



## Religious Beliefs in the Early History of Ancient Egypt\*

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[Literary compositions, including biographical inscriptions, are surveyed in search for information on pre-New Kingdom religious beliefs, as a complementary source to religious and funerary texts. The expressions described below reflect a more personal and spontaneous attitude towards religion. Having a diaphanous character, and despite their scarcity, they may help in the understanding of more complex and hermetic expressions of the 'official' religion. By recalling the universal or basic beliefs, one may perceive the Egyptian religion as being closer to that of other contemporary and neighboring cultures than it is commonly pictured.]

The documentation that has reached us from ancient Egypt at the end of the third and beginning of the second millennium B.C. is so vast concerning funerary practices and their conception of the Afterlife, and it is of such a nature, that it absorbs most of the attention and conditions the majority of the general studies on Egyptian religion when referring to this period (i.e., pre-New Kingdom).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the pyramids and mastabas, as well as the texts and reliefs inscribed on their inner walls and on sarcophagi, have been the main source and inspiration for this kind of studies. The religion that they reflect can be labeled as 'official', in as much as it centres on the deceased king and his followers, their transfiguration, journey to the Hereafter and life therein.

With the aim of completing the view obtained through this approach, the present study gathers religious expressions of a more personal nature and, in some way, more spontaneous.<sup>2</sup> The main source of information will be for that matter *a priori* non-religious texts, as most literary compositions of the Middle Kingdom are. Biographical inscriptions,<sup>3</sup> despite the fact that they appear within a funerary context and that their *raison d'être* corresponds to a certain conception of the Hereafter, show stillistic affinities with contemporary literature and include in some instances personalized religious expressions, and thus they have also been considered.

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1. J. Baines, "Practical Religion and Piety", *JEA* 73 (1987) 79, begins by stating: "Egyptian religion before the New Kingdom is poorly known in all but its funerary aspects". An extended version of this article, dealing with 'non-official' religious beliefs and practices, can be found in *idem.*, *Society, Morality, and Religion*, third chapter of B.E. Shafer (ed.), *Religion in Ancient Egypt* (London, 1991) 123-200.

2. This approach has been conducted for the New Kingdom and Late Period, since both archeological and literary sources contain more information about 'personal piety' than in earlier periods. See, e.g., A.I. Sadek, *Popular Religion in Egypt during the New Kingdom* (*HÄB* 27, Hildesheim, 1987); G. Fecht, *Literarische Zeugnisse zur «Persönlichen Frömmigkeit» in Ägypten* (*AHAW*, Heidelberg, 1965).

3. M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies Chiefly of the Middle Kingdom* (*OBO* 84, Freiburg, 1988); J. Assmann, *Stein und Zeit* (Munich, 1991) 178-99; reprinted in, *idem.*, "Schrift, Tod und Identität. Das Grab als Vorschule der Literatur im alten Ägypten", in A. and J. Assmann- Ch. Hardmeier, *Schrift und Gedächtnis. Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation* (Munich, 1993) 64-93.

I. *God's will*

The idea that man's actions were touched by a determinism of divine origin can be found in some literary passages of Middle Kingdom compositions. Man is portrait not as the author of the situation in which he finds himself, but it is god<sup>4</sup> who has created his circumstances. Indeed, man is able to act within and respond to his environment, but the final result of his efforts eludes his control: god is who has the final word on what has to be. The following passages are taken from *The Instructions of the vizier Ptahhotep* to his son:

Properties do not come about themselves,  
(but) their right is for one who desires them.  
If what he has gathered himself overflows,  
it is god who makes his excellence,  
as he (i.e., god) protects him while he sleeps.<sup>5</sup>

If you are in the antechamber,  
stand and sit according to your position,  
which was assigned to you on the first day.  
Do not surpass (it), or you will be detained  
(...) It is god who advances (each one's) position;  
one does not act (favourably) for those who nudge.<sup>6</sup>

If you plow and there is growth in the field,  
and god lets it prosper in your hand,  
restrain your mouth at your neighbors' side.<sup>7</sup>

If you are rich after having been humble,  
(if) you acquire properties, after having lack them,  
in the town which you know,  
do not value(?) what has formerly come to you,  
do not be haunted by your wealth,  
which has come to you as a gift of god;  
you are not behind one like you (i.e., rich),  
to whom the same thing has come about.<sup>8</sup>

4. On the meanings of the term *ntr* "god", cf. S. Morenz, *Ägyptische Religion* (Stuttgart, 1960; English translation, *Egyptian Religion*, Ithaca, 1973) 19 f.; E. Hornung, *Der Eine und die Vielen. Ägyptische Gottesvorstellung* (Darmstadt, 1971; English translation, *Concepts of God in Ancient Egypt. The One and the Many*, Ithaca, 1982); W. Westendorf, *Das Aufkommen der Gottesvorstellung im Alten Ägypten* (Göttingen, 1984); J. Baines, "On the Symbolic Context of the Principal Hieroglyph for God", in U. Verhoeven- E. Graefe (eds.), *Religion und Philosophie im Alten Ägypten (OLA 39, Louvain, 1991)* 29-46.

5. Papyrus Prisse VII, 8-9; Žába, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep* (Prague, 1956) 30 (181-186), 78, 127. This maxim warns against covetousness; one of Ptahhotep's major concerns, and it begins as follows: "If you are poor, and you follow a man of excellence, may your behaviour be good in front of god" (175-176). This advise is related to the idea of divine judgement, which will be discussed below. For the text, see also J.L. Foster, *Thought Couplets and Clause Sequences in a Literary Text: The Maxims of Ptah-hotep (SSEA 4, Toronto, 1977)*. A translation into English of all the literary compositions included in this survey can be found in M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, I* (Berkeley, 1975); W.K. Simpson (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven, 1972).

6. VIII, 2-3, 5-6; Žába, *op. cit.*, 33 (220-223, 229-231), 81, 132-34.

7. VII, 5; Žába, *op. cit.*, 28 (161-163), 77, 125.

8. XIII, 6-9; Žába, *op. cit.*, 50 (428-436), 95, 154.

Satisfy your clientèle with what has come to you,  
(it) has come about by the favour of god.<sup>9</sup>

If you are a man of excellence,  
and you produce a son by the grace of god;  
if he is straightforward, serves your reputation,  
and he takes good care of your possessions...<sup>10</sup>

Lichtheim<sup>11</sup> states concerning the maxim from which the passage above was taken: "The idea that the gods determine a man's character and fate was not developed to the point where it would have overwhelmed the sense of free will and personal responsibility". However, the next passage quoted refers to someone's character as being also in god's hands.

Behold, a good son is a gift of god,  
(he is one) who exceeds over what had been said to him by his lord.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the question is not up to what extent man's life was conceived as being determined by god's will. Different concepts, determinism and man's free will, coexisted<sup>13</sup> (as within many societies and individuals), arising one or the other depending on the context.<sup>14</sup> It seems, on the other hand, that the idea of predestination is absent from the textual evidence of the early period,<sup>15</sup> if royalty is left aside.<sup>16</sup>

9. XI, 1; Žába, *op. cit.*, 43 (339-340), 89, 147.

10. VII, 10-11; Žába, *op. cit.*, 31 (197-198), 79, 129.

11. *Op. cit.*, 77 n. 23.

12. XIX, 5; Žába, *op. cit.*, 64 (633-634), 103, 171. The word "lord" refers here to the "father", previously mentioned in lines 629-632. Concerning the "good son", the *Instructions*' epilogue also points out: "How good is that a son accepts what his father says, and reaches old age with it. It is the one who listens (to his father's words) whom god loves, and he who does not listen is whom god hates" (543-546). The standard of living in society was transmitted from father to son, and in Ptahhotep's words it consisted in "the conduct (*šrw*) of the ancestors, those who listened to the gods (themselves)" (31-32). See on this topic, H. Brunner, *Altägyptische Erziehung* (Wiesbaden, 1957) 127-34; Fecht, *Literarische Zeugnisse...*, 125 ff.

13. Morenz, *op. cit.*, 66 f. points out that man's volition takes shape in his heart, which is at the same time where the divine inflicts his influence on man's life. All things considered, man was responsible for his actions (pp. 144 f.). F.T. Miosi, "God, Fate and Free Will in Egyptian Wisdom Literature", in G.E. Kadish- G.E. Freeman (ed.), *Studies in Philology in Honour of Ronald James Williams* (SSEA 3, Toronto, 1982) 86 f., states: "Free will, freedom of choice, is always measured in regard to causes and not to effects in every theological system in which this matter has been considered. Fate, on the other hand, normally focuses on results...".

14. As an example of man's free will *versus* god's, in a passage from the *Coffin Texts* the creator-god states: "I have created each man as his brother. I did not command that they do wrong, their hearts are who disobeyed what I had said" (CT VII 463 f-464 b); cf. Lichtheim, *Literature...*, 131 f.; Morenz, *op. cit.*, 58-63; E. Otto, "Zur Komposition von Coffin Texts Spell 1130", in J. Assmann, *et alii.* (eds.), *Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur* (Wiesbaden, 1977) 1-18; W. Schenkel, "Soziale Gleichheit und soziale Ungleichheit und die ägyptische Religion", in G. Kehrler (ed.), *Vor Gott sind alle gleich* (Düsseldorf, 1983) 27-29; J. Assmann, "State and Religion in the New Kingdom", in W.K. Simpson (ed.), *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt* (*Yale Egyptological Studies* 3, New Haven, 1989) 60-62; D. Lorton, "God's Beneficent Creation: Coffin Texts Spell 1130, the Instructions for Merkare, and the Great Hymn to the Aton", *SAK* 20 (1993) 125-29.

15. A different view has been held by Morenz, *op. cit.*, 69-71; S. Morenz, unter Mitarbeit von D. Müller, *Untersuchungen zur Rolle des Schicksals in der ägyptischen Religion* (ASAW 52.1, Berlin, 1960) 8-10; and by G. Fecht, *Der Vorwurf an Gott in den "Mahnworten des Ipu-wer"* (AHAW, Heidelberg, 1972) 128 ff. Their arguments, based on passages from *Ptahhotep*, have been refuted by Miosi, *Studies in Philology*, 78-81.

Predestination does appear, on the other hand, in New Kingdom texts, such as in the stories of *The Doomed Prince* (4, 3-4), and of *The Two Brothers* (9, 7-9), where the Seven Hathors augur the fate of a new-born (concerning how he/she will die); cf. Lichtheim, *Literature*, II (Berkeley, 1976); and C. Eyre, "Fate, Crocodiles and the Judgement of the Dead", *SAK* 4 (1976) 103-114.

16. The formulation that a deity chose the king when he was still "in the egg", i.e., in his early childhood, is common in royal phraseology; cf. *Instructions to King Merikare* (135); and also A. de Buck, "The Building Inscription of the Berlin Leather Roll", *AnOr* 17 (1938) 48-55 (lines 8-10); H. Goedicke, "The Berlin Leather Roll (P Berlin 3029)", in *Festschrift Ägyptisches Museum Berlin* (Berlin, 1974) 93. Papyrus Westcar (p. Berlin 3033) IX, 7- XI, 4, relates how three kings of the V Dynasty were predestinated to occupy the throne; cf. A. Blackman, *The Story of King Kheops and the Magicians* (Reading, 1988) 11-14. The naming of new-borns with theophoric names, as in this story, does reflect a religious attitude, and thus they can be regarded as expressions of private piety, as Baines has pointed out in *JEA* 73, 95-97; already in Morenz, *op. cit.*, 57 f.

The situation that each person has to live with is the outcome of god's will. One can then interpret it as a punishment or as a reward from god, depending on which were his desires and aspirations. In *The Story of Sinuhe*, the main character takes his stay in Palestine as god's punishment, despite of the high economic and political status that he attained there. Sinuhe, after having defeated the Palestinian chieftain that came to challenge him in a duel for the leadership in the region, thinks for a moment about what is happening to him:

... God has just acted mercifully,<sup>17</sup> he is not upset with him who went away to another land. (Until) today, his heart has been kind.<sup>18</sup> (...) My household is perfect, my position wide; (however) my thoughts are in the Palace.

O (you,) whoever god<sup>19</sup> decided upon<sup>20</sup> this flight! may you be merciful and set me towards the Residence. If only you would allow that I see the place where my heart dwells! What is more important than burying my corpse in the land where I was born? Come to (my) aid!<sup>21</sup> What has come about (so far) has been good. (Now,) may god have mercy on me, may he act likewise to improve the end of whom he has afflicted,<sup>22</sup> (now that) his heart is sore for whom he has pushed to live abroad. Today he is indeed merciful, (thus) may he listen to the request<sup>23</sup> of one far away.<sup>24</sup>

Sinuhe's flight has two breaks, i.e. two sedentary periods, which begin by his encounter with a person of a higher status than his: Amunenshi, the Palestinian chief who took him in, and the king of Egypt Sesostris, who made possible his settling down again in Egypt. They both asked him for an explanation of how he got into the situation he was in, and the two received a similar answer:

I do not know what has brought me to this land;  
actually, (it) has been like a plan<sup>25</sup> of god.<sup>26</sup>

17. The basic meaning of the verb *hꜣp* is "to satisfy"; cf. *Wb.* III 189, 11-18; and for this passage, R. Parant, *L'affaire Sinouhé* (Aurillac, 1982) 144-47, 211-24.

18. Sinuhe explains next god's kindness by recalling how he has been able to overcome all the adversities he had to face (B 149-155). Sinuhe regards the duel as the final obstacle of his career in exile, and his victory as the definitive signal of god's favourable disposition towards him.

19. The signs *nꜣrw nb* are commonly translated as "whoever god". However, Sinuhe's intentions to distinguish one god among the many is nowhere else implied, and it stands against the indefinite use of the term "god" that otherwise the author makes. On the anonymity of god in literature, cf. Morenz, *op. cit.*, 76 f. 142. A different rendering of the phrase has been suggested by J.G. Griffiths, "Intimations in Egyptian non-royal Biography of a Belief in Divine Impact on Human Affairs", in J. Baines, *et alii.* (eds.), *Pyramid Studies and Other Essays* (London, 1988) 93 f., where he translates, "O Lord God, who decreed...". On the other hand, Baines, *JEA* 73, p. 90; *idem.*, *Society.*, 175, uses this passage to point out that Sinuhe was unable to identify the god that was influencing his life.

20. *šꜣ*; cf. *Wb.* IV 402, 9 "schicksalhaft bestimmen"; Morenz, *op. cit.*, 73-76, 84; Morenz u. Müller, *op. cit.* They argue that the concept of "destiny" is primarily related to a fixed lifespan, and with it to the manner of dying. See also J. Quaegebeur, *Le dieu égyptien Shaï dans la religion et l'onomastique* (OLA 2, Louvain, 1975); Parant, *op. cit.*, 169 ff.; Miosi, in *Studies in Philology*, 70 ff.

21. *m-sꜣ*, lit. "behind (me)"; cf. *Wb.* IV 10.

22. *sꜣn* can mean "to be kind", or just the opposite, according to *Wb.* III 443, 2-5 "sanftmütig, milde sein. Gern negiert: nicht milde sein"; cf. also Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, 224.

23. *nh*; cf. *Wb.* II 289, 11 "die Bitte"; Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, 136, interprets the term as "prayer". Sinuhe juxtaposes his request to god, to his request to the king, which follows next: "May the king be merciful to me, that I may live by his mercies" (B 167). The deliberate diffuse distinction between "god" and the king comes up once more in Sinuhe's reply to the king's invitation to return to Egypt, by stating that his life is in the king's hands: "The Great God, the likeness of Re, who knows who serves him (well). The servant here is in the hand of one who cares for him" (B 216-217).

24. Papyrus Berlin 3022, (B) 147-149, 155-163; R. Koch, *Die Erzählung des Sinuhe* (BAe 17, Brussels, 1990) 53-56; especially for these passages, cf. J. L. Foster, *Thought Couplets in the Tale of Sinuhe* (Münchener Ägyptologische Untersuchungen 3, Frankfurt am Main, 1993) 50 f.; and also W. Barta, "Der »Vorwurf an Gott" in der Lebensgeschichte des Sinuhe", in *Festschrift Jürgen von Beckerath* (HÄB 30, Hildesheim, 1990) 21-27.

25. *šꜣr* also has the meaning of "conduct", as in the passage translated above in n. 12; cf. *Wb.* IV 258, 10 ff.; Parant, *op. cit.*, 60-68, 138-43.

26. B 42-43; Koch, *op. cit.*, 29.

Now, this flight which your servant made, it was not intentioned, it was not in my heart; I did not devise it. I do not know what separated me from (my) position; actually, (it) was like being guided by a vision.<sup>27</sup> (...) The god who decided upon this flight was dragging me on.<sup>28</sup>

The main character in *The Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, after being cast ashore on an island, is confronted by someone of higher status, as it happened to Sinuhe after his erratic flight, who asks him about the circumstances that brought him there. The sailor's answer is of a phenomenological type, describing the physical facts; that is, the storm that overtook his boat out at sea:

Then, I was brought to this island by a wave of the sea.<sup>29</sup>

The shipwrecked sailor tries to exonerate himself for what had happened by referring to the capability of the crew and of his boat to carry out successfully the enterprise to which they committed themselves. However, the snake that is questioning him, which implicitly appears in the story as a deity,<sup>30</sup> answers itself to its own question from a different point of view:

Behold, god has caused that you live,  
he has brought you to this island of the *ka*.<sup>31</sup>

The health and the well-being of a person seem to be the human aspects that were more clearly perceived as being in the hands of the divine. In the epistolary genre, the salutation with which most of the letters begin expresses the wish that one or more deities favour and protect the addressee of the message.<sup>32</sup> In this vein, a deity is mentioned as grantor of a long life on earth.<sup>33</sup>

The first reaction of a person when he got what he desired was to thank god; and by so doing, the fortunate person spontaneously reveals his belief that it was god's will that made it possible. At the beginning of *The Shipwrecked Sailor*, the crew thanks god when they arrive home again safe and sound.<sup>34</sup> In the same way, when the hero of the story relates how he survived the shipwreck, and after

27. *ršwt*; cf. *Wb.* II 452, 1-3 "Traum"; P. Vernus, "Traum", *LÄ VI* (1986) 745-59; K. Zibelius-Chen, "Kategorien und Rolle des Traumes in Ägypten", *SAK 15* (1988) 277-93.

28. B 223-225, 229-230; Koch, *op. cit.*, 67 f. For an interpretation of the section of the story from where these passages have been taken, see J. Baines, "Interpreting *Sinuhe*", *JEA 68* (1982) 39 f. The heart, which plays a relevant role in *The Story of Sinuhe*, is a two-fold concept, following N. Shupak, *Where can Wisdom be found? The Sage's Language in the Bible and in Ancient Egyptian Literature* (*OBO 130*, Fribourg Switzerland, 1993) 308: "an independent entity, which determines the decisions of a man and affects his way of life, and on the other hand it is the residence of divine inspiration in man, the organ that transmits god's will"; cf. also n. 13 above.

29. Papyrus Ermitage 1115, 109-110; A.M. Blackman, *Middle Egyptian Stories* (*BAe 2*, Brussels, 1932) 44.

30. A side of what its external appearance may evoke, note that the snake comes to the shipwrecked sailor right after the latter had made a burnt-offering to the gods (54-71); and that the shipwrecked sailor promises at his departure from the island that he will perform sacrifices on behalf of and offer presents to the snake, as it was customary to do for a beneficent foreign god (139-148). The snake calls itself "ruler (*ḥk3*) of Punt" (line 151), calling to mind the goddess Wereret mentioned in *The Story of Sinuhe* as being "mistress (*nbt*) of Punt" (B 209-210), the Ashmolean version having a snake as ideogram for her name.

31. 113-114; Blackman, *op. cit.*, 44. The name "island of the *ka*" refers to the island's abundance in all kinds of edible goods and raw materials for one's well-being, as described in lines 47-54, 115-116, 150-153. Different interpretations can be found in D. Kurth, "Zur Interpretation der Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen", *SAK 14* (1987) 167-179; J. Baines, "Interpreting the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor", *JEA 76* (1990) 55-72; A. Loprieno, "The Sign of Literature in the *Shipwrecked Sailor*", in *Religion und Philosophie*, 214 f.; P. der Manuelian, "Interpreting 'The Shipwrecked Sailor'", in I. Gamer-Wallert- W. Helck (eds.), *Gegengabe. Festschrift für Emma Brunner-Traut* (Tübingen, 1992) 223-233. The stories of *Sinuhe* and *The Shipwrecked Sailor* were discussed together by E. Otto, "Die Geschichte des Sinuhe und des Schiffbrüchigen als 'lehrhafte Stücke'", *ZÄS 93* (1966) 100-11.

32. See T.G.H. James, *The Hekanakhte Papers and other Early Middle Kingdom Documents* (New York, 1962); H. Goedicke, *Studies in the Hekanakhte Papers* (Baltimore, 1984). Note the long salutation with which Sinuhe begins his letter addressed to the Egyptian king (B 204-214).

33. See J. Janssen, "On the Ideal Lifetime of the Egyptians", *Oudheidkundige Mededeelingen 31* (1950) 33-43. Note that, among the instances Janssen quotes, there is one which mentions as grantor the king instead of a god, and it comes from *The Instructions of Ptah-hotep*: "I have reached one hundred and ten years of age (as) a gift of the king" (641-642).

34. P. Ermitage 1115, 5-6.

providing himself with all what he needed, he mentions that he offered an holocaust to the gods.<sup>35</sup> When he finally made it back to the Residence, bringing with him all kinds of exotic products from the island, the king of Egypt praised god in front of his court.<sup>36</sup> In *The Story of Sinuhe*, the Egyptian war god Montu is thanked after Sinuhe defeated his opponent in the duel.<sup>37</sup>

## II. Uncertain Future

It comes without saying that if man is not who creates his present circumstances, he will not be able either to decide, or somehow shape his future. Man tried to overcome this cumbersome circumstance with all the means at his hand, and he elaborated mechanisms to foresee the future, such as calendars of "good" and "bad" days.<sup>38</sup> Oracles, which became an important feature of the New Kingdom society (i.e., second half of the second millenium B.C.), are not attested in the written sources for the earlier period.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, the most common idea expressed in the texts is that the future was only in the hands of god;<sup>40</sup> man could only be cautious.

Let your name go forth;  
you will be called when your mouth is silent.  
Do not be conceited about (your) strength  
in the midst of your comrades, restrain your impetus,  
(since) one does not know what will come about,  
what god will do when he opposes (someone).<sup>41</sup>

One does not know what will come about,  
(so) he is prudent (about) tomorrow.<sup>42</sup>

Do not create terror among people,  
(since) god will oppose (you) likewise (...)  
The intimidation of people does not prevail,  
it is the command of god what prevails.<sup>43</sup>

35. Lines 52-56. For the term *sb n sdt*, cf. *Wb.* III 430, 19-21 "Brandopfer". See Sadek, *op. cit.*, 7; who discusses this reference together with a similar event described in Amenemhet's rock-inscription in Wadi Hammamat.

36. Line 176.

37. B 141-142.

38. Papyrus Kahun XVII, 3: a month's list of "good" (*nfr*) and "bad" (*dw*) days, or a combination of the two; F. L. Griffith, *Hieratic Papyri from Kahun and Gurob* (London, 1897) 62; II, pl. 25; cf. L. Troy, "Have a Nice Day! Some Reflections on the Calendars of Good and Bad Days", in G. Englund (ed.), *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians. Cognitive Structures and Popular Expressions* (Boras 20, Uppsala, 1989) 127-47.

39. However, Baines, *JEA* 73, 88-93, points out that "both accidents of preservation and the operation of decorum may have robbed us of concrete evidence".

40. In New Kingdom private correspondence, expressions about man's uncertain future are commonly found; e.g., "Trully, I am alive today, tomorrow is in the hands of god" (papyrus Leiden I 369, 5-6; J. Černý, *Late Ramesside Letters* (BAe 9, Brussels, 1939) 1 (7-8); translated by E.F. Wente, *Late Ramesside Letters* (SAOC 33, Chicago, 1967) 18. See also A.M. Bakir, *Egyptian Epistolography from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-First Dynasty* (BdE 48, Cairo, 1970) 55-64; J. Assmann, *Zeit und Ewigkeit im Alten Ägypten* (Heidelberg, 1975) 65-69.

41. Papyrus Prisse I, 12-II, 2; A.H. Gardiner, "The Instruction addressed to Kagemni", *JEA* 32 (1946) fig. 14. For the term *hprw* to refer to the future, cf. Assmann in, *Religion and Philosophy*, 77 f.

42. XI, 2; Žába, *op. cit.*, 43 (343), 89, 147.

43. VI, 8; 9-10; Žába, *op. cit.*, 24 f. (99-100, 115-116), 75, 120 f.

On the other hand, certain literary characters are described as capable of foretelling the future. One of the stories in *papyrus Westcar* relates how the magician and wiseman Djedi announces the birth of three kings to be, when these were still in their mother's womb.<sup>44</sup> He is described to the king by prince Hordedef as a citizen<sup>45</sup> of one hundred and ten years of age (the utopian life-span for the Egyptians),<sup>46</sup> who was consuming a ration of five hundred breads, the meat of half an ox, and was drinking one hundred jars of beer up to that day.<sup>47</sup> In *The Prophecy of Neferti*, the main character is a great lector-priest<sup>48</sup> of the goddess Bastet, and he is referred to as a brave citizen, a scribe of skillful fingers and a gentleman richer than any of his peers. He was conducted in front of the king when the latter asked for a wise and extraordinary man that will amuse him with his words.<sup>49</sup>

In *The Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, the crew members are described as responsible, determined and strong, capable of foretelling a storm before this would have developed. However, despite of their exceptional qualities for sailing, a storm took them by surprise when they were on the high seas, and they all end up drowned. On the contrary, the snake of the island reached by the shipwrecked sailor foretold with exactitude all that will happen to the newcomer:

Behold, you shall spend on this island month after month, until you complete four months. Then a boat will come from the Residence with sailors whom you know. You shall go with them to the Residence, you will die in your town (...) Then, that boat came as he had already announced.<sup>50</sup>

(...) Behold, you will reach the Residence in two months, you will embrace your children, you will prosper in the Residence and you will be (properly) buried (...)

We reached the Residence in two months, as everything he had said.<sup>51</sup>

### III. *Do ut des*

While man could feel in certain occasions that he was a puppet in god's hands, especially when things were going wrong for him, he was nevertheless able to predispose the divine to act benevolently towards him. God's will was not perceived as being totally arbitrary, but there was always a motive for it acting in one way or another; the exact reason behind it was, however, not always evident for the one that was suffering it. God acted following the principle *do ut des*, establishing a reciprocal relation between his and man's actions.<sup>52</sup> If a person wanted to have a deity on his side, he just had to please him first; and for the same reason, if something bad happened to someone, it was because some-

44. P. Berlin 3033, IX, 7-15; Blackman, *King Kheops and the Magicians*, 11 f.

45. The translations of the term *nds* vary from "citizen" to "commoner" or "poorman", expressing a relative social status in opposition to, for instance, a "son-of-a-man"; cf. J. Janssen, *De Traditioneele Egyptische Autobiografie vóór het Nieuwe Rijk* (Leiden, 1946) 3 f., 35; J. Polotsky, *Zu den Inschriften der 11. Dynastie* (UGAA 11, Hildesheim, 1964) 34.

46. See Janssen, *Oudheidkundige Mededeelingen* 31, pp. 33-43; and on the life-expectancy in ancient Egypt, see remarks by J. Baines-C. Eyre, "Four Notes on Literacy", *GM* 61 (1983) 72-74.

47. Lines VII 1-4; Blackman, *op. cit.*, 8.

48. This religious "title" was associated also with magic practises through the reading knowledge that its holders had; cf. J. Quaegebeur, "La designation (P3-) *Hry-tp: Phritob*", in J. Osing-G. Dreyer (eds.), *Form und Maß*, (ÄAT 12 Wiesbaden, 1987) 368-394. On this topic, cf. G. Lanczkowski, *Altägyptischer Prophetismus* (ÄA 4, Wiesbaden, 1960).

49. *Papyrus Ermitage* 1116 B, 5-11; W. Helck, *Die Prophezeiung des Nfr.tj* (Wiesbaden, 1970) 7-10.

50. For the verb *sr* "to foretell", cf. *Wb.* IV 189, 15 ff.; Morenz, *op. cit.*, 71 f.; Morenz u. Müller, *op. cit.*, 12 f.

51. P. Leningrad 1115, 117-123, 154-155, 167-169, 173-174; Blackman, *op. cit.*, 44.

52. See the last passage quoted above from *Ptahhotep*: "...god will oppose you likewise" (100); cf. A. Volten, "Ägyptische Nemes-Gedanken", in *Miscellanea Gregoriana* (Vatican, 1941) 371-73; Morenz, *op. cit.*, 101-04. See also W. Boochs, "Der Grundsatz der Reziprozität im Recht der Naturvölker und im altägyptischen Recht", in D. Mendel-V. Claudi (eds.), *Ägypten im Afro-orientalischen Kontext* (Köln, 1991) 27-30. Although referring to the Ramesside period, see P.J. Frandsen, "Trade and Cult", in *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians*, 95-108.

how he had previously offended god. Deities were mainly pleased through cultual acts and through the dedication of memorials, as it is instructed to king Merikare<sup>53</sup>:

Act for god, and he will act for you likewise.  
(Act) with offerings that make the altars overflow  
and with reliefs/inscriptions. Your name<sup>53</sup> is what leads (in them),  
and god has in mind the one who acts for him.<sup>54</sup>

The principle of *do ut des* in the relation between god and man is explicitly stated in the monuments themselves.<sup>55</sup>

#### IV. Justice in the Netherworld and one's conduct on earth

If the administration's law and order enforcement failed to prevent or punish a transgression of the established order, the victim was left with the only possibility of imploring for divine justice. The main character of *The Eloquent Peasant*, after requesting nine times to the responsible authorities to have his stolen goods returned to him, he ends by calling up extra-mundane forces. Since the two deities he invokes were related to the dead's world, it seems that he expected divine justice to take place in the Afterlife.

You beat me, you carry off my goods, and you now take away the complaint from my mouth!  
O Lord of Silence (i.e., Osiris)! Give me (back) my properties, and I will stop crying for your  
dreadedness.<sup>56</sup>

Behold, I have been appealing to you, but you have not listened to it. (Thus,) I will go and  
appeal against you to the god Anubis.<sup>57</sup>

It was not enough to make offerings to the gods and dedicate memorials to them; man had to behave on earth in a certain way, even the kings themselves.<sup>58</sup> The idea that people's actions on earth will be judged by the divine in the Afterlife must have acted as the centripetal force for establishing a social code of conduct for funerary inscriptions. Some of the formulations expressed in biographical inscriptions were repeated for more than one person, appearing as literary *topoi*.<sup>59</sup> This fact, however,

53. On the extended meaning "character", "nature" for the word *rn* "name"; cf. P. Vernus, "Name" in *LÄ IV* (Wiesbaden, 1982) 320-26.

54. Papyrus Ermitage 1116 A, 129-130 (cf. also 63-67); A. Volten, *Zwei altägyptische politische Schriften* (*AnAe 4*, Munksgaard, 1945) 68 f.; W. Helck, *Die Lehre für König Merikare* (Wiesbaden, 1977) 82; J. F. Quack, *Studien zur Lehre für Merikare* (Wiesbaden, 1992) 76 f., 195. See also J. Assmann, "Vergeltung und Erinnerung", in F. Junge (ed.), *Studien zu Sprache und Religion Ägyptens* (Göttingen, 1984) 690-97, who refers to "eine gesellschaftliche Solidarität".

55. E.g., Cairo C.G. 20281; where two men offering to Ptah address him at once, saying: "Hail to you, Ptah, Lord of Ankhawy! I have come to praise you. I am your son, who does not neglect his duty in your feasts [...]: 'For the *ka* of the divine Ptah, my Lord, that he may grant me the sweet breath to my nose'; cf. H.O. Lange- H. Schäfer, *Grab- und Denksteine des Mittleren Reichs*, I (Berlin, 1902) 295-97; IV, pl. 20; P. Vernus, "Études de philologie et de linguistique (II)", *RdE* 34 (1982-83) 115-117.

56. Papyrus Berlin 3023, B, 59-61; R.B. Parkinson, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* (Oxford, 1991) 13 f.

57. B<sub>II</sub> 113-115; Parkinson, *op. cit.*, 47.

58. This was pointed out to king Merikare: "Make firm your position at the cemetery by being straight and by doing justice (*m3't*), (since) this is on which their hearts rely. The loaf(-offering) of he who is straight is (better) accepted than the ox of he who is evil" (127-129); cf. Morenz, *op. cit.*, 104; Assmann, in *Sprache und Religion*, 699.

59. See E. Edel, "Untersuchungen zur Phraseologie der ägyptischen Inschriften des Alten Reiches", *MDAIK* 13 (1944) 1-90; Jansen, *op. cit.*



does not discredit the authenticity of the beliefs communicated by them (the authenticity of the actions mentioned is, indeed, another question).

I have never stripped a man from his belongings,  
that he would complain about it to the town-god.  
I am one who says and proclaims what is good.  
I have never denounced a man to his superior,  
that he would complain about it to god.<sup>60</sup>

I am one whom the people love, generous to his servants.  
I have given bread to the hungry, cloths to the naked,  
in order to be honored<sup>61</sup> in front of the great-god.<sup>62</sup>

I have come to my town, I have descended from my province.  
I have done what people desired, and gods praise.<sup>63</sup>

The whole time I spent acting as magistrate,  
I was doing the good and saying what was desired,  
in order to attain a (good) repute in front of god,  
in order to have a (good) old age.  
I have arbitrated (among) two equals as to appease them,  
for I knew that it was what god desired.<sup>64</sup>

#### V. *The spirit of the dead among the living*

The idea that god will judge in the Afterlife each one's actions was, in part, regarded as a way to emend injustice on earth and to fill the legal gaps that the justice administration had, e.g., crimes against the deceased.<sup>65</sup> Together with it, texts express the belief (through hope) that the dead had power of action in the cemetery and, by extension, among the living. The deceased, transformed into a spirit,<sup>66</sup> was thought to be able to request divine justice; after all, he was closer to the divine judge than

60. Tomb of Henku; N. de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs of Deir el Gebrawi*, II (London, 1902) 30, pl. 25 (columns 20-21); K. Sethe, *Urkunden des Alten Reichs*, I (Leipzig, 1933) 78, 8-12; cf. Lichtheim, *Autobiographies*, 24. A similar idea is expressed in *Urk.* I 122, 17-123, 1; 132, 16-133, 1: "I am one who speaks the good and proclaims what is desired. I have never said anything evil to the authority, so that he will act against someone, (since) I desire a good name in front of the great-god"; cf. Lichtheim, *Literature*, 24; and *idem.*, *Autobiographies*, 16. On the "good name", cf. Fecht, *Vorwurf an Gott.*, 144 ff.

61. *im3h*; cf. *Wb.* I 81, 14 "würdig sein"; it refers to the state attained by the deceased after been properly buried, and having gone successfully through his judgement in the Afterlife. In relation to this concept, cf. R. Anthes, "The Original Meaning of *m3' hrw*", *JNES* 13 (1954) 21 ff.

62. Stela of Meru; Turin n. 1447 (lines 15-16); L. Klebs, *Die Reliefs und Malereien des Mittleren Reiches*, AHAW 6 (Heidelberg, 1922) 22, fig. 14; cf. Lichtheim, *Autobiographies*, 64, pl. 3.

63. Stela of Intef son of Senet; BM. 562 (lines 12-14); *Hieroglyphic Texts from Egyptian Stelae, & c. in the British Museum*, II (London, 1912); Lichtheim, *Autobiographies*, 108; W.K. Simpson, *The Terrace of the Great God at Abydos: the Offering Chapels of Dynasties 12 and 13* (New Heaven, 1974) pl. 12.

64. Tomb of Pepiankh the Middle; A.M. Blackman, *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, IV (London, 1924) pl. 4 (right, columns 4-6); *Urk.* I 222, 8-12; cf. Lichtheim, *Autobiographies*, 19.

65. The common word for cemetery was *hr(t)-ntr*, lit. "what is under god" (*Wb.* III 394, 10 ff.), implying that the crimes there committed fall under the jurisdiction of the cemetery's patron deity.

66. See G. Englund, *Akh, une notion religieuse dans l'Égypte pharaonique* (*Boreas* 11, Upsala, 1978); R.J. Demarée, *The 3h ikr n R'- Stelae* (Leiden, 1983).

those on earth. The deceased even threatened<sup>67</sup> to act himself and take physical revenge against those who would violate his funerary property.

As for any one who shall enter this tomb [without being clean, I shall seize his neck] like a bird, and his flesh will be pulled apart for it by the great-god.<sup>68</sup>

Since you desire that I watch over you in the cemetery,  
on the day of approaching there, may you tell your children  
to say an invocation of offerings for (me).

I am a spirit of excellence,

I know all about the spirit in the cemetery.

O living ones on earth who shall approach this tomb!

If you desire that the king praises you,

and to be honored in front of the great-god,

you shall [not] enter this tomb evily, or [...] impured.

If anyone enters it evily after this (what has been said),

I will be judged with him by the great-god,

I will destroy their descendants and their houses on earth.<sup>69</sup>

The deceased followed, as it was mentioned above for the gods, the principle *do ut des* when influencing human's lives,<sup>70</sup> acting against his aggressors, and interceding with the divine judge on behalf of and protecting the well-being of those who care for his funerary cult. The most clear expression of the belief that the dead could influence peoples' lives are the letters written to a relative that had recently passed away,<sup>71</sup> asking him to emend an unjust situation related to his former life on earth.

The religious beliefs of the individual, as they have been above described, have an almost universal character: (I) all aspects of life are subject to god's will; (II) the future is unknown for mankind, and only god knows what will come; (III) man tries to propitiate the divine by performing cultual acts; (IV) god will judge man's actions in the Hereafter according to an established code of conduct; (V) the deceased's spirit has power to influence on peoples' lives. Despite of their universality, one will be on a better position having these basic ideas in mind (among others, e.g., the king's role in the society) when approaching ancient Egyptian religion, as they provide a more 'human' and 'ordinary' context. At the same time, by recalling the universal or basic beliefs, one perceives the Egyptian religion as

67. On threats see, S. Morschauser, *Threat-Formulae in Ancient Egypt* (Baltimore, 1991); J. Assmann, "When Justice Fails: Jurisdiction and Imprecation in Ancient Egypt and the Near East", *JEA* 78 (1992) 149-55. They both regard the increase of curses in inscriptions after the Amarna age as a sign of the expansion of the concept of divine intervention in mundane affairs. H. Goedicke, "Ankhtyfy's Threat", in Ch. Cannuyer- J.M. Kruchten (eds.), *Individu, société et spiritualité dans l'Égypte pharaonique et copte* (Brussels, 1993) 111-121, points out the significance of the deceased's change of attitude, from threatening with legal prosecution (i.e., judgement by the divine), to the threat of he himself taking action against the transgressor (not attested before the VIth Dynasty).

68. Tomb of Harkhuf; *Urk.* I 122, 14-16. The word translated as "to pull apart", *wḏ*, has also the nuance of "to judge", both sharing the meaning "to separate". The adjective '3 "great" may take the value of a superlative when following *ntr*, "the greatest (god)", as pointed out by Hornung, *op. cit.*, 181; who is responded by J. Baines, "'Greatest god' or category of gods?", *GM* 67 (1983) 13-28. For the expression *m'bw*, cf. E. Blumenthal, "Die 'Reinheit' des Grabschänders", in *Religion und Philosophie*, 47-56.

69. Tomb of Nekhebu; *Urk.* I 218, 2-14 (cf., 219, 3-7); cf. Lichtheim, *Autobiographies*, 13 f.; J. Saint Fare Garnot, "Une graphie fautive du verbe *zbi*", *BIFAO* 37 (1937-38) 63-74; D. Dunham, "The Biographical Inscriptions of Nekhebu in Boston and Cairo", *JEA* 24 (1938) 5 f.

70. Assmann, in *Sprache und Religion*, 688 f.

71. A. H. Gardiner-K. Sethe, *Egyptian Letters to the Dead, mainly from the Old and Middle Kingdom* (London, 1928); G. Fecht, "Der Totenbrief von Nag' ed-Deir", *MDAIK* 24 (1969) 105-28; E. Wente, "A Misplaced Letter to the Dead", *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 6/7 (1975/76) 595-600. See remarks by Baines, *JEA* 73, 85-88; *idem.*, *Society*, 147-48.

being closer to that of other contemporary and neighboring cultures than it is commonly pictured<sup>72</sup> (such is also the case, e.g., with Egypt's political ideology). Indeed, what is peculiar of ancient Egypt, as for any culture, is how these beliefs got into practice and took shape. The expressions of religious beliefs in non-religious texts, for having a diaphanous character, and despite their scarcity,<sup>73</sup> may also help in the understanding of more complex, hermetic and exotic expressions of the 'official religion'.

72. This paper is, in part, the consequence of reading the book by J. López- J. Sanmartín, *Mitología y religión del Oriente Antiguo I, Egipto-Mesopotamia* (Barcelona, 1993).

73. Note Baines, *Society*, 146: "as a result of rules of decorum, there is little relevant evidence from early times, because personal religion and motivation were downplayed in public context".