

Annotations for The Princess Wife (part 1)

By Jerald Jack Starr. This page originally appeared in SumerianShakespeare.com.

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A Sumerian princess.

Annotations for Tablet BE 31,28, the story of The Prince's Wife (part 1)

The Princess Wife

The story opens in Mulu's palace. He and Zuzu have recently returned from a campaign of plundering the countryside. The scene is Mulu's banquet hall. He has just sat down to enjoy his victory feast. A servant girl waits in attendance.

**[x,x] . . . with sweet words on her lips the servant without equal bows
down before Mulu, the powerful [x, x].**

Keep your eye on the servant girl. She is up to something.

She says, “Earth and the heavens feel worried when the strong man is not near.”

It sounds like the servant is reassured by Mulu's safe return, but she is just flattering him, lulling him into a false sense of complacency. Although she flatters him, her "sweet words" are actually a veiled insult. Mulu is right in front of her when she bows down and tells him, "the strong man is not near."

Mulu is named for the role he plays in the story. *Mu-lu* is Emesal dialect for *lu2*, meaning "man, person, ruler." It can also mean "someone or anyone." Any of these definitions could apply, but his identity remains a mystery until his name is literally translated. Mu-lu literally means "man-abundant" (in size and possessions). Mulu is the Abundant Man, fat and rich.

Zuzu, with much plundering, has become a wealthy man.

So... Zuzu is a man of plunder. You should keep your eye on him too.

He says to Mulu, “Behold the lord! You are a contented man of riches.

“You are a trusted man of authority, a man generous with his rations and his verdicts.”

None of which is true, of course. Mulu will never be satisfied with his riches, he will always want more. No one really trusts him, and he's not at all generous. He's just greedy.

Rations refer to the system of allocating rations of food, beer, and other necessities for workers in lieu of wages. The Sumerians lived in a time before money was invented so they didn't have metal coins or printed currency. Instead, wages were paid in rations, and business was conducted through bartering. This story is all about rations and barter.

Like the servant girl, Zuzu is flattering Mulu with the same kind of veiled sarcasm, lulling him into the same kind of false security. Meanwhile, Mulu is only hearing what he wants to hear, that he is a great and wonderful prince, much beloved and admired.

Flattery has always been the language of a royal court, but in Mulu's court, the flattery is honey laced with venom.

It's easy to feel sorry for Mulu. He has just sat down to dinner and he is already surrounded by conspirators.

Mulu eats his food like a pig. He divides his captured fodder, and with his hands he crams it into his mouth and chokes it down.

Notice that Mulu is eating his captured "fodder," the food of animals. That's because Mulu is not just a wealthy prince, he is also a donkey (jackass). He is The Great Fatted Donkey, just like Lu-mah, [The Great Fatted Bull](#).

The titled characters in the two stories are part man, part animal. Sometimes Mulu is a man, sometimes he is a donkey, and sometimes he is both at once. On the other hand, the women in both stories are just normal women; *real* women, as you will soon find out.

“My flanks grow fat!” he brays, while eating all the food his hands can grab.

When Mulu talks he brays like a donkey. Lu-mah bellows like a bull.

Mulu is happy, without a care in the world.

Night comes. His rivals wander in by themselves. One of the men is stealing a bowl of malted cakes.

The bowl of malted cakes is a clue.

{Someone in the darkness calls out to Mulu}

“The people’s rations will make you bray with great burning indigestion!

So now we hear that the Great Fatted Donkey has been eating the people's rations. This is a very serious charge, and it's about to give him an upset stomach ...

“Permanently!”

Permanent, as in death. Someone is going to murder Mulu.

Nose to his fat nose, the “man not his servant” {rebel, enemy} throttles the lord.

In *The Great Fatted Bull*, Lu-mah and his assailant throttle each other. It's a reciprocal thing, because Lu-mah fights back, he attacks his attacker. In the story here, the enemy is the only one who does the throttling. The fat donkey prince does not manfully defend himself. In this way, both men stay true to their animal natures. A bull is violent, a donkey is not.

So... who is trying to kill Mulu? And why?

Mulu opens his mouth and swears two oaths to his adversary.

He gasps, “All this malt and fodder ... to abandon! This great eating to diminish!”

Mulu manages to save his own life by promising to give up his gluttonous ways, but it is already too late. He is about to lose everything else.

In the people’s judgment he is not lordly. The god Enlil does not support him.

The people don't like it when someone steals their rations. They don't like it at all.

Enlil is the chief Sumerian god, so it's pretty bad when Enlil himself turns his back on Mulu.

His wife decides to split his grain between her female servants and his slave women.

He gets one single twig of his henbur grain.

It's the wife's way of saying, "Consider this a divorce."

He cries out, "Why? For what reason?" His stomach knows a great hunger.

All this has come as a big shock to Mulu. He can't imagine why anyone would do this to him. After all, he has always been a wise and beneficent ruler, in his own mind at least. Mulu's problem is he always believed people when they told him how great and wonderful he was, even when they didn't mean it.

Filled with wine, he clutches his single twig of grain while his heaps of plunder are spread out before the happy slave women.

So the Great Fatted Donkey is not just a glutton, he is a drunkard as well.

This is one of the best lines in all of literature.

Mulu goes away acting like a man defeated.

How the mighty Mulu has fallen!

Outside, he walks in the manure of the country. He has become a pauper.

While the women live in abundance, he is a man without power, without women, and without virtue.

This is bad, really bad. The Great Fatted Donkey is completely defeated. He lost his wife and his women, his food, his wealth, and his kingdom. He also lost the love of the people and the respect of the gods. Now he stumbles around in the pasture through piles of sh*t, literally, just like any other barnyard donkey.

In the story of *The Great Fatted Bull*, things turn out pretty good for Lu-mah, even though he committed worse crimes than Mulu. Within a few sentences Lu-mah is back on Easy Street, but Mulu continues to suffer. Oh how he suffers! The story of Mulu is like the Story of Job, and it's about to get much worse.

Like a storm, Mulu flies to his father Bantu, the Supreme Lord.

Prince Mulu goes running to his daddy for help.

His father says, "This will open her pure heart. Behold these jewelry beads of stone.

"Princess Pureheart? We shall see about that.

“These you can barter for baskets of food.”

Sumerians didn't have precious gems like rubies, diamonds, and emeralds. Instead, their jewelry is made of carved stone beads, mostly agate, carnelian, and lapis lazuli. Although simple in design, Sumerian jewelry is quite beautiful, as shown in the [Jewelry](#) section.

{Mulu returns to his wife. He shows her the beads and he tells her . . . }

“Behold the great gifts I made for you! I fashioned them to be so splendid and magnificent. They are not from the marketplace.”

Full of false hope, Mulu attempts a reconciliation with his wife. We know this because he presents the beads as handcrafted gifts, and not just items to barter for food. He might have met with some success if he hadn't lied about it. So now we know that Mulu is a liar, and not a very good liar at that. It was foolish of him to add the unnecessary detail that the beads were not purchased in the marketplace, since he already said that he made them himself. It's like he's trying much too hard to be convincing. So his wife, who has heard him lie many times before, immediately becomes suspicious. She's thinking, "Marketplace? Who said anything about a marketplace?"

A princess knows all about jewelry. It's easy to imagine that she takes one look at the beads, then she looks at Mulu and says:



"Really? You really thought you'd get away with that?"

The wife does not give her princess heart to the hero.

Things don't always turn out the way they do in fairy tales.

As we will soon discover, the wife is not a fairy tale princess; and as we already know, Mulu is no Prince Charming.

The word "hero" is meant sarcastically, by the way.

She says, “You planned to [x,x ...]

“but my trusty maidservant has told me all about your lack of character.

This is the servant girl that we saw at the beginning of the story, bowing before Mulu and whispering sweet nothings. I told you she was up to something. The "servant without equal" has been spying on Mulu all along, reporting every sordid detail back to the princess wife.

In this story, and in the story of *The Great Fatted Bull*, all of the women are quite formidable, including the servants and the slave women.

Getting back in good with the wifey could solve all of Mulu's problems, but at this point, Mulu is beginning to suspect that his scheme for a reconciliation is starting to unravel.

“The selling price for each bead also reveals that the lord gave you these stones.

Something about the price of the beads has confirmed to the wife what the servant girl has already told her – that Mulu got the beads from his father, who in turn got them from the marketplace. She's not fooled by any of this. She knows the true value of the beads, so now she's ready to make a counter offer.

“I will purchase them for a half basket of [x,x...]

It sure would be nice to know what's in that basket, or rather, half basket. Unfortunately the signs in the rest of the sentence are badly damaged, so the contents of the basket cannot be known with any certainty. However, the signs are clear enough to show that it isn't food. In any case, the baskets of food will later be given to someone else. I believe the half basket contains some worthless commodity, with some ironic symbolic meaning that is now lost due to damage on the tablet. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if it was a half basket of pig slop.

The wife is driving a hard bargain. Mulu initially asked for a basket of food for each bead, but the princess offers a *half* basket of something worthless in exchange for *all* of the beads. It's an insulting low-ball offer that would humiliate Mulu if he accepts it, which he must. He has no other choice.

"So you don't know beads . . .Mulu was unwise to think he could fool a woman about jewelry.

“And you don't know women!” [x, x...]

These are the last words heard by many a man, right before the door is slammed in his face. It is the wife's way of saying, "We are still divorced!"

Only a few lines are left in the story, so you're probably thinking you are almost finished reading these annotations. Unfortunately for you, at this point in the story, things become darker and more ambiguous, so by necessity my comments will be longer and more detailed (just so you know). This is The Big Dénouement, where everything is explained.

{The wife continues . . .}

“To men who rob and plunder, all women are prostitutes [x, x...]”

That's an odd thing for the princess to say.

This is a very important sentence, and everything depends on how you read it. *Ra* is the sign meaning “to” or “for.” The words are often used interchangeably, like in English. For instance, “to you” and “for you” mean essentially the same thing in both languages. But the meaning of this particular sentence changes dramatically depending on which word you use. “*To* men who plunder” suggests that in the men's *opinion* all women are prostitutes, or so it seems *to* the men. On the other hand, “*for* the men” means that women are willing prostitutes for men who plunder – because they're the men with all the money. In this way, all women are prostitutes *for* rich men because the women “sell” their sexual favors (within and without marriage) in exchange

for money. Whichever interpretation you choose will change the meaning of the next sentence and it will also change the ending of the story.

(I know I said the Sumerians didn't have money, but you know what I mean.)

“So I decree that the baskets of food will go to the person [x, x...]”

The sentence is damaged, so it is impossible to tell who gets the baskets of food, but I’m betting it is the servant girl. This is her reward for the part she played in the conspiracy.

The baskets of food are certainly *not* going to Mulu, that’s for sure. Nor is there a reason for the wife to give the baskets to Mulu’s father Bantu, the Supreme Lord. However, it's possible that the baskets of food will be given to Zuzu (remember Zuzu?). Although this is possible (anything is possible in this story) it seems unlikely because Zuzu will later be rewarded in a different way for his role in the conspiracy. So the only one left is the faithful servant girl, and we expect to see her getting paid for her services.

Unfortunately, the last sentence casts the servant in an unfavorable light, intentionally or not. The wife talks about women being prostitutes, then segues into rewarding the servant girl. There seems to be an implied meaning or connection.

Perhaps it refers to the way that the servant girl (young woman) was treated by Mulu. He is a man of plunder. To him, all women are prostitutes. As a royal prince, Mulu believes it is his god-given right to have sex with the female help, both servants and slave women alike. Whether or not he had any success with this particular servant, he surely made the attempt, in his own slovenly way.

On the other hand, maybe it isn’t the way she was treated, maybe it's the way she acted. Perhaps she used her sexual favors to gain Mulu’s confidence, to keep the strong man near, so she could keep her eye on him. I’m just saying.

It has to be considered. I wouldn't mention it at all if the wife hadn’t brought it up first. Like I said before, it's a very odd thing for the princess to say.

The damaged portion of this sentence would have explained everything. Unfortunately, it is too damaged to read the signs. Perhaps the sentence originally said, “the baskets of food will go to the person *who is the purest one of us all*,” which would exonerate the servant. Then again, the sentence may have said, “the baskets of food will go to the person who *really is a prostitute*,” who needs to be paid for her services. It’s impossible to know which of the meanings apply, so you are left to make up your own mind about it.

For his elder brother’s possessions, Zuzu brays like a happy replacement donkey.

Whoa! What’s this? Zuzu is Mulu’s brother? This comes as a complete surprise to us because we weren’t told about it until right here at the end of the story. It means that Zuzu, like his brother, is also a donkey, which was shockingly revealed by his sudden braying.

A replacement donkey, as the name suggests, is a fresh donkey that is rotated into a yoked team to replace another donkey that is worn out. Zuzu is the replacement donkey. Mulu is the donkey that is worn out.

Wait a minute... That means the man who tried to assassinate Mulu was his own brother!

Yes, Zuzu is the one who tried to strangle Mulu, which soon will be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. Modern criminal investigators have a saying, "follow the money." Follow where the money goes, it will lead you to the culprit. As we are about to see, the money will soon drop right in Zuzu's lap.

It's not known if Bantu, the Supreme Lord, is present at these proceedings. Bantu is Mulu's and Zuzu's father. The princess wife is his daughter-in-law. Apparently Bantu thinks highly of the princess and "her pure heart," so perhaps it's best if he isn't around. He would be quite traumatized if he knew what was really happening in this highly dysfunctional family. So for the sake of his own happiness, the less he knows, the better.

To Zuzu she gives Mulu's abundant fields of grain.

There it is. This is the payoff for Zuzu's role in the conspiracy. There's no other reason for the wife to give Mulu's abundant fields of grain to Zuzu, and it isn't because she was in a generous mood. This was the plan all along. It is Zuzu's reward for doing the dirty work, i.e., strangling his own brother.

Mulu, the man of plunder, has just been plundered by his wife.

Poor Mulu. He's left with nothing, absolutely nothing, not even his pride and dignity. It's easy to feel sorry for Mulu. Sure, he is a thief, a liar, and a glutton; and yes, he is also a drunkard and a philanderer, but he is not *mean* like the Great Fatted Bull, and he is not violent. Lu-mah is a man of violence. He personally captures women and makes them his slaves. He also lays the lash to the back of the shepherd brother. On the other hand, Mulu is never violent, not even when he is attacked. Unlike Lu-mah, Mulu is more of a fool than a villain.

Lu-mah got away scot-free with his crimes, but Mulu continues to suffer. The story of Mulu is like the Story of Job, but without the happy ending.

Mulu gets absolutely no mercy from his wife. She rakes him across the coals, up one side and down the other. First she tries to murder him, then she divorces him. She humiliates him and then takes all of his stuff. Many ex-husbands can probably relate to the story of Mulu.

For all you men out there, the moral of the story is clear: "Don't piss off the wifey."

{She exclaims to Zuzu . . . }

"Long may you live! You are the man of great abundance!"

So now Zuzu is the new Abundant Man, just like his brother was. The court ladies say Zuzu is quite handsome, "though tending towards fat." They say that Zuzu reminds them of Mulu, who at one time was also very handsome, just like his brother.

"You will be the Lord of the Cakes, of all the cakes!"

Remember the malted cakes at the beginning of the story? There are only two times when

the cakes are mentioned. The first time is when they were stolen, and then now, when Zuzu is so conveniently named the Lord of the Cakes. This is proof that Zuzu stole the cakes. It puts him at the scene of the crime, so it also proves that he's the one who strangled Mulu. See, I told you it was a clue.

Why did he steal the cakes? Did he steal the cakes so he could return them to the people?

After all, the cakes are part of the people's rations. When he called out to Mulu and said, "The people's rations will make you bray with great burning indigestion!", Zuzu sounded very democratic, quite egalitarian.

Is he a new kind of prince, one who actually cares about the welfare of the common people?

I doubt it. I believe he stole the cakes simply because he has a sweet tooth, with a fondness for malted cakes in particular.

Here's what I think happened: Imagine Zuzu lurking in the darkness, waiting to strangle his own brother. You'd think he would be very tense and nervous, with his stomach in a knot, but Zuzu is thinking, "Mmm, malted cakes. I think I'll have a little snack."

It seems that Zuzu is another Mulu in the making.

So far as Zuzu is concerned, the people be damned. He obviously doesn't agree with the saying by Marie Antoinette, "Let them eat cake." Zuzu wants *all* of the cakes for himself. That's why he is named the Lord of the Cakes, "of all the cakes!"

There is something else that needs to be considered:

This is more than just an ordinary murder plot. It's not merely a case about a woman trying to knock off her husband. Nor is it a case of simple assault when two brothers are fighting. It is a coup d'état, an abrupt change of government. It is a matter of state. A reigning prince has been deposed and almost murdered. He has been stripped of his wealth and kicked out of his kingdom. Now a new prince has been named as his "replacement." One government has been violently overthrown and another has been put into its place. Now someone new will dispense the royal verdicts and allocate the people's rations.

This coup d'état was the result of a risky plot that required secret meetings, careful planning, and covert surveillance – all leading up to a sudden and violent attack in the still of the night. In this conspiracy, Zuzu is the muscle of the operation, the servant girl is the spy, and the young princess is the mastermind.

Make no mistake, this was the wife's plan all along. She is the mastermind of the operation. She set the plot in motion, and everything turned out *exactly* the way she planned it.

She is still running the show right now. She's the one doing all of the talking. She's the one making all of the decisions.

So there's no doubt about it, this tablet was definitely written by a woman.

"And I will be the Princess of the Fodder, for ever and ever again!"

“Princess of the Fodder” may sound like a hokey title to modern readers, but in this kingdom, grain and fodder mean wealth and power.

“Again” is the operative word in this sentence. She was the Princess of Fodder once before when she was married to Mulu. She'll be the Princess again after she marries Zuzu.

Yes, she will marry Zuzu, her husband's brother. Zuzu will be the prince and she will be the prince's wife. Zuzu has just bumped his elder brother from the line of succession, so now he is the heir apparent to Bantu, the Supreme Lord. Zuzu is rich, but Bantu is far richer, and vastly more powerful. When Bantu passes away (or meets with an unfortunate accident, god forbid), Zuzu will become the Supreme Lord, and his wife will become the Queen.

So now the question is: Were Zuzu and the princess wife having an affair?

Of course they were.

Did the affair lead to the plot, or did the plot lead to the affair? In either case, with the added excitement of being co-conspirators in a dangerous murder plot, a torrid affair seems like a foregone conclusion. After all, human nature hasn't really changed too much in 4,000 years.

“For men who rob and plunder, all women are prostitutes.” The wife's sentence now comes back to haunt her. Remember, Zuzu is also a man of plunder. The wife has gotten rid of one man of plunder, and now she is marrying another. This raises serious questions about her motivations. Was she talking about herself when she said that? It seems that perhaps her motives were more financial than political.

Of course, all of this is my own interpretation of the events. I have no proof that the princess had an affair, and I have no proof that she intends to marry Zuzu. This tablet is open to a variety of different interpretations (it was deliberately written this way) so you should make up your own mind about the princess wife.

On the one hand, she could be The Good Princess. Maybe she really is Princess Pureheart, a kind woman working selflessly to rid the kingdom of a greedy and gluttonous tyrant that is plundering the countryside and stealing the people's rations. Then on the other hand, maybe she is The Bad Princess, an evil and conniving woman who cynically manipulates everyone in her single-minded pursuit of wealth and power. You decide which version to believe.

Let's take one more look at the “happy couple” as they eye each other warily, here on the august occasion of their betrothal. He is a strong man, she is a strong woman. In a way, it seems like they're made for each other. This could be a match made in heaven.

So... do they live happily ever after?

Probably not. After seeing what happened to Mulu, Zuzu is now thinking, “Uh-oh. What did I get myself into?” The princess is thinking, “Zuzu is not an easy pushover like his brother.” Zuzu has readily shown that he's capable of violence, even against his own family members. The princess is wondering, “If it comes right down to it, how can I get rid of Zuzu?”

Meanwhile, the servant girl has her eyes on him already, she's watching his every move.