry earth!

As for us, the winter's cold, as the locust swarm, you lift!
 The heavy hand of summer as of winter you take away.
 O Hoe, you binder, you bind the sheaf!
 O bird-trap, you binder, you bind the reed-basket!
 The lone workman, even the destitute, is provided for;
 The grains... are spread."
 Then the Storm spoke a word

"The millstone lies still, while the pestle pounds!
 From side-plate and foot-plate good results may be had!
 Why should the sieve quarrel with the strainer?
 Why make another angry?
 Ashnan, can a single one reap your neck?
 Ripe grain, why should you compare?"

Then Enlil spoke to the Hoe

"O hoe, do not be so angry!
 Do not cry out so loud!
 Of the Hoe, is not Nisaba its overseer, its captain?
 Hoe, whether five or ten shekel make your price,
 Or whether one-third or one half mina,
 Like a maid-servant, always ready, you will fulfill your task!"

Dispute of the Hoe and the Plow.
 Because the Hoe was greater than the Plow,
 Praise be to Nisaba.