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978-1-107-68926-8 - The Attitude of the Ancient Egyptians to Death and the Dead: The Frazer Lecture for 1935: Delivered in the University of Cambridge on the 14th of May 1935

Alan H. Gardiner

Excerpt

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## THE ATTITUDE OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS TO DEATH AND THE DEAD

To explain the intense preoccupation of the Ancient Egyptians with death and the hereafter requires a complex and exceptional set of conditions. Some<sup>1</sup> have pointed to the unique climate of Egypt, where one cloudless day succeeds another, and where the air is so dry that, as Sir Flinders Petrie has put it, the problem is rather to discover why anything should perish than why it should survive. Where permanence is thus the rule, could man be the exception? But this explanation is obviously insufficient to account for more than a general bias on the side of survival, nor indeed can we hope to divine all the reasons for the extraordinary funerary activity which we associate with mummification and the Pyramids. One contributory factor is found in the observation that the selfsame preservative quality of the climate which has filled our museums with papyri and has maintained intact the most delicate of

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woven tissues tends also to give unusual prominence to the fact of death. Go up into the high desert fringing the Nile Valley, and you will hardly fail to descry the skull or thigh-bone of some quadruped. The earliest inhabitants, seeking new burial-places for their relatives, must constantly have been coming upon well-preserved human skeletons, bringing home to their minds more emphatically than elsewhere the disturbing but indisputable reality of death.<sup>2</sup> The shock of such discoveries may have gone far towards inducing the frame of mind we are seeking to explain. In no country of the earth is life more attractive, more desirable; yet in no other country is death so nakedly revealed. Little wonder that the Egyptians conceived a fanatical abhorrence of death, and devoted no small part of their wealth to devising means of defeating it. This fundamental trait in their psychology is well brought out in the initial words of the appeal which, on many a Middle Kingdom sepulchral stela, exhorts passers-by to utter a prayer on behalf of the deceased: *O ye who live and exist, who love life and hate death...*<sup>3</sup>

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The subject upon which I am addressing you this afternoon was suggested by a reply once given by me to the great scholar whose name is connected with this lecture. Sir James Frazer has produced testimony from all quarters of the globe<sup>4</sup> to show how prevalent is the fear of the dead, and how great an influence that fear has exerted upon early customs and behaviour. To his question whether the same fear was much in evidence in Ancient Egypt I replied with an unequivocal negative, and I must confess that this assertion of mine, over-categorically made, has weighed somewhat heavily on my conscience. To be invited to deliver the Frazer lecture in Cambridge was an honour I could not have resisted in any case; but for me it possessed the additional attraction of giving an opportunity to examine this matter afresh, and my present purpose is to define my position more closely, and to state my conclusions with whatever reserves may seem necessary.

At the outset it must be realized that to fear death and to fear the dead are two very different things, though of course they are by no means

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incompatible, and when combined may very well lead to ancestor-worship, as has happened in China. But of a cult of the ancestors in the Chinese sense there is very little trace in Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Filial obedience was indeed enjoined, and that a son should piously attend to the funerary needs of his parents was the thought underlying the entire ritual of the temples, where the Pharaoh, in practice represented by an officiant priest, typified Horus in the act of supplying the material needs of his father Osiris.<sup>6</sup> The same thought underlay, in theory at least, the relations of the living and the dead. The reigning king will undoubtedly, in the best of cases, have taken some active part in celebrating the cult of the dead man who was at once his father and his predecessor, and this example will have been followed by the nobles in respect of their dead, and also by the common people. There can be no doubt, of course, that a son could usually be counted upon to give his parents decent burial, or failing a son some other close relative.<sup>7</sup> A false-door or other adjuncts might also be added to the tomb after the owner's death.<sup>8</sup> We may also conjecture that filial piety as

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a rule prompted the presentation of daily offerings at least during the first few months of bereavement.<sup>9</sup> But we have highly significant evidence, of which I shall say more later, that for the perpetuation of such offerings the Egyptian nobles of the Old and Middle Kingdoms preferred to rely upon definite contractual arrangements.<sup>10</sup> In the absence of such, funerary observances can seldom have extended to the grandparents, let alone remoter ancestry. Only in the practice of Pharaoh himself was there any serious exception to this rule. Occasionally a king dedicated a statue or made offerings to some distinguished predecessor, and in the temple of Abydos Sethos I is represented as offering to all the legitimate kings of Egypt from Menes downwards. Thus the degree to which ancestors were commemorated and tended in Egypt is extremely limited, so much so that as a generalization it is permissible to affirm that ancestor-worship was not among the habits of the Ancient Egyptians.

After these prefatory remarks I will now concentrate upon the question as to how far the Egyptians feared their dead, and in order to give

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my answer its proper background I will attempt to characterize their general outlook on life from a very wide perspective. The logicity of the Egyptian mind is one of its most striking aspects, and nothing is more remarkable than the impartiality with which the living, the dead and the gods were regarded. *Men, gods, dead*<sup>11</sup>—this and similar collocations of words are not infrequently found, and indicate a hierarchical classification of human and superhuman beings which is reflected in many other conceptions and in much of the behaviour of this ancient people. All three classes had the same needs and were treated in the same manner. The temple was called  $\text{𓆎} \text{𓆏} \text{𓆑}$  *het-nātjer* “the god’s castle”, just as a living prince possessed his  $\text{𓆎} \text{𓆏} \text{𓆑} \text{𓆒} \text{𓆓} \text{𓆔}$  *per en ankhyw* “house of the living”,<sup>12</sup> and just as also the tomb was often described as a man’s  $\text{𓆎} \text{𓆏} \text{𓆑} \text{𓆒} \text{𓆓} \text{𓆔}$  *het ent enheh* “castle of eternity”<sup>13</sup>—*αἰδίου οἴκου* is the term used by Diodorus.<sup>14</sup> In actual fact temple, tomb, and house of the living all bore a strong resemblance to one another, containing rooms where the owner lived, and others where his possessions were stored. A significant detail is that some

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tombs of the Second Dynasty were found to contain unmistakable privies.<sup>15</sup> Just as a wealthy landowner possessed his 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 “servants” (*hemu*), so too the gods and the dead possessed theirs; the name for the highest class of priests was 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 *hemu-nätjer* “servants of the god”, and the dead were ministered to by 𓂏𓂏𓂏 *hemu-ka* “ka-servants” or “soul-servants”. Funerary and divine rites conformed to the model provided by human needs; just as living men required food and clothing, so too did the dead and the gods; the only differences were that the latter, in order to obtain their requirements, had to be brought to life again by magical passes (the so-called 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 *wep-ro* “opening-of-the-mouth” ceremony) and that the presentation of garments and food-offerings had to be accompanied by appropriate gestures and by the recitation of prescribed words, these usually reminiscent of the story of Osiris. Exactly like human beings the gods were deemed to have lived on earth, to have had their sorrows and their joys, to have married wives and to have begotten children, and at last to have died. Even the number of years they lived

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was recorded.<sup>16</sup> The conception of the sun-god being born every morning, growing old during the course of the day, and dying at sunset is not particularly relevant in this connexion, since here we have poetical imagery rather than accepted belief. But the story of the murdered and resurrected god Osiris is very much to the point. This most important of all Egyptian deities was definitely conceived of as an ancient king who, when he died, had been succeeded by his son Horus, and if he continued to live at all, it was partly as ruler of the netherworld and partly as the local divinity of Busiris and Abydos. In the latter aspect Osiris ran the risk of perishing afresh, for magicians sometimes threatened that, unless their will prevailed, they would *cast fire into Busiris and burn up Osiris*.<sup>17</sup>

These strange notions of the gods as once having died but as still, in a different sense, living and exerting power are found also in connexion with mankind. That men die in the ordinary physical way was as clear to the Egyptians as it is to all the world, and in some instances they even held that death might be total annihilation. When the



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Pharaoh slays his enemies, the inscriptions state that he destroys them *as though they had never been*,<sup>18</sup> and as regards their own destiny the Egyptians evidently feared that they too might perish utterly and irretrievably. This indeed was the underlying presupposition of all their funeral preparations. But if all the precautions taken should prove successful, then physical death might be a mere transition<sup>19</sup> from one state of life to another—the second life being not indeed quite the same as had been lived *upon earth*, not quite the same as when a man was *standing upon his feet*, but as close a replica as the imagination would allow. Thus the names of dead persons in inscriptions of the Eighteenth Dynasty are frequently followed by the epithet *wahem cānekh* “living again”, more literally “repeating life”. The life after corporeal death was, however, liable to all the vicissitudes of the first. Hunger and thirst might assail it, and a special dread of the Egyptians, often mentioned in the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead, was that in the future life they might be reduced to eating their own excrements.<sup>20</sup> Many similar fears are voiced in the headings of spells contained

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in the two collections of funerary texts just referred to. Thus there were spells for preventing a man *from decaying in the necropolis*,<sup>21</sup> *from having his head cut off in the necropolis*,<sup>22</sup> *from being accused by his heart in the necropolis*,<sup>23</sup> and most significant of all, *from dying a second death*.<sup>24</sup> The obvious implication of this last expression is that the second death would be final and absolute.

The trend of my argument has been to show that in Egyptian belief men, gods and dead were beings all very much on a same level, subject to like joys and sorrows, sharing the same risks, requiring similar nourishment and apparel, and ultimately liable, unless forethought and magic could stave it off, to a real and irreparable death. In a world of beings thus homogeneously constituted there was little room for fear, except in so far as one man feared another. It is to this last proviso that I now turn, since it helps to give the answer to Sir James Frazer's question. In terrestrial life those men inspire fear who are obviously dangerous and harmful. Now in the realms of the gods and the dead there would naturally be the same moral differences as among the living. Just as there were good