Review


**Reviewed by:** Peter Westh, Lecturer in Religion, *HF-Centret Efterslægten*, Copenhagen, Denmark  
pw@hfc.dk

The Adapa myth is known from five fragments in Akkadian from the 7th century BCE, one larger manuscript from the 14th century BCE, and two fragments in Sumerian from the early 2nd millennium BCE. Thus, we know that it has a considerable history spanning more than a millennium – but, as with most other Mesopotamian myths, we know next to nothing about its context or its general cultural significance.

The basic narrative goes something like this: Adapa is a man living in the city of Eridu, where he is responsible for the daily temple cult of the god Ea. Ea has made Adapa very wise, but has not – this is explicitly stated – given him eternal life. One day, Adapa is fishing in the sea, when the South Wind, depicted as a winged creature, overturns his boat. Angry, Adapa curses the South Wind, causing one of its wings to break. As a result, the South Wind does not blow for seven days. The supreme god Anu – Anu means “sky” – notices this anomaly, and summons Adapa to his throne. Ea preps Adapa for his audience before the sky God, specifically warning him not to accept any food offered, calling it “the food of death”. Adapa then ascends to heaven. Anu is angry at first, but adhering to Ea’s instructions, Adapa manages to appease him. Anu expresses surprise that Ea has revealed such powerful magic to a mere mortal, and offers Adapa food and drink. When Adapa declines the offer Anu is baffled, since the food offered was in fact “the food of life”, which would have made him immortal. There are two versions of the ending: one in which Adapa is dispatched back to earth, another where he apparently stays in heaven with Anu.

The Adapa myth has attracted considerable scholarly interest, particularly because of its thematic similarities to the Genesis narrative – i.e. wisdom, mortality, forbidden foods. Others have seen in it an etiology of
Mesopotamian ritual magic. Amar Annus clearly belongs in this latter tradition.

Annus’ book has three sections that in many ways come across as separate essays. Part one, entitled “Beginning of the cosmos”, tries to position the Adapa myth within a larger framework of Mesopotamian historiography; Part two, “Descent and Ascent”, elaborates on the cosmological setting of the myth, while Part three, “Adapa and Exorcism”, analyses how the myth was utilized ritually.

Annus takes his theoretical lead from Patrick H. McNamara’s *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience* (2009). McNamara’s theory focuses on “the executive Self”, which he sees as a sort of narrative construct. Religious experience involves a process of “decentering” the Self. The process has four stages: (1) the sense of agency or volition is inhibited; (2) the Self is placed into a suppositional, logic space; (3) a discrepancy reduction process is implemented via a search in semantic memory to find a more integral version of the Self; (4) the old Self is bound to and integrated into the new identity.

As an approach to Mesopotamian apotropaic ritual (as I would prefer to call it), this seems fruitful. As Annus explains (2016: 71ff), most of these rituals contain an embedded mythical narrative, where the ritual specialist is identified with a deity or another superhuman agent, often the god Marduk (the son of Ea), but sometimes Adapa. They are what Robert N. McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson would call “special agent rituals” (McCauley and Lawson 2002). This fits quite nicely in the second stage of McNamara’s model. Likewise, much of the “sympathetic magic” in these rituals, could, I think, be analysed as belonging to McNamara’s stages (3) and (4).

In the end, however, Annus does not make much analytical use of McNamara’s model. Instead, he uses it as a prop for his main objective, which is to “reconstruct […] the ancient Mesopotamian master narrative of exorcism” (2016: 3). The term “master narrative” is borrowed from feminist philosopher Hilde Lindemann (who in turn was inspired by Alasdair Macintyre). Annus’ approach to these narratives seems somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he insists that they are not monolithic cultural models, but rather a broad and fluid repository of archetypes and “stock plots” (2016: 101), of which the extant, written sources represent only one expression out of many. This gives him a keen eye for diachronic transformations and competing, even contradictory versions. On the other hand, there is a pervading sense that what he is after is a unified “Weltanschauung” (2016: 121).

Annus sets out to uncover this “master narrative”, not by analysing the extant Adapa myth in detail, but by surveying the cuneiform record for
intertextual “patterns of similarities” – what Claude Lévi-Strauss might have called *mythemes*. So, for instance, rather than analysing what Adapa’s ascent to heaven might signify in the context of the myth, Annus searches for clues in other narratives and rituals involving ascent and descent; and rather than analysing the function of Adapa’s fishing boat, he looks at boats and fish elsewhere.

There is, I think, some merit to such an approach. The problem is that it sends Annus on a speculative quest so fraught with methodological pitfalls, that it is hard to know where to begin. A few examples will suffice.

Part of Annus’ “master narrative” is that Adapa was a sort of *kulturhero*, who was instrumental in (re)establishing the cosmic order after the flood. This idea is primarily inspired by Berossus, a 3rd century BCE Babylonian writer whose work is lost, but which has been paraphrased by Eusebius (263–339 CE) and Syncellus (9th century CE). Although an interesting source, it is unclear both to what extent Berossus himself was influenced by Hellenistic ideas, and to what extent the available fragments reflect what he actually wrote. According to Berossus, mankind originally lived like wild animals, but received civilization from a fish-like creature named Oannes, who emerged from the Persian Gulf. Nothing quite like that is known from Mesopotamian sources, but the name Oannes is attested in 1st millennium texts, where he is listed as one of the sages of old – the *apkallu*. So was Adapa, and sometimes the two are assimilated as Oannes-Adapa. This is in itself an interesting fact, but Annus uses it to graft the highly uncertain tale of Berossus onto the Adapa myth, stating: “Berossos begins where the Adapa myth ends. Just like Adapa disappeared into the sea to visit heaven, he probably used the same itinerary to return to earth like Oannes, who emerged from the sea to teach the mankind” (2016: 50).

In line with this, Annus makes the case that Adapa was, in some lost version of the myth, made king of Eridu (traditionally seen as the first city). In support of this he cites the 19th century BCE text “The chronicle of Esagila” – Esagila being the temple of the god Marduk in a different city, namely Babylon. As is the case with most cuneiform texts this text too is full of lacunae. In one broken line Adapa is mentioned, and Annus suggests an “improved reading” (i.e. a guess) according to which Marduk made Adapa king. Next, Annus argues that even though the myth is set in Babylon, it is “very probable” that it was originally set in Eridu. The reason given for this is that the chronicle also mentions fishermen catching fish for the temple offerings – just like Adapa did in the myth – and that there is solid archeological evidence for fish offerings being made in Eridu, while no such evidence exists in Babylon. Thus, if the myth had taken place in Eridu, and if the god in question was Ea rather than Marduk, the myth “would be much
Another core element of Annus’ thesis is that the Adapa myth “tells about the hero’s descent into the ocean and his subsequent rebirth in heaven” (2016: 17). This element of “rebirth” is inspired by McNamara’s 4th stage, but there is no mention of either death or rebirth in any extant copy of the myth. Instead, the missing parts from the narrative are filled in with comparative material from Manicheism, where primal man was first captured by the realm of Darkness, and then “summoned back to the realm of light”. In this way, Annus turns Adapa into an almost Christ-like figure that “had to be reborn in order to become the light of heaven” (2016: 80). Apart from whatever one might object to such a view, this is obviously a gross anachronism.

In this and similar ways, throughout the book, Annus piles well-established facts, educated guesses, anachronisms and pure speculation one upon the other, to construct his “master narrative”. Everything is glued together by unspecific characterizations – everything is “associated with”, “related to” or “comparable to” this, that, or another thing.

Annus is well aware that his methodology is controversial, and he defends it at length in a puzzling postscript (Appendix 2). Here, he mobilizes Simon Baron Cohen’s Systemizing/Empathizing-theory, originally put forward to explain the cognitive style of people with autism (see Baron-Cohen 2003; Baron-Cohen 2009). Annus argues that his method of seeking patterns in decontextualized “local similarities” is akin to Baron Cohen’s “systemizing” cognition, and while different from the more traditional, contextual and “empathizing” approach within the humanities, it is equally valid.

But the problem with Annus’ approach is not its focus on decontextualized similarities – it is that its standards for what constitutes a “similarity” are simply too low. Too much of what Annus finds is not evidently there, in the source material. It is of course true, as Annus remarks, that any interpretation of historical sources is hypothetical by its very nature, but if we are to maintain a distinction between scholarship and fiction, this cannot be a license to simply speculate. Similarly, while there is certainly a subjective element in all scholarship, invoking “differences in cognitive style and taste” (2016: 121) in defence of one’s approach can hardly be valid, if we are to maintain scholarship as a collective, intersubjective enterprise.

Annus’ book covers an impressive amount of material. Specialists may be able to separate the wheat from the chaff, and will relish the many useful references; but the book cannot be recommended to the general academic reader.
Endnotes

1. Outside the mythical narrative itself, Adapa is known mainly from a number of such ritual texts, where he is invoked as the “apkallu”, i.e. sage, of Eridu.

References