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ANOTHER WRINKLE ON OLD ADAPA

JACK M. SASSON
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

For its relatively modest size, the Mesopotamian narrative about Adapa has attracted disproportionate attention from Assyriologists and from biblical scholars, the latter heavily influenced by interpretations that have Adapa missing an opportunity for immortality.¹ The tale is known primarily from three sources. There are two as yet unpublished early second-millennium Sumerian recensions found in the same room at Old Babylonian Tell Hadad (Me-Turan), with variants from each other.² There are also two blocks of material in Akkadian: a pedagogic version from the late second millennium uncovered at the Egyptian New Kingdom capital Akhetaten (Tell el-Amarna), and a number of seventh-century Neo-Assyrian fragments that can be assigned to diverse accounts, some with apotropaic goals.³ While it is entirely possible that the Semitic material may have covered exactly the same narrative terrain over the centuries and through scribal adaptations, it is always prudent when dealing with fragments not to presume complete harmony between the parts. Accordingly, the comments I dedicate to Marten, a dear friend and respected colleague, draw exclusively on reading the Amarna tablet. Luckily, it is in this version that the heart of the narrative is preserved best.

As the story goes, on an otherwise calm fishing day, Adapa had cursed the South Wind when it capsized his boat, breaking its wings. In doing so, he presumably had interfered with the normal, albeit occasionally violent, order of nature. Consequently, Adapa is summoned to heaven before the great god Anu. But before making his trek, his patron god Ea instructs him on conducting himself before the divine tribunal. Adapa complies with what he imagines to be Ea's instruction and turns back a food offer from Anu. The richness in the Adapa bibliography is due

¹ The most recent full treatment of the tale is Izre'el 2001, with previous literature. Hallo 2001 briefly reviews recent literature. Picchioni's study 1981 remains a rich repository of comparative material. Line numbering of the Amarna version follows Izre'el's edition. Shlomo Izre'el and Scott Noegel kindly commented on an earlier draft of this paper and I am grateful to them.

² Notice of the variant Sumerian copies is in Cavigneaux 1999: 253 n. 13.

³ Full catalogue is in Izre'el 2001: 5–8.

largely to Adapa's reaction at choices presented by Ea and Anu. In this brief note, I broaden Adapa's options and so deepen the ambiguity of his position.

What Ea Advised

After giving him signs that would bolster the reliability of his predictions, Ea had told Adapa (B.29'–33'): *akala ša mu-ti ukallūnikkuma/ lā takkal // mē mu-ú-ti ukallūnikkuma/ lā tašatti*. This is commonly translated, "They will offer you food of death, but you must not eat; they will offer you water of death, but you must not drink."⁴ What the gods eventually offer Adapa is *akal/mē balāṭi*, "food/water of life" (B.60'–62'). In Akkadian, as in most literatures, there is such a prevalent pairing of *balāṭum* "life" and *mūtum* "death" (see the dictionaries) that the natural interpretation by many is that Ea warned against death-giving food when Anu had instead offered life-giving food. The disjunction between what the two major gods expected Adapa to partake has generated much debate as to whether either or both deities were victimizing Adapa.

Many commentators are ready to imagine Ea as intentionally leading Adapa astray, not because this god relishes betraying his own devotees, but because as a god of wisdom (among other attributes) Ea does have clear doubts about the judgment of other gods.⁵ His decision to warn Utnapishtim against an impending flood (Gilgamesh Epic, tablet XI) is deemed a fine example of his willingness to force reason on them even at the risk of thwarting their wishes. Regarding Adapa, the opinion is that Ea did not wish humans to rise beyond their fate and so made certain that his devotee would not partake of life-eating substances when Anu offered them to him.

What did Ea in fact tell Adapa? D. O. Edzard recently advocated a rendering of the crucial lines that in effect places the onus on Adapa. He has Ea alerting Adapa, "should they offer you death-giving food, do not eat; should they offer you death-giving water, do not drink."⁶ Adapa simply misunderstood the instruction. Grammatically, this rendering is defensible; but less so contextually. To begin with, declarative and conditional sentences are distinct grammatically to our ears but not necessarily to those of Akkadian speakers, so that we need to have convincing reasons why Adapa understood Ea's charge one way but not another. Secondly, it makes little sense that after making an equivocal statement ("should they offer you death-giving food, do not eat ..."), Ea would go on urging Adapa not to neglect his order (B.33'–34'). Thirdly, there is no appreciable difference in the tenor of argu-

⁴ On alternative translations, see below.

⁵ Opinions nicely compiled in Buccellati 1973.

⁶ Edzard 2002. This rendering is now adopted in Foster 2005: 528. It had already been proposed in Labat 1970: 292.

ments between Ea prohibiting Adapa from food and instructing him earlier on how to handle himself before Tammuz and Gizzida.⁷ Finally, there is the issue of what Adapa heard Anu say, to which I will turn soon.

Another approach is to deal with Ea's words paronomastically. S. Dalley suggested a pun between *akala ša mu-ti* and *akala šamūti*. Ostensibly the latter phrase is suppose to mean "food from heaven," when *šamūti* with the meaning "heaven" has yet to be found elsewhere in Akkadian.⁸ A. Kilmer has proposed *mē emūti*, deriving the last word from *emūm* "to become" so "water of transformation."⁹ Adopting Dalley's proposal and transforming her own suggestion into "water of breath" for the sake of rhyme, Kilmer offers the following poetic rendering of our lines:

When 'fore An you do stand
The food of death/heaven to you they'll hand,
This indeed you shall not eat.
The water of death/breath to you they will hand,
This indeed you shall not drink.

Dalley's pun, *ša mūti* || *šamūti* works well orally as well as orthographically; Kilmer's less so in that, given the consistent spelling of *me-e* in construct both with *mūti* and *balāti*, it requires presumption that sandhi is at work. Neither suggestion relies on homonyms, but plays on words that are assonantically similar. Yet, even if the meanings of words that Dalley and Kilmer propose prove to be valid for Akkadian (by no means certain), it still remains unclear how they act as puns. Puns work through words that sound alike but have different meanings.¹⁰ Puns may strive for wit or humor or they may impart deep truths; but puns must generate a sense that is potentially accessible to a targeted character in a narrative and must be meaningful to the audience hearing them. Moreover, when they are conveyed in written

⁷ Adapa, you are to appear before King Anu, going up to heaven. As you go up to heaven, as you reach the gate of Anu, at the gate of Anu will be posted Dumuzi and Gizzida. On seeing you they will ask, 'Young Man, for whom are you like this? Adapa, for whom are you dressed in mourning?' 'In our land, two gods are missing, so I have acted thus.' 'Who are the two gods missing in the land?' 'Dumuzi and Gizzida!' Glancing at each other, they will chuckle. They will give a favorable report to Anu; they will help you gain Anu's favor (B.17'–28').

⁸ Dalley 1989: 188 n. 9. *šamūtum* has to do with rain, as does *šamātum*, the last a plural of *šamūm* that may be related to heaven; but the connection is roundabout. A *šamūtum* seems to suggest 'purchase' or the like.

⁹ Kilmer 1996: 111. A word *emūtum/iwūtum* with such a meaning is not yet known.

¹⁰ Many puns work well even if the words only forcedly sound the same; for example 'Lettuce Planet' is a firm that caters events ('Let us plan it'). A nice bibliography on puns, especially in the Ancient Near East, is collected in the early pages of Noegel 1996. See also his website at <http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/wordplay.html>

forms, puns must at least preserve some constancy with the context in which they are embedded. In the case of the above proposals, it is difficult to know what would a pun on rain or breath do for poor Adapa had he deciphered either. Unlike food that is associated with death, there is nothing sinister in the labels they carry. I imagine the contrary: Had Adapa felt he was being offered “food of heaven/rains” or “water of breath” he might have accepted them, if only out of human curiosity.

A Double-Edged Pun

Despite dissatisfaction with the efforts of Dalley and Kilmer, I nonetheless find their approach fruitful and propose that a pun is indeed the device that resolves our difficulty in assessing Ea’s role. But rather than one that contrasts completely different words, mine crafts it from the same word, albeit in modern dictionaries diacritics are used to distinguish among its diverse meanings. My proposal is that Ea is telling Adapa not to eat or drink from *mu-ú-ti* representing both *mūtum*, “death,” and *mutum*, “human being, husband, warrior.”¹¹ So, I suggest the relevant lines be translated so they keep this double meaning, “They will offer you food for humans/ of death, but you must not eat; they will offer you water for humans/ of death, but you must not drink.”

I must register my surprise that to my knowledge such an obvious suggestion has not been offered earlier, because it solves two problems. Lexicographers will not need to stake their beliefs in as yet unattested words. More importantly, interpreters will not need to psychoanalyze Ea, questioning his motivation in derailing a wondrous future for his patron Adapa. For the pun that Ea delivers is Delphic, exploiting ambiguity through amphiboly, words with the same spelling and pronunciation (as far as we can tell) that carry opposite meanings. A fine example from Jonah might clarify its working. In Nineveh, when Jonah foretold, ‘*ôd ’arba’im yôm venînevêh nehpa’ket*, “Forty days more, and Nineveh overturns” (Jonah 3:4), he may have believed that God was declaring inexorable doom on the Ninevites. In fact, because the *nif’al* of *hāfak* is amphibolous, God may also have been saying “Forty days more, and Nineveh turns around,” thus predicting that is that it would soon “become (morally) whole again.”¹² The Ninevites (and Jonah as well) needed to believe that God was launching destruction in a few days; but Nineveh’s repentance was also fore-ordained, whether God changed his mind or not.

¹¹ Dictionaries give primacy to a meaning ‘husband’ for *mutum*, likely because the bulk of its attestations have this sense in connection with *aššatum*, ‘wife.’ But in the vernacular of most languages, a *mutum* is a husband because he is woman’s ‘man.’ Notice that in the OB Gilgamesh, after partaking of food and drink with other human beings, Enkidu ‘anoints himself, becoming a man (*awiliš iwi*); he wears garments, becoming a warrior/ human being (*kīma muti ibašši*); P.iii.24–27; see also vi.31’; respectively lines 110 and 238 in George’s edition, 2003, I: 177, 181.

¹² I discuss such Delphic puns in Sasson 1990: 345–347, citing Mari and Biblical examples.

Sustenance from Tammuz and Gizzida

So when understood equivocally as above, Ea's instruction carries the plot to many possibilities. Above all, it makes it turn not just on Adapa and his fate, but on what ostensibly seems just a subplot: the mistrust between the major divinities on how to deal with human beings. Ea may have feared that Anu would punish Adapa and his instruction was to divert him from it, not directly, but through the intercession of Tammuz and Gizzida, normally chthonic deities that in this tale stand at the threshold of heaven. Adapa was to obtain their favor through theatrics: he was to attire in mourning and to cajole them with words of his devotion to their fate such that, breaking into laughter, they were to intercede with Anu (B.14'–28'). The role of Anu in this particular scenario of Ea is uncharted. For certain Adapa needed to find grace with him, at least because the hearing was taking place in his presence; but the actual presentation of substance and garment was to be done by the other two gods.¹³ In sum, from Tammuz and Gizzida Adapa might have gotten the food of death. So Ea alerted him to its danger by warning him against *akala/mē ša mūti*, “death-giving food/drink.”

Sustenance from Anu

For Ea, there was the additionally anxiety that Anu might offer Adapa hospitality and so might also compromise him as an Ea devotee; but the pun nonetheless would work to keep Adapa as a human being, if not also a warrior (*akala/mē ša muti*).

As the story develops, there are moments of uncertainty for us as interpreters. To begin we may ask how aware was Adapa of what Anu was offering him? Between Adapa's arrival before Anu and his dismissal from heaven there are three scenes and they are sandwiched between lines 46'–60.' The first and last contain direct communications between Adapa and Anu. Standing before Anu, Adapa had not been prepared for Anu's interrogation and, uncoached, he told a slightly slanted version of the truth when he spoke of cursing the South Wind (B.54') when in fact he had willed its wing to break (B.5').

The third heavenly scene comes after Adapa had turned down food and drink, so beginning with line 66' Anu asks him: “Come now, Adapa, why did you not eat, drink, hence come to live?” and when he admits to having followed Ea's instruction, Anu orders him back to earth (B.67'–68'; 70').¹⁴ The question arises as to why Adapa did not partake of food that was associated with *balāṭum*, a word that sounded

¹³ I would not translate, as is often done, the plural forms as indefinite in subject, something like ‘when you are offered’

¹⁴ ‘My Lord Ea said, “do not eat; do not drink.”’ Buccellati 1973: 62 suggests that Adapa understood categorically Ea's prohibition not to consume, no matter what kind of food is offered him. This is likely because he knew that no other substance was to be offered to him.

nothing like the *mutum/mūtum* Ea had warned him against, however that word is to be understood. To answer, I go back to the second scene, which was skipped.

The text there tells us that when Anu heard Adapa's confession—quite as Ea predicted and in fact choreographed—Tammuz and Gizzida were there to “put a good word” for him, calming Anu. We are told in B.56' that Anu *issaku/at*, “grew quiet” and began to ponder the mystery of Ea's involvement in the whole matter. I wish I could do better than previous commentators in deciphering what Anu had in mind when evoking Ea (B.57'–59'); but as we must all make choices, with many others I imagine him thinking, “Why has Ea revealed the (mystery) of the cosmos to an ill-equipped (*lā banīta*) human being, thus encouraging him toward temerity? (*libba kabra iškunšu*).”¹⁵ That Anu was questioning Ea's motivations is obvious; but it is not clear to me what in Adapa's actions or words prompted Anu to suspect Ea of betraying trade secrets. Perhaps Adapa's capacity to wield the word effectively when harming the South Wind was a sign for Anu that Ea had gone too far. Or maybe any god dealing with Ea had to remain on the qui-vive.

Whatever it was about Ea that troubled Anu, he nevertheless decided on a course of action. It is noteworthy, however, that when Anu asks “What can we do for him?” in B.60', he is no longer speaking to Adapa but to Tammuz and Gizzida, and it becomes a fair conjecture on my part to imagine that Anu, likely shielded from human eyes as Mesopotamian gods often were, gave instructions that were heard only by the two gods. If so, Adapa would never have heard the phrase *akal balāṭi* that Anu used and, therefore, could not reconsider his options. In fact, as Tammuz and Gizzida approached him with these gifts, Adapa could not but find in their presentation further confirmation of Ea's prescience since he had been alerted to just this development (B.28'–29'). For Adapa, therefore, the choices were never between feeding on life or on death, but simply between *mūti* and *muti*, that is between words that in our script are distinguished by the presence or absence of a simple macron.

By not accepting the food presentations brought by the gods, Adapa brings us to another moment of interpretive uncertainty. What in fact would Adapa have gained or lost had he accepted what Anu called *akal balāṭi*? The literature is not of a mind on what is really at stake. Some commentators accuse Anu of lying, so actually vindicating Ea. Anu may have offered Adapa *balāṭum* “life”; but, in fact, he was serving him *mūtum* “death.” Such a suggestion simply shifts the charge of deceit from Ea to Anu and is hardly productive. However, *balāṭum* is not known as a euphemism for death and we do not improve literary understanding by subverting

¹⁵ There are disputes about practically every phrase in these lines; see the comments gathered in Izre'el 2001: 28–31 and Picchioni 1981: 137–138. I take *lā banīta*, as do many others, as a qualifier for ‘humanity,’ and not a noun phrase attached to ‘heaven and earth’ (Izre'el). I have treated *libbam šakānum* idiomatically (see CAD Š/1, p. 138) and *kabra* adverbially.

the meanings of words accommodatingly. A more nuanced version of the same has it that Anu's food was something like nectar or ambrosia, perfectly fine for deities but deadly for mortals. While such a suggestion neatly absolves Ea from instructing Adapa falsely, it would portray Anu so clueless that he did not realize the consequence of his offer.¹⁶

Most commentators, however, speculate that the *akal balāṭi* would have made Adapa immortal, and some very fine translations actually force the word “immortality” in one portion or another of Anu's parting shot.¹⁷ There is widespread assumption that this immortality was paradigmatic for humanity, a notion that feeds a good amount of the comparative speculation with the biblical Adam.¹⁸ But this conjecture is needless, for even if Adapa's translation into divinity was at stake, Mesopotamian literature knows of it occurring to individuals, especially to primordial sages, without it applying to the whole of humanity.¹⁹ *balāṭum* has to do with life, but also with vigor and health; so we may presume that had Adapa partaken of it, he might have felt renewed and refreshed; but not otherwise changed in a permanent way, except in so far that he would no longer have had the full trust of his sponsor god, Ea. This notion might explain why the first-millennium versions carried the story into its therapeutic application: Adapa, from human seed, broke the South Wind's wing, with potentially consequential diseases mounting on human beings. Adapa was restored to health nonetheless and so will other human beings. It might also sharpen our appreciation of the enigmatic notice in a later fragment (D.9'-10') where Adapa is but a pawn in a cosmic game, “At that time, about Adapa, Anu set service on him; [afterward], about Ea, he instituted his release.”

Choice for Adapa?

It is time to conclude. If we presume, as I would suggest, that Adapa may not have heard that Anu was proposing to feed him life, his reaction to the offer of food and

¹⁶ This position was held by Böhl and was adopted by others; see bibliography in Liverani 1982: 295–296 and 296 n. 6.

¹⁷ The opposite is still broadly broadcast; see Jacobsen 1930: 201–203. Jacobsen was reacting to M. Burrows' opinion that by making Adapa immortal, Anu sought to prevent a powerful wielder of magic from returning to earth.

¹⁸ Hallo 2004: 274 suggests that “[both Adapa and the Garden of Eden story] express the notion that God offers life but man chooses death.” He equates Adapa's “death-giving” food and drink to the “Tree of knowledge of good and evil.” However, the Adam and Eve of Scripture did become immortal, if not as individuals certainly as launchers of a species that, through birth-giving, can never die out; and this happened after the couple partook of the tree of life (sic) not of knowledge of good and evil; see Sasson 2000.

While no longer compelling, the equation Adapa = Adam still surfaces in literature, even when denying its likelihood; see Shea 1977 and Andreason 1981.

¹⁹ See already Bottéro 1989: 93.

garments must have been based on what he chose to interpret from Ea's instruction. Since he did not eat or drink, we must assume that, like Jonah and the Ninevites, his ears had kept only the sinister potential of consuming food and water of *mūtum* with a macron, so "death," but not of *mutum* without a macron, so "humankind," or the like. He therefore found it logical to turn down food presented by chthonic deities, the least likely to give him a break.

If this interpretation pleases, then, theatrics aside, in this tale there are no deceptive gods. Not Ea, crafty and inveterate punster though he may have been, and certainly not Anu. Adapa did not fail himself, let alone humanity, by not having had the courage to taste life and live. If he were guilty of any fault, it was that to the last he remained oblivious to the games Akkadian words can play. It is just too bad that when he confessed to Anu about the crime that brought him to heaven, Adapa was too prudent to spill all the beans. Had he mentioned *mutum* (with or without a macron) as an outcome of the food Ea had urged him to avoid, Anu might have directed him to the relevant volumes of the CAD.

Armed with grammars and dictionaries, we need not be as imperfect. I speculate that at one point in the creation, development, or redaction of this version of the tale, someone must have seen the pun for its full potential, if only because of the careful way in which Adapa seems scripted to have heard only Ea's attribute for the forbidden food.

Did the scribe copying or recording this Amarna version of the story realize the potential behind the pun? This is more difficult to say. On the one hand, we have two different spellings of the crucial word in Ea's directive: food is of *mu-ti*, 2 signs; but drink is of *mu-ú-ti*; 3 signs (B.29'-30'). This distinction may suggest awareness of the differences between meanings. On the other hand, it is difficult to attribute such subtlety to the scribe, whether writing, hearing, or copying this text, for the use of plene writing (with extra vowels to indicate length) is not particularly consistent despite attempts at explaining it as a metrical signal.²⁰

Yet there is one more issue to raise: What if either or both of the as yet unpublished Sumerian editions of Adapa quote Ea as instructing him to avoid food and drink and do so by using a word for "death or dead person," *úš* or *ug*, neither of which parallels the double-meaning inherent to the Akkadian *mūti/muti*? If so, it would only confirm what many have argued: that the Sumerian and Akkadian versions of tales have their own literary traditions and may, therefore, have different goals when shaping a narrative out of inherited material, whether communicated orally or by writing.²¹

²⁰ See Izre'el 2001: 50-51, 81-90, and in particular pp. 84-86.

²¹ For the debate on this issue see Izre'el 2001: 69-70.

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