

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Pyramid and Coffin Texts 2350-2150 B.C.

Egyptian Religious Texts

Coffin spells. The oldest religious texts from Egypt, and arguably the oldest recorded texts, were the Egyptian Pyramid and Coffin texts, the former from the end of the Old Kingdom (2686-2160 B.C.), the latter from the early Middle Kingdom (2055-1650). The former of these texts, the oldest, were inscribed as hieroglyphs on the walls of the tombs of Old Kingdom Pharaohs, to provide encouragement and instructions for the journey into the next world. The latter, in many ways maintaining the texts and attitudes of the prayer makers of the Old Kingdom texts, differ primarily in their use by the 'general educated public,' those who wanted to inscribe *their* spells too on their permanent resting place. The coffin spells were painted in vertical columns—thus were much less costly and time consuming to set down than the carved inscriptions of the Old Kingdom.

A Pyramid text. From a Pyramid text addressed to Nut, the sky-goddess:

Make this Pepi a spirit-soul in thee, let him not die.
O Great Lady, who didst come into being in the sky, who are mighty.
Who dost make happy, and dost fill every place (or being), with thy beauty,
The whole earth is under thee, thou hast taken possession of it.
Thou hast encompassed the earth, everything is in thy two hands,
Grant thou that this Pepi may be in thee like an imperishable star...
(Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, p. 19).

Profusion of pyramid texts. There are several thousand of these Pyramid texts and coffin spells, and you are asked to read a representative sampling. (The examples in Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 70-93, will give you a 'modernized' reading, some of it very moving, some fierce, like the text for King Unis of the 5th Dynasty in the Old Kingdom—a text celebrating the King's power to cannibalize his lesser rivals, during his passage into the next world; some, like the Coffin Text from the Middle Kingdom on p. 91, in which the departed is given power to rise by the Four Winds, deceptively translatable into the 'poetry of the afterlife,' as in

These winds have been offered me by the Maidens:
The East Wind is she who raises the lashes of seeing;
 Discloses dawn,
 Makes glittering way for the footstep of God
When he strides over eastern horizon.
 Oh, let Re hold fast to my arm,
 Place me there in his field,
 At peace among rushes
There leave me eating and drinking forever,
 Blessed by Osiris and Seth.
She is the breath of life, the East Wind,
 Offered to me
 And through her I live.

Translation issues. You only need to look at the two translations offered above—by Budge and Foster respectively—to see that translation is a key factor in the kind of access we have to these archaic spells, and that the kind of language on which we are carried here is as genre-specific when it comes to religious texts as it is in texts conveying 'the law,' like those with which we started. The texts concerning law and manners led us to terms like 'prescriptive' or 'proscriptive,' but what kind of language will we call that of

the Pyramid and Coffin texts? An effective answer to this question could help us organize the readings that lie ahead for us--the language of 'religion,' and finally that of the 'creative imagination.'

Adorational language of pyramid texts. The 'language' of the Pyramid texts is 'adorational' or 'imprecatory,' drawing attention to the awesomeness of the human condition and to the aligning of the self to that condition. (In this latter function, obviously, there will be a fine line between religious and some poetic language—though not the kind of poetic language we find below in Week Six, under 'love poetry.')

The character of the search for selfhood, in diverse forms of language, will accordingly differ. In the languages of law and manners, with which we began, the self is treated as embedded in the realized settings of social protocol, and as requiring direct address in that setting. In the languages of religion—to make a massive general step—the self is sought in the arc of its aspirations, the trajectories it performs in prayer, spell, or royal itinerary. The self sought in this performative language exists as a permanent condition of discovery.

Reading

Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 64-91.

Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, pp. 9-24.

Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 1-18.

Van de Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 81-83.

Discussion Questions

1 We opened with an introduction to the distance of Ancient Near Eastern Literature from the sensibility of the literatures of the Greco-Roman and Hebraic traditions. Yet in the discussion of the different kinds of language, with which the archaic texts address their subject matters, are we not assuming some similarity between that archaic language process and that of our own time; some continuity of relation between subject and the kind of language we address to it? Are we thereby undermining the thesis of the gap between archaic and Greco-Roman Hebraic traditions?

2 What kind of view of the self is implicit in the notion of establishing a coffin text or spell to guide you in the next world? Does such a practice bespeak confidence in the rightness and harmony of the universe? We have mentioned the affiliation of religious Man/God language with adorational posture, which relies on God's benign intentions and aid. Is there some contradiction between the precautions attitude of the spell maker and the trusting attitude of the believer with his/her faith? Or is the notion of 'faith' not appropriate, so far as you can tell, to the texts you are reading?

3 What is the importance of the difference between hieroglyphs carved into stone pyramid walls, and texts written onto papyrus and intended for inclusion in the deceased's coffin? (The physical difference itself is evident; though skilled scribes are required for both kinds of memorial—and the scribe occupied a high and respected role in Egyptian society—one act was almost sculptural, while the other was scriptural.) Is the importance of the difference that in one case the scribe promotes a lasting eternity of soul-mapping, while in the other the script writer/painter creates a move in an ongoing narrative?

Egyptian Book of the Dead 1550 B.C.-30 B.C. (Egypt)

Democratization of the holy. We are already familiar with some of the magic and heaven-mappings of Pyramid spells, Week Four, but with the Book of the Dead we come to a far vaster assemblage, a long text dating back to the first dynasties (thus including the Pyramid texts and the Coffin texts) but enlarged and enriched right through to the 26th dynasty (664-525 B.C.), and in fact ultimately to the end of the Ptolemaic period (30 B.C.). In its most recent versions, this long text of 192 spells was a prized tomb or coffin ornament for the upper classes as well as the rulers, and in the later period—Middle Kingdom through to the Ptolemaic period—many well-to-do citizens attended to hiring professional papyrus scribes who could paint them their own copies and even their own versions of this guide to the next world. (With the 18th dynasty--1550-1295--it became the custom to write the *Book of the Dead* on rolls of papyrus, which were included in private tombs, with the corpse, and not inscribed either on temple walls or on sarcophagi. Thus the portability of these texts was enhanced, and their use made easier. We move into an era of what has been called the 'democratization of the holy.')

We will see that the text of the Book itself, of which there are four extant versions, is built up from textual accretions of two millennia, going back at least to the 6th dynasty (2345-2181 B.C.), and perhaps to pre-dynastic Egypt, a mysterious world about which we have limited (and no written) testimony. But throughout, whether in hieroglyphic or papyrus form, whether relevant only to the Pharaoh, who was surrounded by the Book inscribed onto his tomb walls, or democratized into a text the prominent could have tailor-copied for themselves, and laid on their corpses, the text was a community-constructive textbook of life on the edge, a guide book to passing through the Underworld, and over the edge into the geographies, hazards, and judgments of the next world.

Spells and exorcisms. The spells collected in the *Book of the Dead* are word itineraries to be repeated (like the Catholic rosary, the komboloia of Greek Orthodox tradition, the Islamic *misbaha*) in a particular physical setting—frequently in the process of 'telling the beads' of some mantra-promoting prayer object. A typical papyrus written prayer, for instance, segues into the command that the prayer should be 'said over a green stone scarab set in a band of *tchamu* metal (i.e. silver-gold) which is to be hung from the neck of the deceased.' (Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, p. 50). Instructions for an early word-itinerary can be most specific. Here, for example, is the instruction for activating spell I34:

*To be spoken over a falcon standing with the White Crown on his head; Atum, Shu and Tefnut, Geb and Nut, Osiris and Isis, Seth and Nephthys being drawn in ochre on a new bowl placed in the sacred barque, together with an image of this spirit (*ba*) whom you wish to be made worthy, it being anointed with oil. Offer to them incense on the fire and roasted ducks, and worship Ra. It means that he for whom this is done will voyage and be with Ra every day in every place he desires to travel, and it means that the enemies of Ra will be driven off in very deed. A matter a million times true.*

Book of the Dead, spell 134

Two of the actual spell itineraries may give the flavor of this distinctive language of going-beyond:

*Words spoken by Ani: 'O you Soul [*ba*], greatly majestic, behold, I have come that I may see you; I open the Netherworld that I may see my father Osiris and drive away darkness, for I am beloved of him. I have come that I may see my father Osiris and that I may cut out the heart of Seth who has harmed my father Osiris. I have opened up every path which is in the sky and on earth, for I am the well-beloved son of my father Osiris. I am noble, I am a spirit [*akh*], I am equipped; O all you gods and all you spirits [*akh*], prepare a path for me.*

Book of the Dead, spell 9.

The spell will be repeated regularly throughout the individual's life on earth, as a static insurance policy against the unknown, specifically against the much dreaded dissolution of the body, which all efforts—different versions of mummification—are devoted to preventing.

May I have power in my heart, may I have power in my arms, may I have power in my legs, may I have power in my mouth, may I have power in all my members may I have power over invocation-offerings, may I have power over water ... air ... the waters ... streams ... riparian lands ... men who would harm me ... women who would harm me in the realm of the dead ... those who would give orders to harm me upon earth.

Book of the Dead, spell 68.

Itineraries of the Soul. The itinerary of the soul (*ba*—free ranging spirit of the dead person; *ka*—life-force of the individual) through the *Duat* (Underworld) is fraught with obstacles, monsters, evil demons, deadly toxins, and leads eventually to a meeting with the supreme judge (Osiris, Ra). No care can be too great in view of the judgments studding the way, and particularly the ultimate *Weighing of the Heart*, by which the Supreme Judge evaluates the moral purity of the candidate for immortality.

Spells and mind-mapping. The word ‘spell’ suggests the ritual language which drives the Egyptian texts for survival. A central premise of ancient Egyptian practice is that language is identical with what it names, and thus can affect, even change, what it names. (This is an assumption deep in verbal prayer, despite the admonitions, of the modern monotheisms, to consider prayer a *vehicle*.) Noting this, we note the special turn we are now able to give, to our perspective onto the language of the Man-God relationship in the Ancient Near East. The spells of the *Book of the Dead* are practices in mind-mapping, and, like the data generated by a good GPS device, are only as good as the spatial diagrams they represent. For the ancient Egyptian the ‘next world’ is in no sense a metaphor, but is a ‘realm’ in which no apologies are made for the physicality of the décor. Telling it like it is is the only way to make ‘it’ perform for you as you wish.

Readings

Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, pp. 37-66.

Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Read enough—30 pages?-- to see the syntactical patterns, and to appreciate the kind of narrative flow that reigns here.)

Frankfort, Henri, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*.

Discussion Questions

1 Is the kind of future-realm mapping language of *The Book of the Dead* like the prayer languages of ‘modern’ monotheisms? *The Book of the Dead* exists as language of which we might want to say, today, that it enables the self to discover the itinerary set out for it. Do Christian or Muslim orthodoxy, for example, propose prayer systems which create or which discover reality? Are their prayer systems parts of ways to discover ultimate reality, or are they creators of that reality?

2 Please reflect on our considerations of language in this syllabus. We have proceeded on the assumption that the ways we use language are the ways we *are*; a useful but certainly arguable description of what being human in the world involves. (Would you yourself argue with that conception?) Are you comfortable with the distinction between the language of manners/social rules and the language of ‘religion.’ Can you look ahead in thought, and consider the plausibility of a language peculiar to creations of the imagination?

3 We opened with an introduction indicating a more or less sharp break between the cultural traditions of the Ancient Near East and those of the Biblical/Greco-Roman cultures. Does that indication hold up, in the case of Ancient Egyptian religious practice? Do you see that practice as continuous, in important ways, with the subsequent monotheistic religions of the Near East?

Week Four *Hymn to the Sun* 1380 B.C. (Egypt)

Akhnaten's Monotheism. The most intriguing and culture-influential of the Pharaohs, Akhnaten (1352-1336), is associated before all with the introduction into Egyptian religious thought of monotheism. Virtually overnight he intruded into the dense polytheism, indeed the native polymorphism (animal-god fusions), which had defined Egyptian religious experience. How remote we are from the inner narratives of Egyptian social/political development is proven by how unprepared we are for Akhnaten's reversal of national theology. Whatever the well-springs of Akhnaten's monotheism, what he imposed on his people, especially in the new royal city of Amarna, a vast complex he had built in haste as an administrative capital and a site for his huge Amen temple, the power of his vision was compelling, his courage was unstoppable, and the narrative of Egyptian faith forever enriched. That he created for the ages will be evident in the persistent fascination he exercises over modern scholars, readers, and musicians—cf. Philip Glass's minimalist opera, *Akhnaton*—and by the creative place he continues to occupy in cultural history. Sigmund Freud's last work, *Moses and Monotheism* (1937), turned on the assumption that Moses was an associate of Akhnaten in Amarna, and that Moses drew his monotheistic vision for the Jews from the milieu of Akhnaten's court.

Pharaoh as embodiment of God. It was the lasting assumption of Egyptian theology that the Pharaoh is an embodiment of God—or of the God of the region where the Pharaoh ruled; Atem, or later Ra, at Heliopolis; Ptah for the citizens of Memphis; Amen for the Thebans and their ruler. Thus when the Pharaoh Akhnaten creates his *Hymn to the Sun*, which we have reason to think he himself wrote, he adores the sky-passage of a holy sun, his God, which is also himself. Perhaps he needed so high a self-concept to create at the level he achieves here; and at the same to create for his awe-inspired citizenry, worshipping with him, probably in festal recitations of this hymn, the force that makes the world. It will have been for the whole people that Akhnaten created this musical poem which celebrates 'going forth into the light,' the phrase-thought that sprang from the real name of *The Book of the Dead*. We seem to have, here, a piece of religious literature which can be read like a piece of imaginative literature. Can we believe that is true, when we look back on the stubborn otherness, in style, viewpoint, and world frame, which marks the Ancient Near Eastern material we have been reading, and which Frankfurt, in the *Before Philosophy* we read in Week One, thought the first thing to understand about the archaic world?

Translation issues. We need to go back to our translations, to our discussions of kinds of language, and to the problem posed by language for recovering the past. Let's start by juxtaposing three samples of translation into English of the *Hymn to the Sun*. (Our translation dates are 1923, 2001, and 2011.) The selection is from the description of the world as the sun is setting.

When thou goest down in the western horizon, then earth is in darkness, as if it were dead. They sleep in the chamber, their heads wrapped up, and no eye seeth the other. Though all their things were taken, while they were under their heads, yet would they know it not. Every lion cometh forth from his den, and all worms that bite. Darkness is...the earth is silent for he who created it resteth in his horizon.

(Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, p. 289.)

When you sink to rest below western horizon
Earth lies in darkness like death,
Sleepers are still in bedchambers, heads veiled,
Eye cannot spy a companion,
All their goods could be stolen away,
Heads heavy there, and they never knowing!
Lions come out from the deeps of their caves,
Snakes bite and sting;
Darkness muffles, and earth is silent;
He who created all things lies low in his tomb.

(John Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, p. 2).

When you set in the western horizon,
Earth is in darkness as if in death;
One sleeps in chambers, heads covered,
One eye does not see another.
Were they robbed of their goods
That were under their heads,
People would not notice it.
Every lion comes out from its den.
All the snakes bite:
Darkness hovers, and earth is silent;
As the one who created all things rests in the horizon.

(Van de Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 204).

Alternate versions of texts. A translation, a carrying-over, is there to make clear to us what was written in a language unfamiliar to us. Is that what these three texts do? (Hard to say, unless we can 'read' the original, in which case we don't 'need' the translation?) Does each of the above versions give you a sense of what the original means—the first version employing Biblical diction and a concrete thingliness; the second version a 'felicitously anglicized smoothness,' and a poem-like layout that cozens the modern ear; the third version contemporary but blunt, and, for example, sticking to what is probably 'original' -- 'horizon' in the final line, rather than 'lies low in his tomb?' Now try this. Take a copy of Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, and turn to pp. xxxviii-xxxix. You will find there both a hieratic and a hieroglyphic facsimile of a passage from the 'Dispute with his Soul of one who is tired of Life,' a wisdom tale like *Sinuhe*, from 2500 B.C. Now think: vast spaces seemingly separate the script-things visible from Egypt from the script-thing 'in English' at the bottom of Erman, xxxix. Do we think those spaces are easy to cross. Let's try another experiment. Order a copy of Budge, *Egyptian Language*, Dover reprint from the New York, 1910 version. That's an approach. It will be a long train ride from the hieratic manuscript on xxxviii to the English on the bottom of xxxix. Do you feel sure that we can cross the border separating these different language acts? Or do we drift back toward Frankfurt's (and our own, in the Introductory week) view that Ancient means Archaic, when it comes to the Ancient Near East? (I drift that way.) Oh yes, and by the way, what about the physical moment of directing your eyes (mind) from Erman xxxviii to xxxix? What kind of distance is involved there? How many millimeters?

Selfhood and language. What, finally do you make of our effort to divide Ancient Near Eastern texts in terms of their distinctive language address, and, within that division, into the further issue of kind of quest for selfhood? Do the three kinds of language in question here—so far as we can reach back into them—comfortably unpack into the addresses of behavioral description, ascension and praise, and imaginative expression? I hope you will say yes, and expect you will, thanks to the broad sense in which each of our text translations above is an address to the transcendent—and sharply different from a proclamation of behaviors or an expression of creative imagination, even though this wonderful Hymn, probably the composition of Akhnaten himself, expresses awe in a language of poetry. But what of the issue of selfhood, and its presentation, which is the title giving action of our course? Is that quest implicit in the language practices tracked in this week's work?

High Writing. Language—whether in the *Instruction for Merikare*, in the *Tale of Sinuhe*, or in the Akhnaten Hymn—is the human self actualizing, trying out its contours, and—so to speak—carving its own map of the world in the face of time. High writing, disciplined by time and life, testifies to the self that is it, and is the quest we are.

Reading

Freud, Sigmund, *Moses and Monotheism*.
Lichtheim, Miriam, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. II, p. 90.
Pritchard and Fleming, *The Ancient Near East*, Vol. I, pp.227-230.
Van de Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 202-207.
Waltari, Mika, *The Egyptian*.

Discussion Questions

1 What do you think of the power of language to bridge the temporal gap of three and a half millennia which separates us from the creator of the *Hymn to the Sun*? Is it not true that in a sense the gap is immediately closed by, say, the act of a translation of that *Hymn*, which is thus vaulted into our mind's midst? Is it not equally true that that 'vaulting' is a dangerous sleight of hand, misleading us to bypass the reality of the temporal?

2 What is the source of the remarkable interest our time has paid to Akhnaten? Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*? Phillip Glass' *Akhnaten* opera? Mika Waltari's *The Egyptian*? Plays? Operas? Films? Is it the Sun-King's monotheism, which may in fact have influenced theological developments in Hebrew culture? Is it his mysteriously beautiful wife, Nefertiti, whom Akhnaten came increasingly to resemble in visual depictions? Is it his sense of individuality, distinctive selfhood, which has led thinkers to consider him the first modern man, the first individual?

3 In our introduction we stressed the break between the archaic world of the Ancient Near East, and the Greco-Roman Hebraic cultural world we inherit. But we have been admitting the exaggeration of that view, even by our language practice, our confidence that we can penetrate the archaic world whose unreachability we are asserting. Does the case of Akhnaten seem to you an example of the point where a connection, with the Hebrews through Moses, breaks a channel right through the wall dividing us from the archaic? What do you think of the thesis of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*?