

The Adapa Discourse in Neo-Assyrian Kingship: A Comparative Analysis of Myth and Reality

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It is difficult to specify exactly what is going on here, but it would appear that there is some kind of transactive relationship understood to exist between the abstract (gods) and the concrete (the earthly responsibilities of the king): the character of some of the acts for which we have evidence is best explained by presuming that the principal point of the actions of the king was to create a harmony between heaven and earth - literally to join them together; to act as agent of the divine, not to supplant its position, or to exploit it for personal ends*29

The King and Totality

The concept of totality, a feature of both the Adapa (myth and discipline) and Assyrian theology, is the logical corollary of the association of the king with completed action: it is another way of framing the idea that the universe is structured according to degrees of participation in the ultimate completion (the realm of the divine). This ultimate completion is necessarily transcendent - the completion of completions - in that we can have no commerce with it except via certain special individuals in auspicious circumstances. However, the essential characteristic of the divine, if it cannot be said to exist in the world, can be emulated within the limitations imposed by the nature of earthly reality. Hence we find the king engaged in conquest and empire building, attempting to take hold of the known universe and to subject it to his will (which is naturally the will of the divine).*30 This ambition (if not necessarily the reality) is reflected in the style of the kings inscriptions, whether addressed to a human or divine audience. Client kings make sense within this emulatory system: a king need not rule directly, just as Marduk need not. A proxy representative (bound by oaths to the Assyrian king, just as the king is bound by oath to the god) is not only satisfactory, but fits harmoniously into the Assyrian model of the world.



The Myth of Adapa (II)

Several key concepts are brought together in the myth, or rather appear to be spun out of one central idea, related to the problem of man's connection with the divine: in the poem Anu is the supreme god: Ea knows the mind and the plans of Heaven and Earth. Adapa has connection with Ea on two counts:

1. he is his son, and
2. he has been initiated into the ways of heaven and earth by him.

Men in general have connection with the divine through the kingship of Adapa, and latterly through the kingship of those who have studied the discipline of the Adapa.

Adapa breaks the wing of the southwind (a wind favourable for kingship) while at sea fishing for the temple of Ea at Eridu.*³¹ He is on the wide sea (described as "like a mirror"); Ea's wisdom is explicitly compared with the wide sea, and Adapa is both in the place of Ea and clearly identified with it at the time when kingship is destroyed (note also that since the occurrence takes place at night the sea must be like a black mirror, with the same characteristics as the liver at the moment it is removed from the body of a sheep. This parallel is probably deliberate, since the point of divination is to know the mind of the gods).

Wide understanding was associated with the power to make decrees, and both were characteristics of kingship. The first fragment tells us that Adapa possessed wisdom and that "his command was like the command of [Anu] [...]" (line 2); "with wide understanding he had perfected him to expound (?) the decrees of the land" (line 3). His power to give decrees comes from his perfection, his completion, which is like that of the gods; but, naturally, it is not the same completion. His connection with the divine is to be understood as functioning through his completion: see Plato's *Phaedo*, 100, "greatness is the participation in the great". But, though he had been given wisdom by Ea, he had not granted Adapa eternal life (line 4). Ea

had however created him as a leader among mankind (line 6) and: "no one treated his command lightly" (line 7) *32

Thus Adapa is in the place of kingship, in that he has been placed in the realm of his father; because he is in that place he has the power to make decrees and he breaks the wing of the South wind with the utterance of his command. He in effect has usurped kingship, because he was cast deep into the realm of his father.

Why did the south wind bring Adapa into the realm of his father? To answer this we should ask why it is that the south wind should be associated with kingship in the first place. It is partly because in Mesopotamia the south wind is associated with storms and unpredictability. Thus the south wind connotes power, and power which transcends our capacity to predict its behaviour. As the gods are powerful and transcendently unpredictable, so the kings as their representatives (and emulators) are likewise powerful and unpredictable.

There is a two way process involved here: standing in the place of wide understanding promotes the power to make decrees and kingship, and kingship itself promotes wide understanding, expressed by Adapa's immersion in Ea's kingdom, the Apsu. Thus the southwind, emblematic of kingship, is responsible for conferring the power on another entity to break its wing (its power to be what it is)*33

This aspect of the myth is probably significant for the understanding of how the Sargonids understood royal succession. The kings had institutionalised the transfer of power from the king to the crown prince (possibly as the result of numerous occurrences of factional infighting in the royal court). His education prepared him to stand in the place of his father. While his education continued, he was not allowed to live in the same place as his father (the royal palace), but instead lived in a separate establishment which mirrored its character and functions. The crown prince was given an entourage like that of the king, drawn from the sons of the nobles forming his own court. Thus, as the king is the image of the god, so the crown prince is the image of the king. The crown prince was chosen by the king from amongst his sons and the decision was confirmed by omens and divination. That is, the kingship of the crown prince was legitimate only if confirmed by the gods. Note that Adapa was engaged in fishing out of sight of the sun god (i.e., at night) at the time he encountered the south wind, and that therefore the sun god could not see what was

happening and give his sanction.*34 Therefore the arrogation of kingship, even divinity, by Adapa, is illegitimate.

Adapa is hauled before the gods to answer for his crime. He is instructed by Ea as to what to say. He expresses dismay that two gods are missing from the land, Dumuzi and Gizzida. The meaning of the first name is 'faithful son', and the second (translated by Dalley as 'trusty timber') may be translated as 'legitimizing throne' (GIS.ZI.DA). As the destroyer of the kingship belonging to his father he has failed to be a faithful son, and has usurped the throne.

His father however, being wiser than Adapa, knowing the plans of the gods, instructs him to refuse the food and water offered to him, saying that he will be offered the food and water of death:

29. They will offer thee the food of death;
30. Do not eat (it). The water of death they will offer thee;
31. Do not drink (it). A garment they will offer thee;
32. Clothe thyself (with it). Oil they will offer thee; anoint thyself (with it).
33. The instruction which I have given thee do not forget; the words
34. Which I have spoken unto thee, hold fast...."

He is instructed only to accept the mourning garment and the anointing oil. But in fact Anu instructs that he be offered the food and water of eternal life (which is in effect Adapa's due, since he has emulated the gods). He refuses, perhaps because he trusts his father, which is, according to this kind of world view, a mistake, since the ways of the gods are forever beyond our capacity to understand. According to Dalley, the actual words used in the text to denote the food and water of life involve wordplay which renders the sense confusing and ambiguous, which is appropriate for the circumstances in which Adapa finds himself. Dalley comments that the verb chosen to alliterate with the words for "food" and "eat" is unusual [akalu, kalu, and akalu (different stress)]. Also that "an unusual plural form of the word "heaven" produces a pun, "bread of heaven/bread of death" [shamuti/sha muti]

It is worth comparing the following neo-Babylonian text for the purposes of illustration of the Mesopotamian perplexity at the nature of the gods:

I taught my land to observe the divine ordinances,
To honour the name of the goddess I instructed my
people. (30)
The king's majesty I equated to that of a god,
And reverence for the royal palace I inculcated in the
troops.
Oh that I only knew that these things are well pleasing to
a god!
What is good in one's sight is evil for a god.
what is bad in one's own mind is good for his god.
Who can understand the counsel of the gods in the midst
of heaven? The plan of a god is deep waters, who can comprehend
it?
Where has befuddled mankind ever learned what a god's
conduct is?

And, speaking of men:

When they are hungry they resemble corpses,

When they are sated they rival their god; In good luck they
speak of ascending to heaven, When they are afflicted they grumble
about going down to the underworld. *35

Adapa's unreasonable response confirms to the gods the
accidental nature of Adapa's emulation: if he had truly understood the
ways of heaven and earth (like his father) he would not have refused
the offer of food and water. It is probably for this reason that Anu
orders that Adapa be brought back to Earth: Adapa did not merit the
corollary of a complete emulation of the gods. It was always Ea's
intention that Adapa be a leader among mankind [I. 6-14] and Ea
seems to have made sure that Adapa returned to fulfill the role for
which he, like the crown prince, was chosen.

Wisdom, the king and the Akitu contest

The character of Ea and its associations with wisdom appears problematic, but probably the difficulty is more apparent than real. Wisdom to those without it is necessarily mysterious - its order is glimpsed on occasion, but mostly it appears like chaos, for which water is an excellent metaphor. In the Mesopotamian cosmology the entire world is surrounded by water, which simultaneously represents both its limitation and its foundation. The inhabited world is a world of relative order separated out of the waters of chaos; the king, as agent of the gods has as one of his functions the maintenance and increase of the available order within the limits of his rule.

Hence the representation of the battle between Ashur (or Marduk) and Tiamat in the Akitu festival. As W.G. Lambert points out, Sennacherib instituted an Assyrian Akitu festival as part of his attempt to substitute Ashur for Marduk "the 'High God' of the land..."³⁶ The festival took place in the Akitu house of the city, and:

"A well known inscription describes the door of this house on which was portayed Ashur advancing to do battle with Tiamat, escorted by ten gods in front and fifteen behind. A slightly broken list of the same ten gods occurs on a Late Assyrian ritual fragment... which describes them as "preceding [Ashur] to the Akitu house"... A combination of these two items of information suggests, if it does not prove, that the procession of gods from the city to the Akitu house was construed as a setting out for battle with Tiamat."

The battle, Lambert presumes, took place inside the Akitu house. If there is a parallel here with Adapa's breaking of the wing of the south wind while on the sea we should expect that at some point in the Akitu festival that either the king or a statue of the 'High God' should be represented as on the sea; literally standing in the place of Tiamat. Three pieces of related evidence from Babylonia are offered by Lambert: the first he describes as a comment on a late magical text, quoting the line:

This refers to Bel who sits in the middle of the Sea (Tiamat) in the Akitu ^{*37}

The second piece of evidence comes from the text called "the topography of Babylon" which gives us information about small cultic structures in the city:

Tiamat (Sea) is the seat of Bel on which Bel sits.

The third piece of evidence comes from a "hitherto unidentified epic which appears to describe Nabu's exaltation to equality with his father Marduk". This passage is interesting in itself as reflecting ideas present in the myth of Adapa, since, "if the text has been correctly understood, Nabu went with his father, as usual, to the Akitu, but then insisted on performing the rites which properly should have been done by his father" (my emphasis). The line quoted by Lambert is:

He set his feet on the rolling sea (Tiamat) *38

Note that the sea is described as "rolling" - that is, the sea is not calm and is in the condition in which it most resembles chaos, paralleling the struggle between Adapa and the south wind. Lambert argues that "the Sea (Tiamat) was no doubt a small cultic structure in the Akitu house (probably a dais) and when the statue of Marduk was taken there, it was set on the dais to symbolise victory over Tiamat."*39 Further, "the presence of the gods there and their heaping up of gifts for Marduk is entirely consistent with the idea that Marduk delivered them from danger by taking their part in fighting with Tiamat."*40

Conclusion:

Clearly the myth of Adapa explains a great deal about the character of Sargonid kingship. The myth embraces a number of themes, including the importance of wisdom for kingship, the order and power of the gods (and the corollary: their inscrutability to mere mortals); the significance of rational arrangement, shown by the fact that Adapa is also the name of a musical instrument; the conquest of chaos by the forces of order; the transfer of power from one legitimate authority to another (i.e., the succession); that all aspects of Assyrian society were understood to be embraced in the meaning of kingship, from artisan to soldier, from scribe to priest. Much of the nature of Sargonid kingship can be related to the myth of Adapa: this is already known to us because Ashurbanipal informs us of the discipline of kingship which bears his name (Adapa). Close examination of the myth (alluded to by the other Sargonid kings) shows that aspects of the Neo-Assyrian Empire not referred to in royal documents and

inscriptions in connection with the myth, can be explained on the basis of the themes which it contains.

In drawing these themes together, the myth reflects the Assyrian concept of the symbolic function of the king, which was to embody the various aspects of the Assyrian state, and to be, emblematically at least, the totality of the world, the embodiment of all earthly power, wisdom, learning, justice, valour, skill, etc. Assyria itself likewise should contain within itself the best of what the rest of the universe had to offer: hence the botanical gardens, the zoological collection, and, from our point of view most significant of all, the library at Nineveh, collected by Ashurbanipal and intended to embrace important documents and texts from all over Mesopotamia, and from all periods of its history.

Since occupation of the throne of Ashur implies an emulation of the divine, (the king embodying some of the characteristics of the gods, in particular their unpredictability), the king is standing in the place of the divine. By being like the gods, the gods are present in the land. In sitting on a throne mounted on a dais representing the "rolling" sea, the king acquires the character of the abyss (which is unpredictable and unknowable). This way of looking at things is, at first sight, consistent with J.G. Frazer's analysis of the principle of sympathetic magic, and ties the image of the king into the pattern of ideas which made the exaltation of statues and the sacrifice of animals "rational" acts*⁴¹

If the character of the divine can be acquired by the performance of the appropriate actions and the collection of its attributes, then it might be reasonable to expect to find some kind of iconographic representation which depicts aspects of the Adapa myth gathered together in one place. Such a representation may exist: a sculpture found lining the processional route to the Ishtar temple at Nineveh shows a shaven figure (a "priest")wearing a peculiar cap, looking for all the world like the body of a fish with its tail in the air. The garments of the priest are of a design which suggests water, and he is playing a musical instrument (not an "adapa" however, but a form of dulcimer, with strings stretched from a wooden post in the form of a hand).

If these details are intelligible as part of an attempt to draw together aspects of the divine by means of their likenesses, what has the iconography of the myth of Adapa got to do with a procession to

the temple of Ishtar? There is no reference to the goddess in the myth itself, but we can perhaps detect a connection with the ideas in the myth in the Akkadian version of "The Descent of Ishtar to the Nether world". As Ishtar stands at the entrance to the Netherworld, the gatekeeper announces her to her sister, the queen of the Netherworld (Ereshkigal), describing her with the words: "She who upholds the festivals, Who stirs up the deep before Ea, the k[ing]" (my emphasis).^{*42} Thus it is possible that what we see in this sculpture is a 'priest' of Adapa, perhaps based at Eridu, participating in a procession to the Ishtar temple, acting symbolically and cultically as Adapa; bringing to the temple a complex of notions regarded as essential for the completion of the ritual; drawing together the pattern of ideas in the myth, and making present the required divine powers. If so, then he is standing in for the king; standing in his stead, in his place; just as the king stands in the place of Adapa, and Adapa, (temporarily, like the Assyrian Kings) in the place of Ea.