

## THEODICY

«التيوديسية» (التحقيق في عدالة الأولوهية)

*Roland Enmarch*

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## THEODICY

# «التيوديسية» (التحقيق في عدالة الأولوهية)

Roland Enmarch

Theodizee  
Théodicée

*Theodicy, the inquiry as to the justness of the divine, is a prominent theme in mythological descriptions of the struggle between order and chaos. It is also an important feature of Middle Egyptian pessimistic poetry, which probes weaknesses in this mythological argument. Although less explicitly articulated, theodicean concerns recur in Egyptian written culture down at least to the Greco-Roman Period.*

«التيوديسية»، أو التحقيق في عدالة الأولوهية، موضوع بارز في الأوصاف الأسطورية للكفاح بين النظام والفوضى. هي أيضاً عنصر مهم للشعر المصري المتوسط المتشائم، الذي يتقصى الضعف في هذا الجدل الأسطوري. المخاوف «التيوديسية» استمرت في الثقافة المصرية المكتوبة حتى العصر اليوناني الروماني على الأقل و لكن تصور بأقل وضوح.

**A** theodicy is an attempt to reconcile belief in divine justice with the existence of evil and suffering in the world. Although the term itself is recent (originally coined in a Judeo-Christian cultural context by Leibniz in 1710; see Laato and de Moor 2003: x), awareness of suffering and the problematization of evil are central to many diverse religious and philosophical traditions, including those of ancient Near Eastern cultures (Sitzler 1995).

Several areas of Egyptian written discourse (primarily mythological, literary, and biographical) explicitly address theodicean topics, advancing a range of theodicean positions. In Egyptian mythology, good and evil are respectively identified with cosmic order (*Maat*) and chaos (*Iset*) (Assmann 1990), an opposition attested as early as the Old Kingdom, where it is featured in the Pyramid Texts (Loprieno 2003: 31 - 33, 44). Chaos

preceded the creation of the ordered cosmos and continued to threaten its existence (Hornung 2005: 175 - 180). The divine world was not transcendent, but was engaged in this ongoing struggle to maintain order. In this scheme, evil and chaos were inherent features of the cosmos, and humanity's role was limited to the dutiful maintaining of *maat* on earth.

Another strand of theodicean discourse, which first becomes prominent in the Coffin Texts and in Middle Egyptian poetry, focuses more on the relationship between humanity and the divine. The deity whose justice is in question here usually assumes the role of solar creator god. According to these texts, humanity chose to behave chaotically and rebelled against the creator god despite his benevolent treatment of them. After defeating this rebellion, the creator god withdrew from direct contact with humanity; it is this

distancing of the creator god that permits the existence of suffering in the world. Two of the clearest references to this rebellion are in the declaration of the creator god in Coffin Text spell 1130 (CT VII, 464b), first attested in the 11th Dynasty (Parkinson 2002: 131, note 1), and in the *Book of the Heavenly Cow* (Hornung 1997), a mythological text first attested in the late 18th Dynasty.

The interplay between the cosmic and anthropocentric conceptions of evil—in particular, the question of the balance between human and divine responsibility for suffering on earth—underlies most Egyptian theodicean discourse. In earlier periods the cosmic and political aspects of the struggle between order and chaos predominate, but as time progresses there is an increasing emphasis on the everyday human experience of imperfection and injustice in life on earth, and the reasons for it.

The Egyptians' essentially negative cosmology (for this term, see Assmann 1990: 201 - 222), and the negative evaluation of human nature arising from it, potentially absolved the gods of blame for the world's imperfections by inculcating humanity. Theodicean interpretations of divine action have implications for social structure and tend to encourage normative cultural and political values. From at least the Middle Kingdom onwards, theodicy formed the basis of the legitimation of the Pharaonic state, where strong and sometimes violent action on the part of the king was required in order to curb humanity's chaotic tendencies (Assmann 2000: 42; 2005: 19 - 23). In accordance with this cosmic framework, untoward political events in Egyptian history, such as rebellions (as in several *Königsnovellen*), the Hyksos dominion, or the defunct reforms of the Amarna period, were portrayed in subsequent royal inscriptions as aberrant outbreaks of chaotic behavior (Loprieno 2003: 47).

The correct human response to this state of affairs was to demonstrate conduct in accordance with the ideal of *maat*, one component of which was loyalty to the Egyptian state. In earlier periods, such

behavior was assumed to lead to success in this life, as stressed, for example, in the Middle Egyptian *Loyalist Teaching* (text: Posener 1976; translation: Parkinson 1997: 239 - 240), and to being judged righteous after death. The concept of a posthumous moral judgment, attested most famously in *Book of the Dead* spell 125, forms another implicit theodicean argument: regardless of suffering in this life, good conduct would be rewarded by the gods in the next. Coffin Text spell 1130 underlines this by listing, as one of the creator god's four "good deeds" for humanity, the fact that he promoted piety by making them mindful of death (CT VII, 464d).

The comparatively peripheral role of literary discourse in Egyptian civilization enabled it to explore these theodicean themes in a freer and sometimes more critical fashion than was possible in mythological discourse. Literary texts were also free to concentrate on perceived moral injustices in everyday experience, rather than the abstract principles of cosmic order and disorder. Middle Egyptian poetry provides the most explicit examples (Parkinson 2002: 130 - 138), such as the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, which explores issues of social justice that implicitly raise theodicean questions (Parkinson 2002: 173; Blumenthal 2004: 11 - 14). Another Middle Egyptian poem, the *Teaching for Merikare* (text: Quack 1992; translation: Parkinson 1997: 212 - 234), culminates in a hymn to the creator god who asserts his care for suffering humanity ("When they weep, he is listening": *Merikare* E135), yet also portrays the creator as a stern father "slaying his son for the sake of his brother" (*Merikare* E137-138). Suffering, even if it seems inexplicably harsh to humanity, thus serves a higher divine purpose, becoming the creator's tool for chastising his errant creations' behavior (Assmann 2000: 106 - 108; Assmann 2001: 174; but see alternative interpretations referenced in Parkinson 2002: 131).

The most direct critique of this view of the creator god occurs in another Middle Egyptian poem, the *Dialogue of Ipuwer and the Lord of All* (text: Enmarch 2005; translation:

Parkinson 1997: 166 - 199), where a human sage accuses the creator god of being too distant from human affairs and of not distinguishing the meek from the fierce. The implication is that it is the fault of the creator if the creation is deficient. An underlying question is whether human beings are condemned by fate to behave chaotically and receive punishment (as is implied in *Merikare*), or whether they have free will (Otto 1951, 1966; Fecht 1972: 128 - 130), a theme more directly addressed in later periods (on destiny and free will, see Baines 1994: 40 - 45; Vernus 1995: 122 - 132). Although *Ipuwer* focuses on problematic aspects of normative ideology, it does not ultimately undermine that ideology but instead forms a plea for closer and more discriminating divine (and royal) intervention in the world, to ensure that justice really is done.

Direct theodicean challenges to divine justice appear less frequently from the New Kingdom onwards. The 18th Dynasty solar hymns emphasize instead the all-encompassing benevolence of the creator god, while the theology of Amarna ascribed evil to the nightly absence of the Aten, expressed most extensively in the *Great Hymn to the Aten* (Sandman 1938: 93 - 96; Lorton 1993). One feature of the major changes in Egyptian religious decorum in the post-Amarna period was the greater emphasis on the personal relationship between non-royal individuals and the gods. The existence of evil and suffering was not denied, but individuals increasingly placed their faith in a specific divine patron and protector who would prevent anything bad happening specifically to them (as in the biography of Simut-Kyky: text: Negm 1997, pls. 44 - 63; translation: Frood 2007: 84 - 89). Human afflictions, in this life and the next, were a divine punishment for bad behavior, requiring contrition and forgiveness (Galán 1999). There is also a greater emphasis on divine intervention, rather than loyalty to the king, as the only guarantee of success (Assmann 2005: 93 - 112). Perhaps inevitable consequences of this shift include an increasing emphasis on the inscrutable nature of divine action and a

recognition that good conduct will not necessarily lead to earthly success. This tendency develops over time, occurring for example in the *Teaching of Amenemope* (text: Laisney 2007; English translation: Lichtheim 1976: 146 - 163), and is expressed most pervasively in the *Demotic Wisdom Book*, of which the main manuscript is Papyrus Insinger (text: Lexa 1926; Volten 1941; English translation: Lichtheim 1980: 184 - 217; German translation: Thissen 1991: 280 - 319).

The *Demotic Chronicle* (text: Spiegelberg 1914; translation: Felber 2002: 75 - 90; see also Assmann 2002: 378, note 10), in contrast, reasserts the connection between human action and divine retribution in its reading of the history of Dynasties 28 - 30: pious kings live out their time and are succeeded by their sons, while impious kings are usurped or have their reigns cut short. This text also illustrates the decline in status of royalty, who are treated simply as individuals being judged by the gods for their adherence, no longer to *maat* (cosmic order), but to the *hep*, the law as a body of rules and guidelines laid down in writing (for one of the earliest references to a *hep* of kingship, see *Merikare* E138). Foreign domination in the first millennium BCE was possibly a factor in the development of prophetic texts, such as the *Oracle of the Lamb* (Zauzich 1983: 165 - 174; Thissen 2002: 115 - 119), that predict future calamity in the form of foreign rule followed by the restoration, in a distant future, of a golden age of indigenous Egyptian culture (Assmann 2002: 382, note 23). This reading of the texts as evidence for Egyptian anti-foreign sentiments has, however, found limited acceptance, and some of these texts may alternatively be understood as attempts by Egyptian writers to come to terms with a rapidly changing international context, in which traditional Egyptian royal and cosmic ideology needed reformulating (Felber 2002: 106 - 110; Thissen 2002: 134 - 136; Blasius and Schipper 2002: 294 - 298). However these predictions are interpreted, the deferral of the advent of cosmic justice to an unspecified future date nevertheless constitutes another implicit theodicy

(Loprieno 2003: 55) that may be compared in thematic terms with the apocalyptic literature widespread in the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean—just as similar comparisons can be made between other Egyptian written genres (such as “Instructions”) and classical literature (Lichtheim 1983). Though it therefore seems plausible, it is not currently

possible to conclusively demonstrate a closer link between the Egyptian theodicean tradition and those of contemporary and subsequent cultures (however, see Frankfurter 1993: 176 - 194).

## *Bibliographic Notes*

The most recent overview of theodicy in Egypt is Loprieno (2003), which forms a chapter in a magisterial volume usefully surveying theodicean literature in the Bible, together with similar texts produced in neighbouring ancient Near Eastern and classical cultures. See also the more intensively cross-cultural comparative study by Sitzler (1995).

The “reproach to god” (*Vorwurf an Gott*) theme in Middle Egyptian literature was first discussed in detail by Otto (1951, 1966), followed by Fecht’s in-depth discussion of that theme in one specific text, the *Dialogue of Ipuwer and the Lord of All* (1972). The theme has also been explored in other Middle Egyptian poems, e.g., Blumenthal (2004). The most thorough recent discussion has been Parkinson’s (2002: 130 - 138). See also Lorton (1993) for a comparison of Middle Egyptian poetic theodicies and Amarna theology.

The standard edition of the *Book of the Heavenly Cow* by Hornung (1997) discusses the theodicean sections of that text, while the 6th edition (2005) of his now classic study on Egyptian conceptions of god also touches on theodicy. Assmann has published a large number of important works on Egyptian political theology (2000, 2001, 2002, 2005), including the concept of *maat* (1990). A number of contributions on prophetic and apocalyptic literature from the Greco-Roman Period, much of which has theodicean overtones, can be found in Blasius and Schipper’s edited volume (2002).

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