

READING GUIDE: ADAPA

Prof. Stephen Hagin ⊗ *Symbolic Connections in WL* ⊗ 12th edition ⊗ Kennesaw State University

Adapa (Dalley, 182-188)

This four-page story is filled with philosophical wonder. Ea (Enki) created King Adapa in order to provide civilization with wisdom and spiritual guidance to his people. One day, while fishing, a fierce storm attacks his boat, which sinks. Battling the waves and the rain, Adapa “curses” the South Wind (the southerly winds were unfavorable in Mesopotamia, since they forced the salt water upstream). Suddenly, the wind (and therefore the storm) ceases. However, this makes Anu (Sumerian An) very upset (upon discovering the lack of wind a full week later), and he summons Adapa to heaven to answer for his actions.

Ea had given Adapa the secret power to perform such an act, perhaps against the will of his superior, Anu. This will be an ongoing theme in Unit 2: Ea (Enki) will come to the rescue of mortals time and time again, much to the dismay of the other gods, especially Enlil (Ellil), god of the wind. As part of an act of deference to the heavens, Ea instructs Adapa to wear funeral clothes and to inform the gatekeepers of the sky god Anu that Adapa is mourning them.

A strong connection to *Genesis* occurs in this story. Guarding the Gate of Anu are two characters: Dumuzi (also called Tammuz) and Gizzida (also known as Nin-Gishzida or Nin-Gišzida). We already know about Dumuzi, who was sent to the Underworld and rose again. We now see what has happened to him: he has become a guardian of heaven, a classic intermediary. Gizzida is a minor character, whose full name is Ningishzida, who was briefly referenced in another obscure reading as a character who also escaped from the jaws of the Underworld. Paired together, Gizzida was called the “Lord of the Tree of Truth,” and Dumuzi-Tammuz was “Lord of the Tree of Life,” a reference to trees that were stars planted in heaven. These trees correspond to the two fabled trees from the Garden of Eden.

The Garden story in *Genesis* ends with the following line: “He [the LORD God] drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life” (3:24). These “cherubim” are the winged minions of God who may be based on the Mesopotamian myths: Dumuzi and Gizzida are associated with the cherubim, portrayed in Mesopotamian temples as two winged sphinxes, and were frequently portrayed with sacred trees in Canaanite and Phoenician art forms of the Iron Age (ca. 1200-587 BCE).

The middle of this picture shows two serpents wrapped around a pole. This is a classic representation of the merging of



THE DRAGON MUSHUSSU. STONE VASE

the dualities. The stake represents the masculine forces, while the serpents reflect the circular, flexible feminine ideals. When combined, the union of these dualities represents healing or life. The modern medical symbol (especially for paramedics) is based on this very symbolism. So, we can see that this story helps to connect many characters and stories from this region, adding to our understanding of the myths through their commonalities.



Interestingly, one of the things that Ea advises Adapa not to do is to accept the food and water of “death” from Anu. When Adapa arrives in the heavens, however, he is offered the food and water of “life” from the sky god Anu. Just as Adapa was instructed, however, he refuses these gifts, and therefore loses his opportunity for eternal life (and, as a representative of all of us humans, he also refuses eternal life for all of us as well).

Why is Adapa told to refuse a gift from heaven? One would think that a gift from heaven would be the ultimate blessing -- but herein lies the problem. Did Ea set Adapa up for an embarrassing failure? Did Ea counsel Adapa unwisely? If so, why?

Many students conclude that man was not intended for eternal life, so it simply had to be this way. Others think that Adapa should have ignored the advice and accept the bread and water of eternal life. However, if Adapa strayed from the command of the gods, won't that result in an even worse penalty? In other words, should Adapa listen to his father Ea, the sky god Anu, or his own conscience? Pick your poison. Each choice has setbacks.

Ultimately, maybe Ea does tell Adapa to refuse the gifts for the good of humanity. As we will see in *Atrahasis*, overpopulation was a big problem to this culture, and the gods force several methods of birth control on the humans, such as sterility, to subdue this menace. If Adapa were granted eternal life, then might ALL people seek the same gift? If that were to have occurred, then we would have starved due to our overpopulation. Maybe, when Ea asked Adapa to wear his funeral cloak, he was really asking Adapa to dress for his own funeral.

Nobody really knows the answer to this question, but it does resemble the Adam and Eve story, where the first humans were confronted with the prospect of the wisdom of life and death — but for a steep price. Perhaps all of these stories help us to see that we cannot be gods, and if we get too close to the other worlds, then we are crossing the wrong boundaries.

Recall as well that someone who accepts a gift from the underworld also accepts death, since that person would have made a decision to leave earthly life in favor of the next. Well, if one accepts gifts from heaven, won't that also imply a death? And, since the Mesopotamians did not believe in an afterlife, then ANY acceptance of gifts not of the earthly realm will jeopardize our very existence. Maybe we are darned if we do and darned if we don't (or something similar). In the Sumerian language, dozens of puns occur in our readings, and one of them applies here.

If you recall from chapter 4 of *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell explains that geography is the primary force that shapes a culture's views of the universe. Campbell mentioned that desert-dwelling societies used imagery of the sky, because it was a dominant force acting upon them, whereas a jungle community does not incorporate horizons, stars, or suns and moons, since their reality is locked into a more limited perspective. However, Campbell neglected to mention another barrier that may be preventing you from “getting” these myths — language.

Because we don't speak Sumerian, we're not getting the puns and the inside language jokes. For example, the Sumerian word for “heaven” also had a second meaning — “death.” Much like English words have multiple meanings (such as “right,” “like,” etc.), so do these early cultures. If “heaven”

and “death” mean the same thing, then we can start to see that Adapa cannot accept the gifts of heaven, since that would mean he has to die (which is apparently akin to immortality). Remember that the names of characters mean little to you, but the Mesopotamians saw these double meanings, and they had lots of fun with their language, just like we do. That’s why we don’t see the metaphors as clearly as they would have seen them 5,000 years ago (although we use many of them all the time, such as the “fly on the wall” metaphor that we saw in *The Descent of Inanna*).

Finally, an interesting language connection occurs in this story. The character “Adapa” is known as “Adama” in other areas of the Middle East. In Hebrew, “Adapa” is called “Adam.” Now we see that the story of a man who blew our chance at eternal life was a popular theme in the Near East. Interestingly, the more goddess-oriented Mesopotamians blamed a man for their fates, while the masculine-oriented Hebrews blamed the woman (Eve).

Unlike Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah from the *Gilgamesh* epic, who won eternal life for himself through his obedience to a god, in *Adapa* mankind was given the chance of eternal life, but *lost* it through obedience to a god. Scholars still debate the meaning of this myth; answering the questions below will help you to participate in the discussion.

Questions for *Adapa*

1. Why does Ea create Adapa?
2. What action by Adapa makes Anu upset?
3. Summarize Ea’s instructions to Adapa.
4. Why does Adapa tell Dumuzi and Gizzida that he is mourning for *them*?
5. What is Adapa’s reason for cursing the South Wind?
6. What do the “ways of heaven and earth” have to do with mankind receiving a “heavy heart”?
7. Anu offers Adapa the food and water of eternal life, but Adapa refuses these gifts. Had he chosen instead to accept the offerings, what would have happened to him? What’s the catch?
8. Stephanie Dalley asks three interesting questions in her introduction to the story (pages 182-183). How would you answer these?
 - 8a. Did Ea deliberately trick Adapa out of immortality, or did he sincerely intend to help him (despite Adapa’s crime against him) and fail (despite Ea’s divine wisdom)?
 - 8b. Did Adapa defy the unwritten laws of hospitality by refusing food and drink in heaven, and thus oblige Anu to punish him?

SOURCES:

<http://www.bibleorigins.net/cherubim.html>

<http://www.military-graphics.com/paramedic.png>