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Adapa and the Ritual Process

Literature, by its very essence, resists attempts which would try to assign final, universal meanings to texts. Thus it goes without saying that any analysis of a speculative composition can only constitute a step in the never ending search for final truth.

In this short essay I should like to offer an analysis of a Mesopotamian literary text, the story of Adapa, which would account for the fact that the hero of the story is also encountered in other compositions, where he holds the status of a sage (*ap-kallu*). Numerous previous interpretations of the story have been proposed¹. The present study is intended as a further elaboration of the work already done on the Adapa story and by no means excludes interpretations already proposed. It gives me great pleasure to be able to offer this small bit of speculation as a symbol of my gratitude and warm feelings towards Prof. Rudolf R a n o s z e k, my first initiator into Assyriology.

Adapa is a unique protagonist in Mesopotamian literature. For no other hero of a canonical text is so often encountered in other compositions. Before proceeding with the analysis of the Adapa story we shall briefly summarize the main plot of the composition and discuss the other references to the main protagonist. Since all

¹ For a thorough examination of the problems involved see B. F o s t e r, *Wisdom and the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia*, OrNS 43, 1974, pp. 344-354, with previous literature. Since then the following relevant studies have appeared: G. B u c c e l l a t i, *Adapa, Genesis, and the Notion of Faith*, UF 5, 1973, pp. 61-66; B. K i e n a s t, *Die Weisheit des Adapa von Eridu*, in: *Symbolae biblicae et mesopotamicae Francisco Mario Theodoro de Liagre Böhl dedicatae*, M. A. B e e k et al. eds., Leiden 1973, pp. 234-239; W. v o n S o d e n, *Bemerkungen zum Adapa-Mythos*, AOAT 25, 1976, pp. 428-433; P. X e l l a, *Problemi del Mito nel Vicino Oriente Antico*, Naples 1976, pp. 47-60.

of this material has been recently surveyed by B. Foster, we shall only sketch the necessary data here².

All the extant references to Adapa connect him with the city of Eridu and its god Enki/Ea and with the knowledge of wisdom. By wisdom I mean here not the technical term borrowed from Biblical Studies, but the more practical, literal meaning of the word. In the case of Adapa, however, this practical knowledge extends to more esoteric matters. The wisdom of the hero of our story is closely connected with the cultic aspects of magic, with the means of healing and of being able to see things which other ordinary mortals cannot grasp. It is in connection with this kind of knowledge that the Neo-Assyrian kings invoke Adapa in their inscriptions³. It is also the source for the late tradition which identifies Adapa as one of the seven sages who served as "advisors" to ancient kings⁴. The knowledge of hidden matters is also well demonstrated in the polemical context of the so-called "Verse Account of Nabonidus" where a horrible statue of Sin, unacceptable to the traditional clergy, is described as one which "...not (even) Ea-Mummu could have formed, not (even) learned Adapa knows his name"⁵. In the same text Adapa is referred to as the author of an astrological omen series⁶. Cumulatively, it is this tradition concerning the sage which is the source of the famous passage in Berossus which describes Oannes-Adapa as the fish-man who came from the sea and provided mankind with the accoutrements of culture such as writing, agriculture, etc.⁷ This is, however, a late tradition which associated knowledge of the esoteric arts, in particular knowledge of the future as a function of divination, with other arcane sciences such as magic and, most importantly, literacy⁸.

The basic domain of Adapa, however, is magic. It is in this sense that he is originally attested as a servant of Enki/Ea in the "Weidner Chronicle"⁹ and is mentioned in other magical contexts¹⁰. There seems to be good reason to believe that up to the Old Babylonian period magic was a separate institution, distinct from the official cult. This matter cannot be fully discussed here but certain basic facts may be pre-

² B. Foster, op. cit.

³ CAD A/II, p. 172.

⁴ There is a large literature on this subject. For the most recent material see R. Borger, *Die Beschwörungsserie bīt mēseri und die Himmelfahrt Henocks*, JNES 33, 1974, pp. 183-196.

⁵ Translation by A. L. Oppenheim, ANET², p. 313.

⁶ See F. R. Kraus, RA 68, 1974, pp. 92-93.

⁷ See now the new translation by S. Burnstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berossus*, Malibu 1978.

⁸ On certain aspects of this late tradition see R. Drews, *The Babylonian Chronicles and Berossus*, Iraq 37, 1975, pp. 37-55.

⁹ A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, Locust Valley 1975, p. 147; 33 (in broken context).

¹⁰ See, for example, the letter from Adapa incorporated into an incantation in STT 2, p. 176 and the reference to "the creation of Adapa, sage of Eridu" (*e-piṣ a-da-pa* NUN.ME *eri*₄-*d*[*u*₁₀^{ki}]) in the Lamashtu incantation PBS 1/2, 113; ii 58.

sented. First of all it should be noted that Old Babylonian incantations were not a major component of the school curriculum. Very few such texts are known from Nippur and even fewer from Ur. Moreover, there is little indication of the presence of elements from the so-called "Eridu Mythology" in the cult before Middle Babylonian times. The marginal, separate status of magic was one of the forces which gave it power. After the end of the Old Babylonian period it appears that the separate power of the magical tradition was in a sense neutralized through absorption into the mainstream of the tradition. Thus a figure like Adapa, who originally would have been a citizen of a different domain, now becomes part of a larger world of thought and acquires other attributes in addition to his status as a magical sage. This hypothesis is, admittedly, difficult to prove at present. Nevertheless, even if this line of argument is not accepted one thing does remain uncontested: that Adapa is strongly connected with magic and the traditions centered around the city of Eridu and its gods. Having noted these facts we may now inquire as to how the story of Adapa is connected with these traditions and with his status within magic.

Let us now investigate the structural composition of the Adapa story, the stages through which the narrative progresses, and the transitional signals which mark thematic changes. At the outset of the text Adapa is described as pure and clean, a servant in the cult of Ea at Eridu. When he is out fishing for offerings for the god the south wind destroys his boat. Here the first climax arises; the hero in his rage utters a curse, threatening to break the wing of the wind. At this point a startling thing happens — the curse comes true, the wing of the wind is broken! Note that no physical action precipitates this event, it is *language* which is the weapon used by Adapa. And already here the magical associations of the hero are alluded to. For the only other context where a similar event takes place is found in incantations describing the demon Pazuzu¹¹. We shall return to the significance of this fact below.

At this turn of events the god Anu becomes furious and demands that Adapa be brought before him in heaven. At this point Ea instructs the hero not to accept bread and water in heaven and tells him to garb himself in mourning clothes to appease the vegetation gods who guarded the doors of heaven. In ancient Mesopotamia mourning clothes were dirty, a marked sign of contrast to the state of Adapa at the outset of the story. Thus the change of clothing is used in the text as a transitional marking device, which is meant to indicate thematic changes. Now Adapa arrives in heaven and refuses the bread and water offered to him by Anu. Most interpretations take this to be the most significant part of the story, depicting how Adapa, the "primal man", lost his chance for immortality. For the food offered by Anu is the source of eternal life. Although Adapa, on the instruction of Ea, rejects the food, he is given a change of clothing and is sent back to earth together

¹¹ W. G. Lambert, *Inscribed Pazuzu Heads from Babylon*, FB 12, 1970, pp. 41-47.

with diseases and the means to combat them — incantations¹². The disease is here a function of the fact that by hurting the south wind Adapa has brought on famine, and thus disease. But what is of importance to us here is the fact that another transitional state has been signalled by a change of clothing. It is worth noting here that in the so-called "Epic of Gilgamesh" each and every turn in the narrative situation, which also indicates a change of status for both Gilgamesh and Enkidu, is likewise marked by a difference in outward appearance, most notably in the garb and hair-dress of the protagonists¹³.

Let us now attempt to describe this story in more structural terms. Adapa exists in a state of purity. He is then taken out of that state and, in the most extraordinary adventure which could be experienced by a human being, is brought to heaven in a form negating his previous existence — all dirty and in mourning. By the decree of the gods he is then returned to earth in new clothes, anointed, and with new knowledge. He now has the power of magical spells. He had stumbled upon this power by chance when he cursed the south wind. Now, however, this discovery has become institutionalized and he possesses it with the approval of the gods. The states and processes sketched above mirror those universally found in rites of passage. For the structure of the story, as outlined above, can be described in the terms developed by A. van Gennep¹⁴ and then elaborated on by V. Turner¹⁵; the states of separation, margin and reaggregation. These have been described as follows: "The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated"¹⁶.

Thus the part of the Adapa story leading up to the "passenger's" arrival in heaven can be described structurally as the phase of separation. The incident in heaven may be depicted as the ultimate liminal state. For Adapa has stepped from the realm of the profane into the world of the sacred. To be sure, as a servant of Ea at Eridu he was already in an ambiguous state on the margin of these two worlds. But his passage to heaven is the symbol of the ultimate switch of universes. For when he is "reaggregated" into the profane world he acquires a new form; he possesses the

¹² The end of the tale is badly broken. On the restoration of these lines see, most recently, W. von Soden, *op. cit.*, pp. 432–433.

¹³ See J. Sasson, *Some Literary Motifs in the Composition of the Gilgamesh Epic*, "Studies in Philology" 69, 1974, p. 272.

¹⁴ *The Rites of Passage*, London 1960 (originally published in 1908).

¹⁵ Turner has dealt with these problems in a number of studies, most notably in *The Ritual Process*, Chicago 1969.

¹⁶ V. Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 94–95.

power of magic. And although the last part of the text is not well preserved there can be little doubt that the main topic of the final section is magic¹⁷. At this point it must be stressed that I am by no means implying that the Adapa story somehow represents an initiation ritual but rather that it employs, purposefully, a structure that is isomorphic to the form of a rite de passage. It is in this manner that the structure of the text elucidates the dominant meaning of the composition: the problem of the institutionalization of magic.

The ritual passage of Adapa may, in a particular terminology, be considered as etiological. For it demonstrates a concern with the very nature and fragmentation of man's most potent weapon — language. The discovery that words can maim, that, in the famous dictum of Rimbaud, a metaphor may change the world, necessitates a solution. Limits must be set to this power, and to this effect it must be channelled into a specific, circumscribed context, the art of magic. The art must be limited to a small number of initiated persons if this power, too destructive to remain in the hands of each and every human being, is to be harnessed. The result is a paradox, that the most human of all of man's capacities, the ability to manipulate language, becomes fragmented, and one aspect of the propositional function of speech can only be utilized by a powerful minority. And it is at this moment that the function of Ea in the text becomes clear. By instructing Adapa not to accept the bread and water of life offered by Anu he thwarts an inept attempt by the head of the pantheon to hide Adapa's discovery. For Anu's solution, to make the hero into a god, would have been no solution at all, since the same situation would have repeated itself throughout human history. By tricking Adapa into not accepting immortality Ea forces Anu to recognize the magical power of words and to provide an institutionalized form for the utilization of that power — *ašipūtu*. In addition, of course, Ea's trick is self-serving, for it places him in a privileged position as the divinity in charge of magic.

The process depicted in the Adapa story signifies a transition into the crafts of the god Ea, a marginal world inhabited by magicians, demons and, perhaps, sages. All of these beings are marked as being somehow set apart from the regular classificatory scheme of things. The demon, who causes diseases, and the magician who can cure them, play a dialectical role with one foot in the sphere of the sacred and one in the profane world. Both of them have to cross the threshold between these two parts of the universe, the demon to afflict, the magician in order to effect a cure. Thus only Adapa and the demon Pazuzu break the wings of winds, a narrative device which may perhaps serve to signal the connections between these types of marginal figures.

Since we are in the realm of speculative interpretation I should like to proceed one step further. Most evolutionary minded concepts of the development of western thought have seen the birth of philosophy in the opinions of the pre-Socratics who were able to conceptualize unity within the universe. Near Eastern thought has

¹⁷ See note 12 above and E. Burrows, *Note on Adapa*, Or 30, 1928, p. 24.

always been considered as fragmented, depicting the universe as a series of disconnected facts which could only be described through an elaborate system of exemplification. Thus the various lexical lists of the Mesopotamian literati are often exemplified as indexes of this failure of imagination. The analysis presented above stands in opposition to this view. For it is rooted in a firm belief that Mesopotamian literary texts are more than "just so" stories concerned with the basic, elemental, physical facts of existence. Mesopotamian thought did indeed wrestle with primary intellectual problems such as the illusions of historiography and the question of personal self-integration, as in the so-called Epic of Gilgamesh¹⁸, or the fragmentation of discourse, a problem central, in later times, to rhetorical speculations. Thus it is our obligation to search out the structural and symbolic patterns through which the Mesopotamians expressed their search for meaning in their universe. Only then will philology live up to the challenge which the ancient texts present.

¹⁸ See my forthcoming *Gilgamesh — History and the Structure of Desire*.