

Adapa and Humanity: Mortal or Evil?

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The standard reading of lines 57–58 of the Amarna Adapa fragment is *am-mi-ni dé-a a-mi-lu-ta la ba-ni-ta ša ša-me-e ù ir-ši-e-ti ú-ki-il-li-in-ši*.¹ Anu asks himself this question about Adapa who stands before him as a penitent mourning the absence from earth of the fertility divinities, Dumuzi and Gizzida. Speiser's translation in *ANET*³ is also a fairly standard one: "Why did Ea to a worthless human of heaven and of earth the plan disclose?"² F. M. Th. De Liagre Böhl translates *amēlūta lā banīta* as "diesem hässlichen Menschlein."³ However, Speiser's italics indicate that he was not entirely satisfied with his translation, and J. A. Knudtzon, who originally published the Amarna Adapa fragment, attempted to dissociate *lā banīta* from *amēlūta* in his translation of the line: "Warum hat Ea den (eig. die) Menschen *das* Unschöne des Himmels und der Erde sehen lassen." The reason he wished to separate *lā banīta* from *amēlūta* is quite apparent. This description of Adapa appears to be contradicted by the context, since Dumuzi and Gizzida had just described Adapa favorably to

* I wish to acknowledge the helpful criticisms of Professor William Moran regarding the syllabary and grammatical problems involved with an earlier version of the proposed reading in this paper. I also wish to thank my friend and former teacher, Professor David Weisberg, and my friend, Professor Wayne Pitard, for their discussions with me about this paper. The errors contained herein remain my own.

1 J. A. Knudtzon, *Die El-Amarna-Tafeln*, VAB II/1, 356: 57–58.

2 P. 102. *Libba*, which Speiser translated "design" at the end of line 58, is now generally viewed as belonging to the next sentence; see *Ahw.* and *CAD*, s.v. *kabru*. This leaves *lā banīta* as the direct object with the general sense of "inappropriate things" as in Knudtzon's translation (see below), which the author accepted in a previous article, "Adapa and Immortality," *UF* 16 (1985), 53–56. The new reading proposed in this note strengthens the argument of that article.

3 F. M. Th. De Liagre Böhl, "Die Mythe vom weisen Adapa," *WO* 2 (1959), 425; also De Liagre Böhl's translation of *libba kabra* in line 58–59 as "Hochmütig" reflects this pessimistic view of mankind; Wolfram von Soden, "Bemerkungen zum Adapa-Mythus," in Barry L. Eichler, ed., *AOAT* 25, 431, is in agreement with De Liagre Böhl and suggests "überhebliches" bzw. "anmassendes Herz" as a translation. Although this phrase may refer to Adapa's admission that his anger prompted him to curse the southwind (*uggat libbīya* in line 53), it might also refer to Adapa's "heavy heart," the penitence evidenced by his clothes of mourning and his statements to Dumuzi and Gizzida, which they appear to relay to Anu.

The long-standing tendency to associate the Babylonian Adapa myth with the Garden of Eden story perhaps influenced some scholars to give *lā banīta* a rather harsh Augustinian/Calvinistic meaning that portrays mankind as evil, presumptuous, or even self-willed. Such an interpretation strengthens the parallels with Adamic Man found in the Genesis story. However, *lā banū* does not convey the notion of being evil or even self-willed but rather unfriendly, ungracious, unpleasant, or ignoble; cf. *CAD*, s.v. *banū*.

Anu—he appears to be *damiqtu*, not *lā banītu*.⁴ This contradiction, combined with the fact that one theme of the myth is that Adapa lost an opportunity for immortality for himself and perhaps for all humanity, strengthens the likelihood of an alternative reading for *la ba-NI-ta* in line 57.

These signs should be read *la ba-lī-ta*, the accusative singular feminine form of the verbal adjective of *balāqum*, modifying *amēlūta* with the meaning ‘not living forever’ or ‘mortal’.⁵ This proposal requires a new reading for only one sign, NI as /lī/. Of course this is a standard occurrence in the orthography of certain words such as *be-lī*, *be-lī-ia*, *i-lī*. In the Adapa fragment itself NI occurs as /lī/ in *be-lī* (49, 53, 68) and *be-lī-ia* (50). However, the scribe was not consistent in this regard, since *be-[lī]* occurs in line 10.⁶ In the Amarna texts generally, the occurrence of NI as /lī/ is not unusual.⁷ The defective writing, *ba-lī-ta* for *balitta*, does not pose a problem, since defective writing occurs in this text and throughout the archive.

If this proposed reading is correct, Anu asks himself, “Why did Ea disclose to a mortal human being the things (*ša*) of heaven and earth?” Anu’s concern is that Adapa knows too much; the power Adapa commands because of that knowledge is dangerous not because mankind has an evil nature, but because he may act on angry impulse. In Adapa’s case, the result of an angry impulse was an ecological disaster. Anu is worried about Adapa because he lives on earth with the knowledge and power of a god and the emotions of a mortal; his basic goodness (piety and penance) make punishment of his behavior inappropriate. As the story unfolds, Anu believes he has found a solution to the perplexing problem which Adapa represents by providing Adapa with immortality and residence in heaven. But Anu’s solution is frustrated by Ea’s anticipation and his having tricked Adapa into rejecting the bread and water of immortality.⁸ The basic human problem continues to exist since Anu ordered Adapa’s return to earth: the power resulting from human knowledge and its irrational use.

4 Line 26: *amāta damiqa*, and the restoration in line 55, *amāssu banīta* (cf. von Soden, *AOAT* 25, 431; and Speiser’s reconstruction in *ANET*³, 102, line 55). Although the restoration of line 55 is uncertain, it is strengthened by the close parallelism between this section of the text and Ea’s foretelling what would happen to Adapa prior to the latter’s journey to Anu in heaven: lines 16–34. Although strictly speaking *damiqtu*/*banītu* describe the words spoken by Dumuzi and Gizzida, the implication clearly is that Adapa is a “good man”; his piety and repentance are manifested by his clothes of mourning as well as his lament at the departure from earth of Dumuzi and Gizzida.

5 Although I know of no precise grammatical parallels to the adjectival use of *balqum* with the meaning attributed to it here, clearly *balāqum* has the meaning “to live forever” in the Old Babylonian period, see R. Campbell Thompson, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Oxford, 1930), 53 (X, i, 8; iii, 2 and 5); see also the same meaning found in the later versions of the epic: Thompson, 60 (XI, 7) and 64 (XI, 198); D. J. Wiseman, “A Gilgamesh Epic Fragment from Nimrud,” *Iraq* 37 (1975), 160–61, line 39.

6 See Erich Ebeling’s “Glossar” in *VAB* II/2, s.v. *bēlu*, for the variability between the use of /li/ and /lī/ found in this word.

7 An inspection of Ebeling’s “Glossar” revealed the following examples: *li-li-ku-ni* (52:41); *ni-til-lī* (264:15); *ni-e-ta-lī* (178:4); *lī-di* (249:5); *e-li-u* (155:34); *i-lī-e* (151:10); *i-lī-ū-nim* (149:66); *te-lī-ū-na* (249:13); *i-lī-gi* (38:12); *lī-ki* (283:9); *mi-lī* (225:6). Although no instances of its occurrence are found in forms of *balāqum*, *mu-ba-lī-iṭ* is found in personal names in the Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian periods: Wolfram von Soden and Wolfgang Röllig, *Das Akkadische Syllabar* (Rome, 1967), 146.

8 See the author’s article cited in n. 2.