

**Critical Interpretation of Adam Reta's "Kasi"**  
**(Himamat Ina Begena pp. 41-45)**  
**By Hassen Mohammed**

I am going to try a literary interpretation of the shortest story of one of the best Ethiopian writers of modern times, Adam Reta. Even this story of four pages took me to so many places and I hope you are with me all along. This journey may have been taken by the author while he wrote or imagined the story; or maybe not. So we do not know for sure until Adam himself tells us his thoughts about the story and its bits and pieces. Therefore, this is my own exercise. First thing is first; let me briefly introduce the story. The story involves Kasi, the main character, his neighbor Musi, and Allah or God. Musi is a good, kind and respectful person but Kasi is wicked and vile. Kasi is spiteful towards Musi for the latter is endowed with everything while Kasi languishes in poverty. In the old days, God used to come down annually to a specific place and person to check up on their kindness inconspicuously. Lot determines the place and person and the person is asked to make a wish. This time, chance favors Kasi and he wished Musi to lose everything. Musi does lose everything. The person whose wish is fulfilled has to return the favor to God and lot decides it too. When the lot oracle is drawn for Kasi, (and interpreted by God, as they were sets of some Geez symbols or letters) it requires of him to fetch water from a far away sea and fill a pot but to minimize his hardship he will turn in to a bird until he completes the task. Kasi gets excited but suspiciously asks "what if I remain a bird afterwards?" and God responds "your wish is fulfilled" at which moment Kasi becomes a bird, breaking out of his home flying in to the sky following God and His angels. Then God tells him the catch, i.e. Kasi (the bird) is going to fetch water from the sea with a sieve attached to "his" beak and the pot "he" is supposed to fill has a hole. Finally, God said to "him" that it is "his" fate and indicates down to earth, at which point Kasi plunges screaming. What fascinate me in this story are the symbolism and the fate of Kasi (or humanity). I will come back on the latter some other time but today I am going to discuss symbolism exclusively. The symbolization process in our story begins with the naming of the two neighbors Kasi and Musi. Though they are representations of good and bad, as expressed in the equivalent Amharic terms, Adam seems to purposely used abbreviation to make them appear as regular names so they do not give away much too early in the story. Typical of Adam however, he provides us with their meaning through footnotes that seem to have trumped the traditional suspended disclosure. He might have been leaning towards the theory of naming. Naming activities are central to human symbolic and communicative processes. In all human communities there is thought to be a close relationship between the name of a person or other phenomenon and its character, status, and very being. There is power in names because they both participate in the reality named and give definition and identity to that reality. So do the names of the characters in our story. The major theorizing and application of symbolism is embodied in the letters used for the lot oracle drawn to determine what Kasi is to do to return God's favor. As we can see from the footnote, Adam used what he referred to as 'constant' or unchanging Geez calligraphy. Why or what makes such symbols constant? I am going to respond to this query from two directions that should intersect at some point. First, is the theory of symbols and symbolizing process; and second is the attributes of God.

I.

A symbol usually is something concrete and particular that represents something else, usually abstract and generalized. While the symbol itself is typically easily perceived, its referent may not be. Symbolic theorists commonly define a symbol in such a way that its referent is unclear, particularly with the powerful and lasting religious symbols. A common, but largely tacit, assumption in most modern theories of symbolism is that the capacity to generate and use symbols is a core technology unique to the human species. Ernest Cassirer made this point in referring to symbolization as the root of all social communication. Susanne Langer extended the argument further, viewing symbolization as one of the most basic and primitive functions of mind. Theorizing of the symbolic process, therefore, involves theorizing of the structure of the psyche itself in order to explain how meaning is created and handed down. The British linguistic analysts and those of The Vienna Circle contributed to symbolic theory in their concern with discovering the invariable patterns by which meaning enters in to human communication and with disposing of the distorted patterns by which meaning is turned in to nonsense. (Consider Adam's choice of only 74 letters, leaving out the rest.) In addition, Sigmund Freud's point of departure in the neurotic symptom and Carl Jung's search for archaic, archetypal patterns both represent attempts to describe the universal structure of mind in terms of symbol-making processes. The problem of symbolic meaning introduces a consideration of hermeneutics and of semiotic logic. Levi-Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure, Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, and Paul Ricoeur of The Vienna Circle contributed a lot on symbolic meaning. They are all worthy of analysis but I leave that to the reader and limit myself to what we have gone through. Our brief and quick journey in to symbolic theory demonstrates one thing: they all try to establish and understand the natural capacity of mind and "natural symbols" in order to capture invariable and universal patterns of meaning. I think that is what Adam had in mind when decided to use those "constant" Geez letters as symbols of God. We also see Paul Ricoeur's restatement of the symbol's oldest characteristics: that a symbol both reveals and conceals, that it has both a symptom hiding and truth-proclaiming dimension. What God reads from the lot of oracle shows only half of the picture; however, it is from what transpires later that we get the full picture; to the surprise of both Kasi and the reader.

II

Adam chooses those 74 letters as the ones God prefers to use because they are constant. Being constant or immutability is a divine attribute. As St. Thomas Aquinas elaborated in *Summa Theologica*, immutability means changelessness. That God is changeless follows upon His infinity and absolute actuality. What is changeable is, to that extent, perfectible, and God is absolutely perfect. What is changeable is finite, for change means loss or gain, increase or diminishment, and God is infinite. What is changeable is in the state of potentiality (state of "can be") and in God there is no potentiality at all; God is. So the language or symbols of God acquire their immutability from the same divine attributes. How can human beings understand these symbols? Adam speculates rightly that it is where we need a mediator such as prophets. The concept of language-game, as brilliantly conceived by Wittgenstein, is at work here for any communicative action to take place. Prophets are supernaturally informed and supernaturally moved to announce a certain knowledge or message. Therefore, prophecy is the expression in speech of the divinely imparted knowledge, help, guide or warning. However, God also uses angels. God gave the Old Testament to man by His ministering angels. St. Paul says, "The Old Law was given by angels in the hand of a

mediator." God gave The Quran to the prophet Mohammed (pbuH) through the angel Jibrill. In any case, however God's message or symbol is transmitted it must be decoded or deciphered by the mediator to be communicated to human beings. This occurs either in speech or in writing but in the old times God Himself did the speech or the writing (as was the case with Abraham and Moses respectively). Hence, we see God using writing, with changeless symbols, to determine the fate of Kasi in our story. The beginning of writing can be traced back to the fourth millennium BCE and earlier in Mesopotamia and Kurdistan, the Zagros Mountains, and the Iranian Plateau to the east and north. Subsequently, the idea of writing spread eastward and westward; to china and Egypt. Soon people started attributing to gods and heroes the origin of writing and its transmission to human beings. In Mesopotamia, the cradle of writing, Nabu- son of Marduk, king of Babylonian pantheon- was credited with the invention of writing, which he used to record the fates of men. The same is true for Egyptians, later Jews, Christians and Muslims as well (Surah 96). This notion of the function of writing, represented in the Book of Daniel 5:5-28 (cf. the English expressions "hand of fate" and "handwriting on the wall"), is still alive today in the Middle East and the Balkans. Therefore, God created writing or symbols and primarily use it to determine or record the fates of men. T that is exactly what God does in Adam Reta's "Kasi": using writing to determine Kasi's fate (or may be the fate of all men.)This last issue of fate takes too much of our time and I have to put it off for some other fateful day. I hope you enjoyed, thanks for putting up with me.