JUDGMENT AFTER DEATH
(NEGATIVE CONFESSION)

المحاكمه بعد الموت (إعتراف سلبى)

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According to Egyptian funerary beliefs, judgment after death was a process the deceased had to undergo in order to become “justified” and thus qualify for entrance into the hereafter. In this sense judgment can be considered to have been an initiation ritual. From the Middle Kingdom onward, judgment comprised a series of “posthumous” trials set in various Egyptian cities of particular mythic and cultic significance (featured in The Book of the Dead, spells 18 and 20, with precursors in the Coffin Texts and other Middle Kingdom sources). These trials, based upon the mythological judgment and subsequent justification of Osiris, constituted a model for each deceased’s justification. The most popular concept of judgment after death was expressed in BD spell 125, which supplied both the relevant text to be recited (including the “negative confession” proper) and a depiction of the judgment scene. First attestations of BD spell 125 do not predate the New Kingdom; we therefore have good reason to assume that the concept of judgment after death was not fully developed before that period. However, there are precursors in the Coffin Texts, which themselves may have precursors reaching as far back as the Old Kingdom (based on the discovery of Pyramid Texts containing spells that were previously known only from Middle Kingdom coffins).

The roots of the belief in judgment after death possibly lie in the addresses to visitors found in tombs of the 4th Dynasty. Some of these texts threaten entrants who violate the ritual purity of the tomb or mortuary cult with...
a judgment in the hereafter before the Great God. Certain elements of the belief, such as the scale upon which the heart (or other body part) of the deceased would be weighed in judgment, are present in the Coffin Texts. The concept of judgment after death first appears fully developed, however, in Book of the Dead papyri of the New Kingdom and is depicted as such in the relevant vignettes therein. BD spell 125 has survived in numerous copies, chiefly in cursive hieroglyphs and hieratic, but a demotic version (dated to 63 CE by its colophon) is also known.

The vignette of the judgment after death, attested from the mid-18th Dynasty onward, gives us an idea of the actual trial procedures. Although its association with Book of the Dead spell 125 is well known, the vignette is also found in accompaniment to other BD spells associated with the judgment. After the New Kingdom, the representation is found in a variety of contexts—coffins, shabti chests, mummy bandages, shrouds, and in one instance, a relief in the small Ptolemaic temple of Deir el-Medina. Although the set of figures displayed in the judgment scene changes over time, a typical representation comprises the introduction of the deceased to the judgment hall by a deity (Anubis, Thoth, Maat, or the Goddess of the West); a scale on which the deceased’s heart is weighed against a feather (the symbol of maat: cosmic order and justice); a devourer (a beast that is part lion, part crocodile, and part hippopotamus), who stands by, ready to eat the heart of—and thereby annihilate—the sinful deceased; Thoth, who records the result in writing; and the enthroned Osiris, presiding as chief judge. All or some of a group of 42 judges are also shown. Abbreviated versions of the vignette exist, as well as more elaborate depictions.

According to its title, BD spell 125 is to be recited by the deceased when entering the judgment hall. It is intended to ensure that the individual will pass through the judgment phase and be found ethically worthy to enter the realm of Osiris. To this end, the deceased claims to know the names of the judges and asserts his purity. As the knowledge he displays reveals familiarity with cults, rituals, and cult topography, it presents him as one who is versed in religious matters. In the spell’s main section, the deceased addresses each of the 42 judges by his name and cult center. Each address is followed by the deceased’s denial of having committed a specific sin, hence the term “negative confession.” The 42 negative confessions confirm the speaker’s equanimity—that is, they confirm that his behavior did not undermine or disturb the societal peace (for example, through theft, adultery, murder, or adding to the balance) and that he acted according to the cultic prescriptions, such as that of respecting the cultic chastity. Together with Egyptian instructions that parallel BD spell 125, and autobiographical texts that commemorate the achievements of individuals of the Egyptian elite, the negative confession is a major source of ancient Egyptian ethical standards. A life lived in accordance with these standards was a life lived according to maat. Over the more than 1500 years of the spell’s tradition, the set of negative confessions remained remarkably stable, varying from (BD) manuscript to manuscript only in sequence. Variations are particularly noticeable between the redactions of the New Kingdom, Third Intermediate Period, and Late Period, where it is apparent, at least in some cases, that scribes had re- or misinterpreted words or phrases when copying.

Some scholars have suggested that BD spell 125 is an adaptation of the oaths of purity sworn by priests during their initiations. This suggestion is prompted by the texts of two priestly oaths whose structure and content are reminiscent of the negative confession of BD 125. The oaths, however, are written in Greek on papyri of Roman date. It has been argued that the recent discovery that the oaths are in fact translations from Egyptian constitutes further support for the suggestion. The oaths’ Egyptian version is contained in the so-called Book of the Temple, a manual on the ideal Egyptian temple. However, there are no known manuscripts of The Book of the Temple.
that predate the Roman Period. Therefore, the
text might be much younger than the first
witnesses of BD spell 125, although a Middle
Kingdom date for the Egyptian priestly oaths
has been advocated on the basis of The Book of
the Temple’s Middle Egyptian grammar. This
dating method has not been unanimously
accepted by Egyptologists; thus it cannot be
definitely excluded that there is a reverse
dependence, i.e., that the priestly oaths are, in
fact, adaptations of BD spell 125. The known
and available Egyptian sources do not
presently allow a decisive conclusion, but it
can be stated that there is a relationship
between ritual texts pertaining to the temple
context and texts that were used for funerary
rituals, or as mortuary compositions.

The concept of judgment after death
appears in sources other than The Book of the
Dead. In The Book of Gates, for example, first
attested in King Horemheb’s tomb (KV 57),
the judgment hall of Osiris is featured. There
the judgment process is conceptualized as
being complexly linked to the solar journey
through the netherworld, during which the
sun god is vindicated, thus providing a model
for the deceased. There are also references to
a judgment after death in Egyptian wisdom
texts, including The Instruction of Merikara (E
53–56) and The Demotic Wisdom Book (P.
Ininger 4, 7 and 5, 7f.).

Some researchers have proposed, on the
basis of Diodorus I 91–93, that a judgment of
the deceased was “performed” as a drama at
the tomb during the burial rites and have tried
to find support in Egyptian sources for the
proposition. Opponents of this hypothesis
consider that Diodorus likely demythologized
what he had heard about Egyptian religion
and the mythic judgment after death.

Bibliographic Notes

Sources for Book of the Dead spell 125 are abundant (Gülden and Munro 1998: 140 - 147). Allen’s
translations of the spell (1960: 196 - 208) and (1974: 97 - 101) are perhaps more philologically
precise than, and thus preferable to, those by Faulkner (1972: 29 - 34) and Hornung (1979: 233 -
245). The most comprehensive treatment of the judgment after death in the Coffin Texts is
Grieshammer (1970); see also Assmann (2001: 372 - 393). The tradition, iconography, and
development of the vignette through Egyptian history are discussed in detail by Seeber (1976).
For the judgment as it appears in The Book of Gates see Manassa (2006). Assmann’s classical study
(1990) on maat explains the connection between ethical behavior and life in the hereafter by
referring to sources other than BD spell 125. The demotic version of BD spell 125 is re-edited by
Stadler (2003a) alongside commentary on scribal re- and misinterpretations of words and phrases
and their relationship to the older hieroglyphic and hieratic versions; additionally, the discussion
of whether BD spell 125 may derive from priestly oaths is summarized on pages 23 and 24. For
this possible derivation also see Gee (1998), who could not have known that the Greek priestly
oaths from Egypt were, in fact, translations from Egyptian, as shown by Quack (1997). The Book
of the Temple is still more or less unpublished; for one of the most recent preliminary reports see
Quack (2005: 105, n. 1), with references to the earlier preliminary reports. For judgment after
death in The Instruction of Merikara and The Demotic Wisdom Book, see Quack (1992: 34 - 35) and
(1999), to which some modifications have been proposed by Stadler (2001) and (2003b). Stadler
(2001) discusses whether a dramatic performance of the judgment was a component of Egyptian
burial rites.
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