

on Earth. As the embodiment of the union of Upper and Lower Egypt, the king was likewise the personification on Earth of the goddess *Ma'at*, whose name meant "what is right." In other words, the god-king of Egypt *was* truth, law, and justice.

The state that resulted from the union of Egypt's two lands enjoyed about 3,000 years of unparalleled prosperity and stability. Between approximately 3100 and 343 B.C.E. Egypt experienced only a handful of relatively short-lived periods of either major internal turmoil and the consequent breakdown of central authority or domination by foreign powers. This long history of centralized monarchy and native rule was due in large part to the blessings of geography. Egypt was fairly secure behind its barriers of sea and desert, and the Nile's annual flooding was normally predictable and usually beneficial.

The sense of security that followed from these geographical and historical circumstances was reflected in much of ancient Egypt's religion, philosophy, and arts. At the same time, codes of law, which figure so prominently in the historical records of Mesopotamia, are not to be found in the literature of ancient Egypt. Though the Egyptians were equally concerned with maintaining a well-ordered society, their avenue to this goal differed greatly from that of the Mesopotamians.

The Search for Eternal Life in Egypt



3 ▼ *THREE MORTUARY TEXTS*

Historians have traditionally divided the first 2,000 years of Egyptian civilization into six ages: the Early Dynastic Period (ca. 3100–2600 B.C.E.); the Old Kingdom (ca. 2600–2125); the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2125–2025); the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2060–1700); the Second Intermediate Period, or Age of the Hyksos (ca. 1700–1550); and the New Kingdom, or Empire (ca. 1550–1069).

The *Early Dynastic Period* was Egypt's era of initial unification and state-building under the guidance of its first three royal dynasties. The *Old Kingdom* that followed centered on Egypt's god-kings, whose mummified remains were reverently entombed in pyramids in preparation for the journey to eternal life in the *Land of the West*. During this age, Egyptians believed (or at least the priests taught) that immortality was the exclusive preserve of the divine pharaoh, members of the royal family, the priests, and a handful of favored royal servants. They further believed that in order to insure the king's safe journey to the afterlife, all that was needed was proper attention to the many details of the royal funeral ceremony. Beginning with the entombment of King Unas, who died around 2345 B.C.E., Egyptians carved magical incantations on the walls of royal burial chambers as a means of assuring the king's safe journey into eternal life. Modern scholars have discovered and catalogued over 750 distinct incantations, which they term collectively the *Pyramid Texts*. We do not know what the Egyptians called them, but regardless, they provide a privileged view of funeral practices and beliefs regarding immortality during the Old Kingdom. Our first selection comes from the tomb of King Teti, who followed Unas to the throne.

Ancient Egyptians continued to bury their dead with great ceremony for thousands of years and intermittently constructed pyramids throughout their long history. None, however, reached the monumentality and engineering excellence of the massive pyramids at Giza, near Cairo, which entombed several kings of the Fourth Dynasty (about 2600–2500 B.C.E.). For over 4,500 years they have served as tokens of the power wielded by early Egypt's god-kings. The reign of Pepi II (ca. 2275–2185 B.C.E.) marked the end of the Old Kingdom. Shortly after Pepi's death, pharaonic power collapsed, plunging Egypt into an era of internal turmoil known as the *First Intermediate Period*. A century later this age of local rule and social upheaval gave way to the *Middle Kingdom*, an era of revived central authority and of a deepening awareness of social justice and personal moral responsibility. Befitting the new spirit, many Egyptians came to view eternal life as available to all Egyptians who met certain criteria.

A new body of funerary inscriptions appeared, which scholars today refer to as the *Coffin Texts*. The texts, usually inscribed within the wooden coffins of people who could afford elaborate funerals, were ritual resurrection spells. Some were modeled upon the earlier *Pyramid Texts*, but most were new and displayed an obsession with the dangers of Earth and the terrors of death that was lacking in the pyramid inscriptions. Despite their hope in a blissful afterlife, Egyptians were not immune to the miseries and fears, especially fear of disaster and death, that beset all humans.

Our second selection is a much-used coffin spell that takes the form of a two-part speech. In the first part the sun-god Re speaks, reminding humanity of his four good deeds at the time of creation. In the second part the deceased speaks, laying his claim on eternal life.

The process of widening access to the afterlife evolved to another level with the creation of *The Book of the Dead*. This is the modern name for a collection of papyrus texts that the Egyptians knew as *The Chapters for Coming Forth by Day*. Although it did not reach its final form until around the sixth century B.C.E., this collection of chapters was largely a creation of the New Kingdom. Like the pyramid and coffin inscriptions from which it evolved, it was a body of magical incantations for use in burial ceremonies, but unlike the pyramid and coffin inscriptions, it had a fairly standardized text. It was also available to a larger but still necessarily prosperous clientele. Divided into more than 150 chapters, which were gathered together into papyrus scrolls, the book had a certain mass-produced quality. One could purchase a scroll, fill in the name of the deceased, and bury it with the person's body. Resurrection had become a cut-rate enterprise.

Of all the chapters, the most famous is Chapter 125, the lengthy "Judgment of the Dead," from which we have extracted the *The Negative Confession*. The scene is the Hall of the Two Truths, or the Double Ma'at, where *Osiris*, king of the Underworld, presides over an assembly of forty-two minor deities. It is these forty-two who judge the deceased's suitability to become an eternally blessed spirit. Upon entering the hall, the deceased (N, or fill in the name) proclaims her or his purity.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What are the underlying assumptions of King Teti's pyramid text?
2. According to the coffin text, how does a person guarantee eternal life?
3. Consider the speech of Re. Does it contain a moral element? If so, how is that message connected, if at all, with the dead person's spell?
4. One scholar has written of the *Coffin Texts*: "Because the individuals who were seeking an afterlife as divine beings stood outside of the royal circle, their coffin inscriptions reflected both paranoid fear and delusions of grandeur." Do you agree or disagree?
5. What does *The Negative Confession* allow us to infer about Egyptian values in the New Kingdom?
6. Each of the three texts provides a path to eternal life. What do their similarities and differences suggest about continuities and changes within Egyptian society over this millennium?
7. Compare these three texts with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. What are their different messages? What do those messages suggest about the differences between the two civilizations?

A PYRAMID TEXT

Oho! Oho! Rise up, O Teti!
 Take your head,
 Collect your bones,
 Gather your limbs,
 Shake the earth from your flesh!
 Take your bread that rots not,
 Your beer that sours not,
 Stand at the gates that bar the common people!
 The gatekeeper comes out to you,
 He grasps your hand,
 Takes you into heaven, to your father Geb.¹
 He rejoices at your coming,
 Gives you his hands,
 Kisses you, caresses you,
 Sets you before the spirits, the imperishable
 stars.
 The hidden ones worship you,
 The great ones surround you,
 The watchers wait on you.
 Barley is threshed for you,
 Emmen is reaped for you,

¹The god of Earth and father of Osiris, the god of resurrection and king of the dead.

²The deities who accompany Re as he sails daily across the sky (note 9).

Your monthly feasts are made with it,
 Your half-month feasts are made with it,
 As ordered done for you by Geb, your father,
 Rise up, O Teti, you shall not die!

A COFFIN TEXT

Words spoken by Him-whose-names-are-hidden, the All-Lord, as he speaks before those who silence the storm, in the sailing of the court:²

Hail in peace! I repeat to you the good deeds which my own heart did for me from within the serpent-coil,³ in order to silence strife. I did four good deeds within the portal of lightland:

I made the four winds, that every man might breathe in his time. This is one of the deeds.

I made the great inundation,⁴ that the humble might benefit by it like the great. This is one of the deeds.

I made every man like his fellow; and I did not command that they do wrong. It is their hearts that disobey what I have said. This is one of the deeds.

³The serpent-dragon Apophis, a mythic symbol of the lurking dangers in the world.

⁴The annual flooding of the Nile.

I made that their hearts are not disposed to forget the West,⁵ in order that sacred offerings be made to the gods of the nomes.⁶ This is one of the deeds.

I have created the gods from my sweat, and the people from the tears of my eye.

The Dead Speaks

I⁷ shall shine and be seen every day as a dignitary of the All-Lord, having given satisfaction to the Weary-hearted.⁸

I shall sail rightly in my bark,⁹ I am lord of eternity in the crossing of the sky.

I am not afraid in my limbs, for Hu and Hike¹⁰ overthrow for me that evil being.

I shall see lightland, I shall dwell in it. I shall judge the poor and the wealthy.

I shall do the same for the evil-doers; for mine is life, I am its lord, and the scepter will not be taken from me.

I have spent a million years with the Weary-hearted, the son of Geb, dwelling with him in one place; while hills became towns and towns hills, for dwelling destroys dwelling.

I am lord of the flame who lives on truth; lord of eternity, maker of joy, against whom that worm shall not rebel.

I am he who is in his shrine, master of action who destroys the storm; who drives off the serpents of many names when he goes from his shrine.

Lord of the winds who announces the north-wind, rich in names in the mouth of the Ennead.¹¹

Lord of lightland, maker of light, who lights the sky with his beauty.

I am he in his name! Make way for me, that I may see Nun¹² and Amun!¹³ For I am that equipped spirit who passes by the guards.¹⁴ They do not speak for fear of Him-whose-name-is-hidden, who is in my body. I know him, I do not ignore him! I am equipped and effective in opening his portal!

As for any person who knows this spell, he will be like Re in the eastern sky, like Osiris in the netherworld. He will go down to the circle of fire, without the flame touching him ever!

THE NEGATIVE CONFESSION

(1) To be said on reaching the Hall of the Two Truths¹⁵ so as to purge N of any sins committed and to see the face of every god:

Hail to you, Great God, Lord of the Two Truths!

I have come to you, my Lord,

I was brought to see your beauty.

I know you, I know the names of the forty-two gods,

Who are with you in the Hall of the Two Truths.

Who live by warding off evildoers,

Who drink of their blood,

On that day of judging characters before Wennofer.¹⁶

Lo, your name is "He-of-Two-Daughters,"

⁵The Land of the Resurrected Dead.

⁶The forty-two religious and administrative districts into which Egypt was divided. Note that the dead person is being judged by forty-two deities.

⁷The dead person now becomes the speaker, assuming the identity of Re.

⁸One of Osiris's titles. One must first satisfy Osiris before joining Re.

⁹Re sails across the sky in a bark, or boat.

¹⁰Personifications of effective speech and magic, they are probably a reference to this magical spell, which has been uttered at entombment and carved in the coffin.

¹¹The company of Egypt's nine chief deities.

¹²The watery void outside of the temporal and spatial

boundaries of creation from which the creator emerged, Nun was personified as the god of the Abyss.

¹³A primeval god who existed as a force before creation, he became the chief god of Thebes. He rose to preeminence in Egypt when the princes of Thebes reunited Egypt after the Second Intermediate Period.

¹⁴The guards to the Land of the West.

¹⁵Ma'at takes a dual form here in Isis, goddess of Right, and Nephthys, goddess of Truth. Isis was the sister and wife of Osiris. It was she who brought the dead and dismembered Osiris back to life, thereby assuring his status as god of resurrection and king of the Underworld. Nephthys, also Osiris's sister, had assisted in his resurrection.

¹⁶One of Osiris's names.

(And) "He-of-Ma'at's-Two-Eyes."

Lo, I come before you,
Bringing Ma'at to you,
Having repelled evil for you.

I have not done crimes against people,
I have not mistreated cattle,
I have not sinned in the Place of Truth.¹⁷
I have not known what should not be
known,¹⁸

I have not done any harm.
I did not begin a day by exacting more than
my due,

My name did not reach the bark of the
mighty ruler.¹⁹

I have not blasphemed a god,
I have not robbed the poor.
I have not done what the god abhors,
I have not maligned a servant to his master.
I have not caused pain,
I have not caused tears.

I have not killed,
I have not ordered to kill,
I have not made anyone suffer.
I have not damaged the offerings in the
temples,
I have not depleted the loaves of the gods,
I have not stolen the cakes of the dead.²⁰

¹⁷He has not sinned in any holy place.

¹⁸Secrets of the gods.

¹⁹As he sails across the sky in his bark, Re has not heard of
any misdeeds by the deceased.

I have not copulated nor defiled myself.²¹
I have not increased nor reduced the
measure, . . .

I have not cheated in the fields.
I have not added to the weight of the balance,
I have not falsified the plummet of the scales.
I have not taken milk from the mouth of
children,

I have not deprived cattle of their pasture.
I have not snared birds in the reeds of the
gods,

I have not caught fish in their ponds.

I have not held back water in its season,

I have not dammed a flowing stream,

I have not quenched a needed fire.

I have not neglected the days of meat
offerings,

I have not detained cattle belonging to the
god,

I have not stopped a god in his procession.

I am pure, I am pure,

I am pure, I am pure! . . .

No evil shall befall me in this land,

In this Hall of the Two Truths;

For I know the names of the gods in it,

The followers of the great God!

²⁰Food to accompany the dead on their journey.

²¹Presumably, in a holy place.

Another Side of Egyptian Life

4. A CRIB INCANTATION and TWO LOVE SONGS

A cursory examination of the Egyptian funerary monuments, sarcophaguses, and mummified bodies that fill museums might lead a person to conclude that ancient Egyptians spent their lives obsessing about death. Certainly the previous source might also seem to support that judgment. The brief pieces that appear here allow us to put that supposed Egyptian preoccupation with death into a fuller perspective.