

## Egyptians Concepts of Sin

— A.M. Blackman

A concepts of the Egyptians sin is afforded us by the two 'Assertions of Innocence' in ch. 125 of the *Book of the Dead*. The acts and qualities therein repudiated by the deceased are murder, robbery, theft, oppression, impiety towards the gods and the dead, lying, slander, dishonesty, avarice (*wn-ib*), hasty temper, pride, loquacity, eavesdropping, adultery and masturbation. From statements in moral treatises and other literary compositions and in the biographical inscriptions of feudal lords and officials, we learn that the sins enumerated in those two distinctly haphazard lists must be added injustice, partiality, disrespect for the aged and for parents, disobedience, contentiousness, rancour, ingratitude, selfishness and drunkenness. Some conception of the varying degree of reprobation in which the different sins were held *i.e.*, to what extent they were classed as greater or lesser offences against the gods or the community.

### The Origin of Sin

The Egyptians, at a very early date, had some conception of a golden age, when the Sun-god ruled over the earth and sin and evil did not yet exist.<sup>1</sup> Already in the *Pyramid Texts* mentions, 'those belonging to that first generation of the company of the righteous, that was born before anger arose, born before clamour arose, born before blasphemy arose, born before tumult arose, before the eye of Horus was wrenched; before the testicles of Seth were torn away'.<sup>2</sup>

To explain the origin of sin in the world is perhaps, one of the aims of the so-called *Destruction of Mankind*.<sup>3</sup> According to this tale, the sun-god *Re*' (the god who was characterised by his righteousness and hatred of evil) ruled at a remote age over gods and men. When he grew old, men thought blasphemously of him, so he sent down his eye in the form of the goddess Hathor to destroy them. After Hathor had for a whole day revelled in slaughter, *Re*' relented and saved men from total extermination. But he henceforth refused to dwell any longer on earth, and withdrew himself to the sky.

In this legend men themselves to be regarded as the originators of sin, for it was as the result of their folly that the earth ceased to be under the direct rule of the perfectly righteous god. Possibly also the above-quoted passage from the *Pyramid Texts* refers, in its original form, to this rebellion against the Sun-god.<sup>4</sup> The reference to the quarrel between Horus and Seth is apparently a later addition. But he who inserted it evidently held the view that all the sin and misery that prevail in the

world originated, not in the acts of men, but in Seth's murder of Osiris and his subsequent conflict with Horus.

### **The Punishment of Sin**

The Egyptians had various conceptions of the punishments meted out to those who failed to obtain a favourable verdict at the posthumous trial.<sup>5</sup> According to the *Second Tale of Khamuas*, the unrighteous dead were tortured.<sup>6</sup> "Setme saw...one man in whose right eye the pivot (?) of the door of the fifth hall (of Amenti) was fixed, while he prayed and uttered loud lamentation".

The man in question had been great and wealthy during his life, but after his death his evil deeds were found more numerous than his good deeds that he did upon earth.<sup>7</sup> We read in the same tale that those who were improvident during their lives suffered the pangs of hunger while those who had led stupid, aimless existences—"the kind of men on earth whose life is before them, but God diggeth a pit at their feet to prevent them finding it"—had food, water and bread hung over them, but as 'they were hastening to take it down... others dug pits at their feet to prevent their reaching it.'<sup>8</sup> According to the above-quoted *Second Tale of Khamuas*, the actively virtuous are granted a higher award than the moderately good: "As for him of whom it shall be found that his good deeds are more numerous than his evil deeds, he is taken among the gods of the council of the Lord of Amenti, his soul going to heaven with the noble spirits. And he of whom it shall be found that his good deeds are equal to his evil deeds, he is taken amongst the excellent spirits that serve Sokari-Osiris".<sup>9</sup>

The high ethical tone of this tale (the existing version dates from the latter half of the 1st century A.D.)<sup>10</sup> is most remarkable.<sup>11</sup> We find no trace in it of the idea that justification after death could be attained by means of spells and ceremonial abultions.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, a man's fate in the hereafter is represented as entirely dependent upon how his life on earth had been spent. It may be pointed out at the same time that an equally high ethical standard is displayed in the description of the posthumous judgment in a composition of the feudal age and also in the well-known passage occurring in one of that special group of hymns discussed below: "Amun-Re' who judgeth the earth with his finger... He assigneth him that sinneth against him to the fire, and the just to the West".<sup>13</sup>

This Egyptian moralists warn the evil-doer that his sins will bring misfortune upon him or an untimely death. The gods 'who will not ignore the deed of any person are often represented as directly responsible for the sinner's doom. A very ancient philosophical treatise informs us that the tongue of Path 'gives life to the peaceful, death to the guilty'.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Necessity for Being Sinless**

As has already been stated above that the attainment of bliss by the dead depended upon the verdict which they obtained at their posthumous trial. The judge of the dead, whether Re or Osiris, was characterised by his righteousness and hatred of wrong, as were also the members of the assistant judicial council. The deceased, in order to find favour in the sight of these gods and so obtain the verdict upon which his happiness depended, had also to be righteous, *i.e.*, be able to show that he had led an absolutely sinless life on earth. Even an Egyptian would have regarded that as an achievement beyond the power of most men. Accordingly, several ways were found of overcoming what must have appeared a very serious obstacle to salvation.<sup>15</sup> These were:

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- (a) ceremonial ablutions which, whether performed by or on behalf of a man during life or after death, cleansed him from his sin and made him righteous;
- (b) going on pilgrimage to Abydos or otherwise participating in the Osirian mysteries;
- (c) the recitation of magical formulae, by means of which things alleged (*e.g.*, that the speaker was free from sin or had performed or participated in this or that ceremony), however untrue they might be, became actualities.

### Acknowledgment of Sin

The nobles, officials, and private persons of the old and Middle Kingdoms and early New Empire never seem to weary of asserting in their biographical inscriptions that, in respect of their character and conduct, they were models of perfection. To own that they were sinners or even imperfect never seems to have occurred to them. In fact, they mention a fault only in order to deny that they were ever guilty of committing it.

What looks like the most amazing spiritual pride may possibly be accounted for by the prevailing belief in the magical efficacy of formulæ, written or recited.<sup>16</sup> This belief, coupled with the idea that ceremonial purity and freedom from sin were their sole passports of posthumous happiness, naturally deterred the Egyptians from owning themselves sinners in any documents, particularly in ones so closely connected with their existence after death as were inscriptions on their tomb-chapel walls or on their funerary stelae.<sup>17</sup> To allow there that they were anything but absolute perfection would be to jeopardise their chances of salvation. Indeed, if a man felt that he could not attain happiness in the hereafter unless by some means or other he convinced his divine judges that he was free from all moral and ceremonial defects, he might well have shrunk from admitting that he had any such defects even to himself.

(1) The claim of the Egyptian to moral perfection was also prompted by his desire to win the goodwill of visitors to his tomb-chapel, so that they might be ready to present him with food and drink-offerings or in lieu of these recite certain spells.<sup>18</sup>

(2) Those who accuse the Egyptians of un-exemplified spiritual pride must bear in mind that, though in accordance with custom the narrative containing these self-adulatory assertions is put into the mouth of the deceased, it was often composed under the direction of a pious son or some other surviving relative.<sup>19</sup>

(3) Such assertions in process of time became a convention, the stereo-typed way of describing a deceased<sup>20</sup> or living<sup>21</sup> person's character or even one's own.<sup>22</sup>

As has been pointed out, it was characteristic of the Egyptian to deny that he was guilty of sin. But certain hymns of the XIXth dynasty,<sup>23</sup> written on papyri or inscribed on votive stelae, display a religious sentiment hitherto unknown in Egypt and not met with again until Christian times. The persons who wrote the hymns or for whom the hymns were written speak of themselves as 'humble'<sup>24</sup> folk, 'afflicted',<sup>25</sup> 'distressed',<sup>26</sup> 'in bondage',<sup>27</sup> 'wearied'.<sup>28</sup> They confess that they are sinners deserving punishments at the hands of this or that divinity.<sup>29</sup> But they throw themselves on the mercy of the divinity pleading that they are 'ignorant and foolish, not knowing good from bad',<sup>30</sup> and 'disposed to commit sin'.<sup>31</sup> 'Punish me not for my many sins,' exclaims a suppliant of the god

Amūn, 'I am a witless man. I am a man without understanding. All day, I follow after my own dictates, as the ox after the fodder'.<sup>32</sup>

The divinities addressed are represented as chastising men for their sins. A certain Nekhtamūn, we learn, 'lay sick unto death', and was '[under] the might of Amūn by reason of his sin'.<sup>33</sup> Nefer'abu 'was a just man upon earth', but he 'wrought the transgression' against the Peak of the West (a Theban goddess) and she chastised him. This goddess, we are told, 'smites with the smiting of a savage lion, she pursues after him that transgresseth against her'.<sup>34</sup> The moon-god, Thoth is said in one hymn to have punished a man for swearing falsely by him.<sup>35</sup> According to another, a man was smitten with blindness for a similar offence against Ptah.<sup>36</sup>

But these divinities are always addressed as compassionate and ready to forgive. 'Be merciful to me!' cries a suppliant of Ptah, 'look upon me, that thou mayest be merciful',<sup>37</sup> Another suppliant appeals to Thoth as 'Merciful one, who art able to take this (punishment in the form of sickness) away'.<sup>38</sup> Amun-Rē', we are told, 'comes at the voice of the distressed humble one'.<sup>39</sup> He is as 'disposed to mercy' as is his petitioner to sin.<sup>40</sup> In answer to the prayer of a friend, this god heals a man whom he had smitten with sickness; for he passeth not a whole day worth. His wrath is finished in a moment and nought is left.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the Peak of the West is merciful to him who transgressed against her, when he turned to her in penitence.<sup>42</sup>

#### REFERENCES

1. J. H. Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, New York and London, 1912, p. 211ff.
2. K. Sethe, *Die altägyptischen Pyramidentexte* (hereafter cited as *pyr*), Leipzig, 1908-10, 1463.
3. E. Naville, *TSBA* IV. [1876] 4 ff; A. Erman, *A Handbook of Egyptian Religion*, Eng. tr., London, 1907, p. 29ff.
4. A.H. Gardiner, *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage*, Leipzig, 1909, pp 44,78, 84.
5. K. Sethe, *op. cit.*
6. Griffith, F. LI., *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis*, Oxford, 1900, p. 46.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
8. Griffith, *op. cit.*, pp. 45, 49 f.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 47 f,
10. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
11. *Ibid.*, P. 46, note on L. 6 p. 48, notes on II. 8, 10; see also Erman, *Handbook*, p. 230 f.
12. K. Sethe, *op. cit.*; see also Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 461., not on 1.6.
13. *Select Papyri in the Hieratic Character from the Collections of the British Museum*, London, 1841-44, pl. lxxviii.=*Pap. Anastasi*, 2, VI., II. 5-7.
14. Erman. A., 'Ein Denkmal memphitischer Theologie', in *SBAW* xliii, [1911] 940.
15. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 46, note on 1.6.
16. Griffith, *op. cit.*
17. Breasted, *op. cit.*, p. 167 ff., and esp p. 169 f. It should be pointed, out in this connexion that similar statements to those that follow the second 'Assertion of Innocence in ch. 125 of the *Book of the*

*Dead* (i.e., 'I have done what men command and that wherewith the gods are pleased... I have given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked a ferry-boat to the boatless. I have made offerings to the gods, and ablutions to the blessed dead') frequently occur in the tomb-inscriptions and on stelae of the feudal age.

18. Breasted, *op. cit.*, p. 169.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
20. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, Chicago, 1906-07, II, pp. 767-769.
21. Gardiner, *Egyptian Hieratic Texts*, Leipzig, 1911, pt. I, p. 6.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
23. Erman, 'Denksteine ans der theban', Graberstadt, 'in *SBAW*, XLIX, 1911, 1086ff.; B. Gunn, *Journ, or Egypt. Archæology*, III, 1916, p. 81 ff.
24. Erman, E.g., *Denksteine*, pp. 1088, 1091f.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 1088, 1105.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 1088, 1091.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 1091.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 1108.
29. E.g., 'Righteous was Ptah, Lord of Truth, towards me, when he chastised me' (*Ibid.*, p. 1102).
30. *Ibid.*, p. 1098.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 1094.
32. *Select Papyri in...the British Museum*, pl. LXXII, = *Pap. Ansatasi*, 2, X, 1. 7-XI, I. 1.
33. Erman, *Denksteine*, p. 1092 f.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 1098 f.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 1102 f.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 1101 f.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 1102.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 1103.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 1088.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 1094.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 1092 ff.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 1099; see also B. Gunn, *Journ, of Egypt, Archæology*, III. 81 ff.; A. Erman, *Handbook*, pp. 78 f, 82., ff.; J. H. Breasted *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, p. 349 ff.

The ancient Egyptians believed that a soul (kꜥꜥꜥ/bꜥꜥꜥ; Egypt. pron. ka/ba) was made up of many parts. In addition to these components of the soul, there was the human body (called the á,¥êœ¥, occasionally a plural á,¥êœ¥w, meaning approximately "sum of bodily parts"). According to ancient Egyptian creation myths, the god Atum created the world out of chaos, utilizing his own magic (á,¥kêœ£). Because the earth was created with magic, Egyptians believed that the world was imbued with magic and so was every living thing.

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The consequences of sin have to be faced by the individual who has committed the sin. If we do not face them in this life, we will have to face them in the afterlife or one of our next lives. When we keep a positive perspective towards the hardships we undergo as a consequence of sin, we can change for the better and evolve spiritually. Atoning for sins can also help us in this process.

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