

A Conceptual Study of the Judgment of the Dead in Ancient Egypt

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The ancient Egyptians are generally known to have been some of the ancient peoples that practiced and spread the afterlife beliefs among the Peoples of the Ancient Near East. The Egyptian views on judgment with respect to temporary or permanent punishment or the feeling of guilt during the afterlife journeys is explained in this research. Literatures that pertained to the ancient Egyptian concept of judgement have been used in the search for their beliefs. The methodologies employed in this research are conceptual and comparative. Using the ancient Egyptian views of punishment in the afterlife with specific interest to the period before Decline, the researchers argued that there is little or no evidence to prove that the Egyptians were responsible for originating a belief in the idea of permanent punishment after being judged in the afterlife. The primary purpose of the research is to elucidate the ancient Egyptian view about the concepts of temporary and eternal punishment in the afterlife.

Keywords: Afterlife, Death, Destiny, Heaven, Judgment, Netherworld, Punishment.

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INTRODUCTION

There is an ongoing controversy among some Christians and non-Christians regarding the idea of temporary and permanent punishment in the afterlife. Also, the ancient Egyptians are known to be one of major spreaders of the beliefs in the afterlife. Their extensive burial rituals, the building of pyramids and other monuments that portrayed their beliefs in life after death have made many to think that the ancient Egyptians originated the afterlife concepts. For example, May (1983) thought that the ancient Egyptians influenced the Canaanites practice of offering food to the dead (May, 1983:70-71) and Spronk (1986) reiterated that "... it is unlikely that the whole Israelite conception of afterlife would have simply been taken over from another religion" (Spronk, 1986:55) which might include Egypt. Lucas (1948) and Lange (2004) are of the opinion that it was the Egyptians that introduced the afterlife beliefs among the West Africans and especially the Yorubas (Lucas, 1948:264; Lange, 2004:40). These researchers concentrated on studying the ancient Egyptian concepts of temporary or eternal punishment in the afterlife. This is necessary in order to determine whether they originated or developed the notion according to which the punishments of the wicked is eternal or temporary in the afterlife.

One of the afterlife concepts is the view according to which the dead shall be judged. The question arises whether the dead found guilty shall be judged towards an eternal or a temporary condemnation. This background motivated the need for this research. The researchers as a result began to find concepts that pertained the Egyptian views of the afterlife. Specifically, the concepts of judgment, punishment, hell and heaven dominated the contents of this research. In order to get to the point of this

research on whether the Egyptians originated the ideas of punishment on the afterlife, the researchers expounded on the factors that qualifies an individual to be judged in the afterlife. The factors looked into included Book of the Dead, letters written to the dead, devotion to earthly leaders and mummification. The researchers argued that these factors were primarily responsible for determining whether the dead would be punished in the afterlife. The researchers explained that these factors made it possible to argue that the Egyptians may not have been responsible for originating the ideas of permanent punishment in the afterlife.

Another conceptual study was relevant. The studies looked into the Egyptian concept of heaven and the netherworld. Their view of the netherworld is mainly determined by the perceptions of the living not the dead. Also, their netherworld seemed not to attract serious punishment in which the dead would have to be condemned forever. This and other reasons made it possible for the researchers to point out that the ancient Egyptians did not originate the concept of permanent punishment in the afterlife.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Death is a natural phenomenon and a major characteristic of all living things. In other words, it is expected that all living things will die and that death marks the end of life¹. Rensburg and Eck also said that death is inevitable (Rensburg and Eck, 2008:1499). Murnane (1992:35) said that the ancient Egyptians were popular for many reasons and one of which is their view about death and the afterlife. They buried their dead using extravagant rituals. The ancient Egyptians are significantly known as major contributors to originating and spreading the concepts of mummification and the afterlife beliefs in the Ancient Near East as noted by Herodotus who circumnavigated Egypt around 457 BCE (Partridge, 1994:10-11).

Additionally, Spronk (1986:88) noted that the ancient Egyptians regarded death as a journey and not the end of life. In other words, the dead was expected to rise or to continue to live after death. The power of the dead to rise was attributed to Osiris who was regarded as the god of resurrection. The Egyptians had a myth according to which Osiris sacrificed himself for all mankind, and that he was betrayed by those he loved. He died and was resurrected and became exalted as the chief judge in the world of the dead: "Osiris was the lord of the underworld, the judge of souls in the afterlife, and the god of fertility, of resurrection and of the renewal of life" (Cain, 2021:1).

It becomes pertinent to inquire about why the Egyptians believed that the dead will be judged in the afterlife. Watson (2022) said that the ancient Egyptians valued ethics and that they knew what was right and wrong. This suggests that they had a societal order knowing what criminal acts were and what were accepted as norms. They knew that lies, blasphemy, murder, theft, adultery and others were sinful or criminals acts that could attract punishment for the person who committed all of these or any of these acts (Watson, 2022:4). Willems (1990) said that when such crimes or other closely related crimes were committed, the Egyptians knew that punishments for crimes were necessary and commensurate according to the crime committed. As punishments, criminals could be banned from participating in religious and social life, social roles could be denied, and the confiscation of the possessions owned by the criminal was conducted by the state in addition to the view according to which the criminal's offerings were not accepted by the gods. A criminal might be denied the right to be buried and when these consequences are due unto a criminal, the Egyptians had a view that these consequences could be equated to having no hope for resurrection or for an afterlife (Willems, 1990:44).

Willems (1990:76) further noted that before and during the dynastic periods, the ancient Egyptians did not separate the state from religion to the point that they thought that disobedience to the state was the same as disobedient to the gods or to their religious tenets. This could be one of the reasons why some of the punishments ascribed to criminals were cruel. At some points, the death penalty became relevant in connection to their justice system (Usmonovna and Kholmurdoyich, 2020). According to Willems (1990:33), the death penalty was a late practice which might have started during the Eighteenth Dynasty, otherwise prior to the Eighteenth Dynasty, there are rare or no text which support the practice of death penalty by the Egyptians. More so, when the death penalty was introduced, the flesh of a child that killed his or her father could be removed and burned or the criminal might be stoned to death. Other practices included beheading, hanging and burying a person alive. High ranking officials could be allowed to commit suicide instead of being killed in public which had been the popular way of carrying out sentences or executions (Usmonovna and Kholmurdoyich, 2020:103). This background study is necessary because it has a role in the ancient Egyptian perception of the concepts of permanent or temporary punishment in the afterlife.

It is important to note that the concepts of judgment and punishment in the afterlife are arguably believed by many ancient religions. One of the views of the Canaanites that pertained to the netherworld is the perception that the netherworld is a dark place for all the dead, surrounded with city walls and where the dead shall never be returned. In other words, the netherworld is perceived as an unpleasant

¹ MadPenguin, (2024). What are the 8 Characteristics of Living Things? <https://www.madpenguin.org/what-are-the-8-characteristics-of-all-living-things/>

place for the dead (Harris 2010:41 cf. Cooper, 1992:25). The ancient Israelites also had a similar perception of the netherworld or Sheol as a place of no return². Ma'súmián and Doermann explained at length that the persecution and the sufferings of the Israelites by the Babylonians and the Persians during the Hellenistic periods influenced their view according to which the wicked needed to be punished in the afterlife (Ma'súmián, 1996:28; Doermann, 1961:295; cf. Craffert, 1999:80). On the subject of temporary or eternal punishment in the afterlife, the origin of the belief is still contested and not clearly known. Yet, the subject is arguably debated among some Christians reason being that some believed in it while others do not. More so, there are Christians that are of the view that the punishment of the wicked is eternal likewise the blessings of the righteous, yet others are of the view that the punishment of the wicked is temporary in the afterlife. Those that believe in eternal punishment of the wicked thought that these biblical passages suggest that the wicked shall be punished eternally (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Isaiah 66:22-24; Daniel 12:1-2; Matthew 18:6-9; Matthew 25:31-46; Mark 9:42-48; Jude 7; Revelation 14:9-11). On the contrary, other Christians do not regard the netherworld or hell as a place of eternal punishment. They thought that God is too merciful to destroy the wicked eternally (Harris 2010:318; cf. Ps. 107:1; 2 Pt. 2:9). Those that believe this argue that even the Jesus of history never taught about eternal punishment in hell for he only came to preach, teach and heal (Harpur, 1991:140). Greg Mores also, argued that the word "eternal" as referenced to the judgement of the dead in the Bible may mean "forever" or "age to come" which to him suggest that the punishment of the wicked is not everlasting (Mores, 2020).

More so, the word "judgment" is ambiguous. It could mean a formed opinion or decision or a wise discretion or reaching a conclusion.³ In law, it suggests "an official decision given by a judge or a Court of Law" (Yusuf, 2016). Abdul Yusuf surmised this idea of judgment when he noted that judgment pertained to 'something unpleasant that happens which seems like a punishment for the things you have done wrong' (Yusuf, 2016:6). Yusuf further noted that judgment meant the verdict or a decision taken by a judge in

a court of law or a tribunal where the views of the plaintiff and that of the claimants are heard and reviewed using factual and available evidence to reach a decision. A judgment could be needed in order to settle disputes between two parties: for example, the defendant and claimant. The power to enforce judgment is given authoritatively to the judiciary through a tribunal or a court of law. A judgement therefore has to be void of doubt. It has to be convincing, where an order or a decree or a recommendation or a sentence is passed:

Therefore, a judgment can be final or interlocutory. A judgment is only final when it is obtained in an action by which an existing liability of the Defendant to the Claimant is determined on merit and vice versa (Yusuf, 2016:6).

For the ancient Egyptians, they believed that for the dead to gain an Osirian resurrection in the afterlife, the individual must be identified with Osiris (James, 1976:156). Osiris was the son of Geb, the sky god and Nut, the earth goddess. He was the first born amongst his siblings Isis, Set and Nephthys and he married his sister Isis. Being the first born and a good person, he became the king of Egypt who was highly respected by all humans that lived on earth and by all the gods that dwelled in the netherworld. Osiris was killed by his brother Set who got jealous of all the accolades Osiris received before the gods and humans. Isis had magical powers which enabled her to raise Osiris from death and Osiris became associated with resurrection and referred to as the god of resurrection (Cain, 2021: 1-2). He had the power to raise and judge the dead (Jordan, 1976:146). Towards the end of the Old Kingdom, the seasonal natural circle of the Egyptian fertile Nile used for agricultural purposes was associated with the power and love of Osiris towards nature and humans. The Egyptians connected the Nile's fertile mud with resurrection attributed to the power of Osiris (Murnane, 1992:36; El-Shahawy, 2005:73).

The ancient Egyptians believed that a deceased person needed to be judged similar to what is found in the features of a modern court of law. From the Egyptian view, the dead would meet forty-two evaluators and judges with Osiris as the chief judge (Willems, 1990:41). The deceased's heart meant the seat of intelligence and was weighed on a scale in the form of a beam balance. It was weighed against the feather of an ostrich which represented the standard for Truth. It was expected that the heart would weigh exactly the same as the feather, but if the heart outweighed the feather, then the soul of the deceased would be expected to be punished. Those who have passed successfully through the Osirian judgment were rewarded and sent to live a joyful life in the Egyptian Heaven (MacGregor, 1992:60).

More so, an example of a court-room judgment as discussed above can be cited in the case between Ani and

² Sheol is known as a place full of distress because of darkness (Jb 15:22; 23; 30; 20:26), slipperiness (Ps 35:6), dread (Am 15:18; 20, Zeph 1:15, Nah 1:8), ignorance (Jb 37:19, Ecc 2:14), dustiness (Jb 17:16; 20:11; 21:26; Ps 30:10), loss (Jb 5:14; 12:25; 19:8), and sin (Pr 2:13). Sheol was regarded as a place that had city gates (Is 38:10) and was divided into chambers (cf. Pr 7:27) and where all the dead lived (Jb 30:23; Is 26:14, Jb 10:21-22, Ps 49:20; Jb 7:9-10).

³ "Judgment," 1995, The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English; <https://www.dictionar.com/browse/judgement>

Tutu, Ani's wife. Their judgment took place in *Ma'at*,⁴ a Hall Court (James, 1976:157). Ani stood before Osiris and his heart was evaluated by the forty-two evaluators. Anubis, the jackal-God of the necropolis who was in charge of the scale, watched over the procession of the judgment and Thoth, the Ibis-headed-God took and kept records of the court procession. The deceased (Ani) denied committing any sin to each of the evaluators until he was finally declared a "true voice," that is, found without guilt. Ani achieved the Osirian resurrection and was finally led to meet with Osiris, the chief judge and the god of resurrection (James, 1976:157).

For the Egyptian afterlife judgment, only one chief judge, Osiris, and other forty-two judges presided over court affairs and the weighing of the deceased heart in addition to his or her confessions are primary in determining whether the deceased shall be declared guilty or not. In ancient Egypt, a deceased might be declared free of sin or not guilty of committing any sin as long as the deceased confesses that he or she is innocent of any sin. This type of confession is refereed as 'negative confessions' because the deceased declared himself or herself innocent (Horn, 1981:4). The services of the chief judge and other judges were not temporary but permanent unlike the case that pertained to modern court judges that do serve temporarily. This research is a study of the role of ancient Egypt in the spread of the beliefs in temporary and permanent punishment in the afterlife.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This research is basically conceptual and comparative. It is conceptual because the researchers relied on explaining relevant concepts to elucidate what the Egyptians regarded as judgment in the afterlife. The researchers also compared the Egyptian views of judgment and punishment in the afterlife with those of the semitic people like the Israelites and the Canaanites. The Christian views of judgment in the afterlife have also been compared with those of the Egyptians. The aim of these comparisons is primarily to give light on the understanding of the ancient Egyptians believed regarding permanent or temporary punishment in the afterlife. The materials used are mainly library literatures where both the conceptual and comparative methods were employed.

⁴ The word *Ma'at* could sometimes be associated with the maintenance of natural order likewise societal norms as it was expected by *Re* (Watson 2010:4) but in this case, it referred to a court-room (James, *An Introduction Ancient Egypt*, 157). In general, the word *ma'at* seemed to have been used in the cult of Osiris and it referred to the positive standard for judgment or the standard for truth (Bernstein, 1993:12).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings in this research pertained to the analyzation of the factors or criteria that determined the fate of the dead in ancient Egypt. These criteria included the Egyptian Book of the Dead, written letters to the dead, devotion to earthly leaders and mummification.

The Egyptian Book of the Dead

The *Egyptian Book of the Dead* which is an ancient Egyptian funerary text also known as "The Book of Coming [or Going] Forth By Day" (James, 1976:13) or "The Book of What is in the Underworld" (Jordan, 1976:150) was first inscribed on the exterior of the deceased's sarcophagus but after a period of time, it was written on a papyrus. The name "The Book of the Dead" was given to these Egyptian funerary texts in the nineteenth century CE by a German Egyptologist, Karl Richard Lepsius, who published some parts of the texts in 1842 (Hubert et al., 1996:39). The Book was written by men who understood the paths of Osiris, and by religious leaders, mediums, and traditional elders who were the custodians of the Egyptian culture. In the New Kingdom and in later times during the ancient Egyptian periods, some Egyptian priests collected together the various religious cults of burial concerning the events of the afterlife passed to them by their ancestors and these collections, on papyrus, are called "Book of the Dead." The Book was written and used by many Egyptians and there are many copies of the Book (Jordan, 1976:150).

More so, parts of the Egyptian Book of the Dead were written in chapters which are not necessarily patterned according to the contents or context. The dead were normally buried together with the Book close to the coffin but since the sixteenth century BCE when the Hyksos came into power, The Book of the Dead was no longer kept in the grave beside the coffin but was put inside the coffin (Bernstein, 1993:13). One of the major objectives of the Book was to guide the soul of the deceased towards his or her journey to the netherworld. Siegfried H. Horn said that the Egyptian Book of the Dead is a "document that describes the experiences that the deceased would have upon reaching the underworld. It also contains the "formulas to use in facing one's judges upon entering the underworld" (Horn, 1981:4).

According to the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the *Ba* or *soul* of a deceased was expected to travel to paradise after bodily death through the routes in the netherworld. The Book described how the *Ba* was expected to travel up on a boat to the sea to meet with Osiris but, on passing through the Milky Way, the soul would have to encounter turbulent and difficult events. For example, the *Ba* would meet monsters and deadly creatures that would torment him or her but the Book of the Dead had secrets on how the deceased soul could escape from the monstrous beings found in the underworld. On calling the names of each of the monsters as written in the Book of the Dead, the deceased would be set free.

Finally, the *Ba* would have to come across forty-two celestial deities who would lead it through seven gates with a gate Keeper, Watcher and a Herald at each gate. The *Ba* would have to call the names of these Keepers, Watchers and Heralds from the Book of the Dead. When the *Ba* successfully called the names of these guardian deities, the *Ba* would then be directed into the presence of Osiris thus gained salvation (Turner, 1993:13). The function of the Egyptian Book of the Dead is dualistic. At some instances, it was meant to assist important personalities and at other instances, it was meant to assist all kinds of people during the afterlife journeys (Jordan, 1976:150).

It is important to note that the Egyptian Book of the Dead illustrates the Egyptian mythologies surrounding the journeys of the dead and describes what would happen to a deceased in the afterlife. The Book of the Dead served as a kind of an amulet aimed at helping the deceased's soul pass through a successful evaluation of human deeds in the afterlife by certain judges (Bernstein, 1993:13). The Book of the Dead could also prevent the judgment of the heart by cautioning the deceased heart from declaring utterances against the deceased. As a result, there was no reason to condemn the deceased to the second death (Spronk, 1986:95). In other words, grace or salvation in the afterlife was made a little bit easier by the confessions of the deceased. All that the deceased was required to do was to open his or her mouth to say that he or she did not commit certain abominable acts or sin or crime. Siegfried H. Horn cited an example of such confessions that was required to be made by a deceased in order to declare himself or herself guiltless before Osiris the chief judge:

I have not blasphemed a god.
 I have not done violence to a poor man.
 I have not done that which the gods abominate.
 I have not killed.
 I have neither increased nor diminished the grain-measure.
 I have not added to the weight of the balance.
 I have not committed evil.
 I have not stolen.
 I have not been covetous.
 I have not told lies.
 I have not committed adultery (Horn 1981:4).⁵

The Egyptian Book of the Dead was mostly used during the Old Kingdom Period (2650-2150 BCE) through the periods of the rise of Solar religion (James, 1976:156) or The New Kingdom (c. 1580-1090) (Bernstein, 1993:13). The rise of Solar religion enhanced the cult of Osiris and allowed men and women of all ranks to gain salvation in accordance with

an individual's choice and not necessarily by relying upon a king's choice. The Egyptian Book of the Dead contained inscriptions pertaining to the top secrets of Osiris, prescribing specific ways for attaining the salvation of a deceased in the afterlife (James, 1976:156) which took the form of a spell that ensured success for the deceased in his or her afterlife journeys. An official of the late Old Kingdom stated: 'I am an effective spirit who knows his magic spells; and I know the spells of ascending to the Great God, the lord of heaven' (Murnane, 1992:41). The Book was sometimes equated to a spell simply because it had some magical abilities to release the dead into a better destiny in the otherworld.

Written Letters to the Dead

Another Egyptian tradition promotes the view according to which dead corpses in ancient Egypt were thought to be powerful or supreme. Letters begging the dead not to harm the living were written and buried together with the deceased. Some of the letters found in tombs were written for a number of reasons some of which was to beg the deceased spirit to be gentle to the living or to direct the deceased person towards the good paths of the netherworld which the deceased had to pass before arriving in heaven. Because of the power ascribed to the dead, the ancient Egyptians appealed for protection, help, guidance and good fortune from the deceased through committed, continual, extensive and expensive funerary offerings (Spronk, 1986:93).

The letters written to the dead are not exactly the same as the Egyptian Book of the Dead because the letters were directed at begging the dead to be good to the living while the Egyptian Book of the Dead was directed at helping the dead to find success in the journeys through the world of the dead. The similarity between the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the ordinary letters written to the dead is that both writings were used as spells in directing the dead in the afterlife. Both the letters and the Egyptian Book of the Dead were kept in the grave. For those Egyptians who failed to experience the Osirian resurrection or had no support or guide from the Book of the Dead or who failed to be reincarnated, their destiny was to temporarily be in the netherworld (cf. Spronk, 1986:88-89, 95).

Devotion to Earthly Leaders

For the ancient Egyptians, having faith in the gods alone was not the standard for attaining salvation, rather to be saved in the afterlife meant devotion to their earthly patrons like their kings and leaders (Rensburg and Eck, 2008:1510). During the late New Kingdom and throughout the Period of Decline, the regard for Egyptian leaders and their role in the afterlife declined. Jordan (1986:147) presumed that it was probably during these periods that ideas about guilt, fear, judgment,

⁵ Horn, Sin and Judgement, 4, originally from John A. Wilson in Pritchard, op. at, pp. 34, 35.

and punishment in the afterlife emerged in ancient Egypt.⁶ It is important to note that the ancient Egyptian kings were charged with the responsibility of maintaining the natural order of creation as created by *Re* and they were regarded as the representatives and incarnates of *Re* on earth. Acts of rebellion against the laws of natural order which meant obedience to earthly leaders were to be punished in the afterlife (Watson, 2022:3-4).

The ancient Egyptians were optimistic about an afterlife and, until the end of the Old Kingdom, blissfulness in the afterlife was meant strictly for kings, leaders and the wealthy and influential privileged people of ancient Egypt. The belief in the democratization of the afterlife for all citizens also began at the end of the Old Kingdom through the Period of Decline (Jordan, 1976:146). It was also during these periods that Egyptians began to doubt ideas concerning resurrection and judgment in the afterlife. For example, during the Period of Decline, there was pessimism and skepticism on whether death was a journey to the otherworld or the end of life, so the Egyptians of this period began to think that it was better to value life on earth than in the afterlife (Spronk, 1986:68; Davies, 1999:58-59). In addition, a scribe's instructional papyrus of Late Period times indicates how the human soul seeks answers to the problem of afterlife or judgment in the hereafter by questioning the great creator-God Atum:

Soul: O Atum, what does it mean that I must go into the wilderness (of death)? It has no water, it has no air, it is very deep, very dark and boundless.

Atum: You will live there without care in a land of silence.

Soul: But one cannot find there the satisfaction of love-making.

Atum: I have put blessedness in the place of water, air and love-making; and peace of mind in the place of bread and beer (Jordan, 1976:147).

Before the period of Decline, kings had the powers to assist the deceased to gain salvation or not to face judgment in the afterlife. It is not surprising that servants and slaves to kings were willing to die and be buried alongside a deceased king so that he or she could help them gain salvation in the otherworld (Schwantes, 1969:63).

Mummification

Mummification of the deceased body can help the deceased to gain salvation in the afterlife. This is so because mummification was sometimes equated with "moral justification"

⁶ Jordan (1976:147) taught that the idea of judgment in relation to guilt and fear in the afterlife is not typical of the Egyptian spirit.

without which the deceased would not resurrect. Mummification was a form of justification (making the deceased right with God) that gave the deceased direct access to be resurrected or even go to heaven "[t]hese two concepts, mummification and justification, are intimately linked" (Mark, 2008:2-3). Mark further emphasized that mummification could be equated to making a deceased righteous because the ritual enabled the dead to meet and be equated with Osiris:

At the end of the embalming rites, having been returned to life and freed from imputation of wrongdoing, the deceased was endowed with an Osirian-aspect. In fact, the performance of such rites was sometimes described as "giving an Osiris to" someone. Many Egyptian texts for the afterlife are addressed or refer to "the Osiris of" an individual – that aspect or from which the dead person acquired through the efficacy of the rituals performed for his benefit in the embalming place, and in which he was supposed to endure for the rest of eternity (Mark, 2008:3).

Mummification was necessitated to enable the body resurrect and interact with both the spirit world and the physical world: "Ba visited the upper world during the day and went back to the body at night" (Garland, 2020:6). Mummification was done to make the body look "normal" in this world and in the otherworld (Spronk, 1986:93). It can therefore be said that mummification is a form of judgment of the dead that declared the dead absolutely righteous and not guilty of any crime or sin.

The discussion in this research pertained to the concepts of the destinies of the dead. The subject studied included the concepts of the netherworld and heaven.

The Netherworld

The exact location and nature of the Egyptian netherworld is still under debate and this is so because many authors gave various views on what they think the netherworld meant for the Egyptians. Eileen Gardiner noted that the netherworld is mostly associated with an underground or the underworld somewhere down the earth (Gardiner, 2015:1). Bernstein said that the Egyptians believed that the netherworld, or Tuat, was not necessarily located beneath the earth but was located somewhere around the earth and he could not say exactly where on earth (Bernstein, 1993:14). Spronk taught that the ancient Egyptians regarded the netherworld with horror and as a place of discomfort that had probably seven gates⁷ and that these gates were each thought to be guarded

⁷ This is as evident from the function of the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

by a gate Keeper, Watcher, a Herald and a god (Spronk, 1986:88). The route to the netherworld was perceived to be full of danger, hardship, hunger, thirst and darkness and this could perhaps be the reason why *Re* was thought to be a provider of light in the netherworld (Davies, 1999:27).

In addition, John Watson described the Egyptian netherworld as a place of immeasurable suffering to the point that the dead were punished to a seeming non-existent: “[t]hey were deprived of their sense organs, were required to walk on their heads and eat their own excrement. They were burnt in ovens and cauldrons and were forced to swim in their own blood, which Shezmu, the god of the wine press, squeezed out of them” (Watson, 2022:2). Although it took longer for a deceased to be helped by *Re* to get to the place of eternal life, the netherworld was not a place of a continual or permanent punishment, as Davies said: “of any Egyptian doctrine of a final catastrophe there is no record” (Davies, 1999:27).

Further information about the Egyptian netherworld can be obtained from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* where it has been portrayed that the netherworld was a place of terror with demons and monsters. An example that demonstrates the perception of the netherworld as a place of no return in ancient Egypt can be described by an interaction between Osiris and Atum.⁸ Atum was required to stay in the netherworld while Osiris was taken to Heaven to be like a god with the stars and to be like *Re*. But Osiris was worried that he would never meet with Atum again. This story suggests that the Egyptian netherworld was regarded as a place of no return (particularly to the physical world in human bodily form) unless the help of the gods were obtained (Spronk, 1986:88-89, 95).

Leaders, kings and wealthy people of ancient Egypt were thought not to be part of the netherworld experiences. Kings were thought to be representatives of gods on earth, they were not subject to the punishments of the netherworld and this was why an Egyptian king was regarded as “the one who does not go down” to the netherworld (Bernstein, 1993:12) and a Pharaoh was regarded as one “of those who are not punished and not found guilty of crime” (Bernstein, 1993:12). An important idea about the Egyptian netherworld is that it was regarded as a kind of an intermediate state where the suffering of the deceased was temporary.⁹

⁸ Atum was one of the gods of Heliopolitan cosmology who was thought to be the first creation to have emerged from the waters of Nun. In later times, Atum was associated with *Re*, the sun god, and was considered as the setting sun. In much later times, he became associated with *Ptah* and finally with Osiris.

⁹ There were no thoughts of the netherworld as a place with different degrees of punishment depending on the deceased’s moral life on earth, and there was also no idea of purgatory as a place where the deceased was allowed to repent in ancient Egypt (cf. Watson 2010:2-5).

In addition, the netherworld for them remained a route that needed to be passed by all those who died except kings and other leaders. The journeys through the netherworld had been described as difficult or a form of punishment and seemingly the most important punishment otherwise the Egyptians rarely nursed a view that there was a place of permanent punishment for the deceased. They had fewer or no cases of people being condemned after being judged by Osiris except for people that were divinely cursed or were sick beyond cure before they died (Horn, 1981:4). An example can be cited by a mortuary text of a blind person who admitted of a guilt because he took a false oath while he was alive: “I am a man who swore falsely by Ptah, lord of truth; and he caused me to behold darkness by day. I will declare his might to him that knows him not, [sic]And to him that knows him, to[o] little and great: Bye ye [a]ware of Ptah, lord of truth!”¹⁰ In other words, with the exception of those that were likely cursed who may incur the same consequences in the netherworld, heaven was seemingly automatic for all sundry.

Heaven

Generally, the ancient Egyptians believed that Heaven or Paradise was a good place meant for the blessed dead whose heart did not outweigh the feather in the judgment seat of Osiris (Murnane, 1992:43). They believed that Heaven was located in the east, a place where the sun rises every day and they associated Heaven with the morning star (Spronk, 1986:89). They also believed that in Heaven, kings and leaders would play the same social role as they did on earth and plots would be allocated to kings where servants would continue to farm (Murnane, 1992:43). It was assumed that in ancient Egyptian Heaven, there would be a continuation of the earthly kind of normal life except that laborers or servants would continue to labor or serve, albeit at more ease, compared to their heavy duties while on earth. In addition, the Egyptian Heaven was associated with agricultural fields *Earu* or *Sekher-Aaron* (field of Reeds) where a large harvest was expected (MacGregor, 1992:60-610). Ancient Egyptians paralleled agriculture in Heaven to agriculture in the Nile valley except that the harvest in Heaven would be bountiful compared to the harvest in the Nile valley (Murnane, 1992:43).

Egyptians believed that in Heaven crops ‘as high as man’ would be grown and that this blissful place (Heaven) was full of water canals for irrigation. They believed that there would be ‘bread and beer of eternity’ in Heaven. The inhabitants of Heaven were thought to be the spirits of deceased kings, their loyal servants, and those who successfully passed through the judgment headed by Osiris. Before

¹⁰ Horn (1981:5) originally from Gunn, B., 1916, “The Religion of the Poor in Ancient Egypt,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, vol. 3, p.88.

the Period of Decline, it was thought that those loyal to the king, including his family members, would be saved depending on the king's prerogatives (MacGregor, 1992:60-61). However, after the Middle Kingdom, the Heavenly rights were extended to all those who could financially or materially afford them (Jordan, 1976:146).

Finally, it is important to note that when a person dies, the ancient Egyptians believed that the dead went on a journey. The journeys led the deceased to heaven or to the netherworld. Assuming that a deceased made it to *Sekhet Aaru* or Field of Rushes (a farm in Heaven where there was comfort) with his or her new body *sahu*, this did not mark the end of the deceased's suffering. Egyptians believed that there were wild animals and reptiles in *Sekhet Aaru* so the deceased still needed to use the *Book of the Dead* to protect himself or herself from crocodiles, snakes, giant beetles, suffocation from insufficient ventilation, decaying and being forced to eat feces (Turner, 1993:14-15). To be a farmer at the Field of Rushes was also believed to be an unfavorable destiny for the dead because Egyptians thought that there was no air in the Field of Rushes. However, a deceased might find another region of the Field of Rushes that was highly favorable for agricultural production, happiness, less suffering and with every good comfort including sexual gratification (Turner, 1993:14-15).

CONCLUSION

For the ancient Egyptians, it can be said that they valued or loved life here on earth because they had a view according to which the way they lived here shall be repeated exactly in heaven or enroute the netherworld. Earthly social roles shall be continued in the afterlife. Servants shall continue to serve while kings shall continue to be kings in the afterlife. It is not surprising that the Egyptians were not afraid of death, reason being that their view of punishment in the afterlife had never been for total annihilation but a preparation to enter into heaven to continue to serve their leaders as *Shabtis* or *Ushabtis*.

The Egyptians were not or were less concerned about the punishment in the afterlife in tandem with their behaviors while on earth. They were more devoted to their ethos, customs, values and rules not primarily because they feared being judged or punished in the afterlife but because they saw it necessary to honor their leaders and live a good lifestyle which was hoped to be continued in the afterlife. Besides, it seemed the *Book of the Dead* and the *Letters Written to Dead* were orchestrated by humans without the influence of the gods or spirits and seemed devotion to their earthly leaders together with mummification were strictly done by humans, the motives behind these beliefs and practices made it possible to speculate, that these criterion which guaranteed the dead automatic entrance into heaven suggest that humans had a seemingly greater role to play

than the gods in determining the final destinies of the dead.

Also, the confessions made by a deceased during judgment made it easier for the dead to ascend to heaven seemed all that was required was for the deceased to declare himself or herself innocent. Finally, it is important to note that the activities of the bereaved over the dead and the choice of the deceased to comply with societal and religious norms during his or her lifetime is primary in determining a successful judgment in the afterlife. The researchers noted that activities such as using the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, writing letters to the deceased, committed devotion to earthly leaders and the rituals of mummification eased the deceased journey to a more relaxed afterlife in heaven. It seemed their heaven and netherworld are determined by the role played among the living. This made it possible to insinuate that they had no or little regard for punishment in the afterlife and the permanent punishment in the afterlife may not have originated from them.

Conflict of interests

The author(s) declares no conflict of interest.

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