

Death Messenger in Ancient Egypt

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Abstract

In the matter of the death personification in ancient Egypt, there is no god for death process. God Osiris helped the deceased ones to their place of rebirth, but he was not the reason of their death. So who is the responsible of taking souls away in ancient Egypt? The aim of this article to argue what kind of answers could be given by the ancient Egyptians.

Keywords: Death Messenger – autobiographies - Ptolemaic Period – Instructions - Second Death.

Introduction

Death in ancient Egypt was the most mysterious phenomenon as the bulk of what remains from the ancient Egyptians is related in one way or another to death and the dead.¹ Death makes all equal.²

Death is one of those phenomena which did not exist before the creation, and is therefore among those negative elements which were introduced afterwards and which go to make up the world order. According to the utterance 571 in the pyramids texts,³ the primeval God Atum was “before the sky existed, before earth existed, before men existed, before the gods were born, before death existed”. Thus, after created death, every living beings are subject to the fate of death.⁴

¹ Lichtheim M.(1978), *Ancient Egyptian literature II*, University of California Press, p.119 ; Ikram, S.(2003), *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, Cairo: AUC Press, pp.ix-x.

² Assmann J.(2005), *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, translated from the German by David Lorton, Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, p.9; Hays H. M.(2011), “*The Death of the Democratisation of the Afterlife*” in: *Old Kingdom, New Perspectives*, Strudwick N. & Strudwick H. (Ed.), Oxford: OxBow Books, pp.115-143.

³ Faulkner, R. O.(1969), *the Ancient Egyptian pyramid texts, Supplement of Hieroglyphic Texts*, Oxford: The clarendon press, p.226.

⁴ Morenz S.(1973), *Egyptian Religion*, translated from the German by Ann E. Keep, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, p.186.

The ancient Egyptians abhorred death for its invisibility, separation and reversal and absolutely, they loved life. In the instruction of HarDjedef, dated back to fifth Dynasty, he recommended men to guard against the misery of death by furnishing their tombs on a lavish scale:

“Make worthy your station in the west, Given that death humbles us, given that life exalts us”⁵

Abhorring death in the ancient Egyptian autobiographies was obvious since the First Intermediate period:

i nḥw i tpw t3 mrrw nḥ msddw ḥpt dd.tn ḥ3 mw ḥ3 t ḥnkt
“O living ones, o earth-borne ones, who love life, who hate death: Say, 1000 water, 1000 bread, beer”⁶

In the dialogue of a Man with his Ba (Papyrus Berlin 3024), dated back to the Middle Kingdom:⁷

“it (i.e., death) is a heartbreak, For it brings tears to grieve a man, It is taking a man from his house to cast him into the desert, you will not go up to see the sunlight”.

During the New Kingdom and later there are to be found extremely pessimistic descriptions of the condition of the dead, the image of death as separation, which was a theme common to both feasting and laments. Hoping that the deceased will be able to celebrate again in the afterlife. In the tomb of Nefersekheru at Zawyet El-Sultan, from the reign of Ramesses II, the following caption accompanies the mourning women as a liturgical lamentation:

“The house of those in the West is deep and dark. There is no door, no window in it, no light to brighten, no north wind to refresh the heart. The sun does not rise there. They lie forever in sleep because of the darkness, even in the daytime (?). Oh, woe! May the dear one be safe and sound, breathing air!”⁸

During the Graeco-Roman Period, a passage is devoted to the lady *Taimhotep* in her Stela BM147, describe her physical state of being dead. She was unhappy that she was part of the land

⁵ Lichtheim, M.(1973), *Ancient Egyptian literature: A Book of Readings, Volume I(AEL I)*, University of California Pres, p.58

⁶ Lichtheim, M.(1992), *Maat in Egyptian autobiographies and related studies*, OBO 120, p.160.

⁷ *AEL I*, p.165; Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, pp.181-182

⁸ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, p.114

of the dead, which no awake to see her family. She worried that she would be left in the desert, fated to sleep eternally, and thirsting for the life-giving water, just out of her reach:

“O my brother, my husband, friend, high priest! Weary not of drink and food, of drinking deep and loving! Celebrate the holiday, follow your heart day and night, let not care into your heart, value the years spent on earth! The west, it is a land of sleep, darkness weighs on the dwelling-place, Those who are there sleep in their mummy-forms. They wake not to see their brothers, they see not their fathers, their mothers, their hearts forgot their wives, their children. The water of life which is for all on it, it is thirst for me; It comes to him who is on earth. I am thirst with water beside me!”⁹

Thus, the theme in the previous texts advised living life in this world fully, deliberately, and not denying any wish “follow the heart”, so long as it is day for the person before his messenger of death come.

Names and Definition of the Death Messenger:

The ancient Egyptians saw in death a mysterious phenomenon but it is a part of cosmic order. Primeval god fixed its time separately for each individual by sending him a messenger.¹⁰ That death messenger is a reflection of the creator power over the creations; the ancient Egyptians defined the messenger as unseen with no physical shape, thus they cannot make an offerings or a deal with him. Their hearts forget what he was send to do. Which is god’s work to let them enjoy life now.¹¹ They mentioned his names in a way confirmed that he is unescapable.

1- The 1st name of the Messenger was mentioned as *ipwti*  “Messenger, Envoy”.¹² In the instruction of Ani:¹³

iw p3y.k ipwti it3i.k gm.tw.f grg.tw ii bw srf n.k dd mk ii hry.f sw r h3t.k

⁹ AEL III, pp.62-63; Panov, M.(2010), “Die Stele der Taimhotep” in: *Lingua Aegyptia* 18, pp.169–191.

¹⁰ Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, p.186.

¹¹ Taher, H.(2008), “*Petosiris, the high priest of Hermopolis, his life and religious thoughts*”, unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Minia university, pp.32-33

¹² *Wb I*, 304.6-11.

¹³ AEL II, pp.138. ; Quack J. F.(1994), *Die Lehren des Ani; Ein neuägyptischer Weisheitstext in seinem kulturellen Umfeld*, OBO 141, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, pp.291-292.

“When your **messenger** (of Death) comes to fetch you, He shall find you ready to come to your place of rest. say “here comes one prepared himself before you”

- 2- The inscription of Sishu in the northern eastern pillar of the naos, Tomb of Petosiris at Tuna El Gabel, 4th Century B.C,¹⁴ the Death Messenger was mentioned as $w^c r$  “Fugitive, deserter”.¹⁵

$nn wn w^c r nw mwt šsp.f kbh r mkh3 r h3b$

No fugitive (messenger) of death take libation, so as to forget what [he] was sent [to do].

- 3- In the Stela of Taimhotep (BM 147), during the reign of Cleopatra VII, the death messenger was mentioned as mi ¹⁶  “come”:

$^c-nis.n.f nb r.f iw.sn n.f hr ir m3w mi rn.f$

As for death, "Come!" is his name. All those that he calls to him, come to him immediate!¹⁷

Here the imperative of the verb “to come”¹⁸ becomes the nominal name of death messenger, as a clear metaphorical use to personify the inevitable death process coming to fetch the person to his place of rest.

Epithets of the Death Messenger:

The death messenger epithets reflect the fear of the ancient Egyptians towards the invisibility of death process; it is difficult to understand its reasons to avoid them. We can conclude these epithets of the death messenger in the next 5 points:

1- So Quick and Unpredictable:

In ancient Egyptian texts, there is a belief in the inevitability of death and the uncertainty of his time when his call will sound. In the instruction of Ani during the New Kingdom:¹⁹

¹⁴ Lefebvre G.(1924), *Le tombeau de Petosiris I*, Cairo, pp.161-162; *AEL III*, p.51.

¹⁵ *Wb I*, 286.21.

¹⁶ *Wb II*, 35.8-14.

¹⁷ *AEL III*, p.63.

¹⁸ That “Come!” which refers to death process is known to other texts, for example, a harper’s song in the tomb of the vizier Paser: “Think not of that day of “Come!” until you go to the West as a praised one”, see Lichtheim M.(1945), “The songs of the Harper”, in: *JNES 4*, p.203; Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, pp.119-127.

iw bw rḥ.k p3y.k mwt ir dd tw rnw iṯ3y .k-m..... iw p3y.k ipwty iṯ3y.k

“When your messenger (of death) comes to fetch you..... do not say, “I am too young for you to take me. Indeed, you do not know your death!”

The use of verb *iṯ3y* “fetch” here, reflect the ancient Egyptians fear towards death messenger. In the inscription of Sishu, Tomb of Petosiris at Tuna El Gabel, 4th Century B.C:

ᶜ mitt rst n wn rḥ hrw ii.f ḥmwt ntr pw smhi ibw r.s-šm.f ḥr

“He goes quickly like a dream, no one knows the day he comes (Death Messenger). It is god’s work to make the hearts forget it”²⁰

Here the sudden come of the death messenger while the person was in inattention described as a dream. The reason for that-people were not obsessed by their death- was the deity made them forget mortality to create an attitude to enjoy life now.

2- Powerful and Invisible:

In the Stela BM 147 of Lady Taimhotep, reign of Cleopatra VII:

*ᶜ ib.sn nr(w) m.m snd.f n wn dgit(i).f s(w) m ntrw rmt-nis.n.f nb r.f iw.sn n.f ḥr
wrw m ᶜ.f mi ndsw*

“All those that he (death messenger) calls to him, come to him immediately, their hearts afraid through dread of him. Of gods or men, no one beholds him, yet great and small are in his hand”²¹

The verb “nis” “to call” reflected the ability of the death messenger, rendering his victims powerless before him. Also, Taimhotep’s expression of “ great and small are in his hand” reconcile the individual with the thoughts of the inevitable death.

3- Unreasonable in his Choices:

In the instruction of Ani:

mwt.f mi p3 nty iry.f i3wt iw p3 mwt ḥrp.f p3 nḥn p3 nty m ḵni

“The death seize him, the infant Who is in his mother's arms, Just like him who reached old age”²²

¹⁹ AEL II, pp.138; Quack, *Die Lehren des Ani*, pp.291-292.

²⁰ AEL III, p.51.

²¹ AEL III, p.63.

In the Stela of Taimhotep :

*n iw(.f) n sm3^chw n.f {n} (21) n sdm.f nw3t.f-^c mwt.f r i3w p^hr m r-^hnp.n.f s3 m
sw3š.f*

“He snatches the son from his mother, before the old man who walks by his side..... He comes not to him who prays for him. He hears not him who praises him”²³

Ani and Tamhotep saw no logic in the choices of the death messenger, It is clear they believed those who are old or those that “pray for him ... who praises him” should be the ones to die not those who have to be snatched away.

4- Merciless:

No one was safe from death when he chose the victims, it is the hand that no one can turn it away, the text in the Stela BM 147 of the Lady Taimhotep continued:

sndw nb(w) hr n^hi m b3^h.f n ir.n.f msdr.f r.sn.... n hsf^c.f hr(.f) mr.f nbw

“His arm is not warded off all that he loves Frightened they all plead before him,he turns not his ear to them”²⁴

The expressions “his arm is not warded off” and “he turns not his ear to them,” emphasized that death messenger spares no one. Death is the inescapable end of all life.

5- Not taking any Bribes or Gifts:

In the inscription of Sishu, father of Petosiris:²⁵

3bw^cr nw mwt šsp.f kb^h r mk^h3 r h nn wn

“No messenger of death take libation, so as to forget what [he] was sent [to do]”

Stela BM 147of Taimhotep continued in describing the death messenger:

n m33t(w).f rdit(w) n.f fk3w m htw nb(t)w

“He is not seen that one might give him any gifts”²⁶

²² AEL II, pp.138.

²³ AEL III, p.63.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lefebvre, *Le tombeau de Petosiris I*, pp.161-162.

In Seshu text, “no messenger of death take libation offerings” is parallel to that of Taimhotep “He is not seen that one might give him any gifts”. They suggested their desire to bribe that phantom messenger. Because they cannot see that messenger, they did not know how to appease him in an attempt to escape death.²⁷

Death Messenger and the Greek God of Death

This is a comparison between the ancient Egyptian concept “*Messenger of death*” and the Greek concept of “*God of death*”. Both they have the same function but they are different in attempt of escape from them. Greeks have a myth about Sisyphos king of Korinth escaped from their God of Death Thanatos by tied this god in a chain, people stopped dying until he released himself.²⁸

In the contrast, the ancient Egyptians did not have a god for death process to offer him gifts, or could escape from him like the Greek’s myths, i.e. the ancient Egyptian god of the dead Osiris guided the deceased ones through the underworld to their place of rebirth, but he was not the reason for their death. The ancient Egyptians knew the concept of hidden messenger for the person is more realistic and no way to make a deal with death. Moreover, the idea of being immortal on earth it is not in their mind. Thus, everyone who lived on earth had to die.²⁹ One official of the late Ramesside age, 20th Dynasty, named Butehamon wrote a letter (Louvre 698) to his dead wife:

“Re has departed and his ennead following him, the kings as well, and all humanity in one body following their fellow beings. There is no one who shall stay alive, for we will all follow you”³⁰

Butehamon declared that death and the necessity of dying is the common heritage of all earthly beings. Death of his wife was one small part of a greater, comprehensive state, which envelope all beings, human as well as divine in final end-point at which the cycles of renewal

²⁶ AEL III, p.63.

²⁷ Zandee, J.(1960), *Death as an Enemy According to Ancient Egyptian Conceptions*, Leiden, p.87.

²⁸ Booth, C.(2006), *People of ancient Egypt*, London, pp.271-272.

²⁹ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, p.389.

³⁰ Wente E. F.(1990), *Letters from Ancient Egypt*, Atlanta, pp.217-218.

stop.³¹ While the Butehamon's comment did not explicitly express any feel of rebellion at the thought, it did evoke a sense of sadness and finality.³²

God of the Second Death in Ancient Egypt

There is an ancient Egyptian concept for a god of death, whom can be avoided by spells, he is responsible for the second death as in Spell 335 of the Coffin texts:

“Save me from this god who takes souls away, Who laps lip corruption, who lives on putrefaction, who belongs to darkness, who is in the dusk, of whom those who are among the languid ones are afraid”³³

That god of death was not responsible of the first and actual death, which we concern here. It is a personification of the “second death”, a definitive annihilation, that threatened the one who was already dead, and thus in the world beyond.

Conclusion:

- Through the previous texts, the ancient Egyptians personified death process as invisible messenger.
- They gave that messenger different names such as *ipwti* “Messenger”, *wʿr* “Fugitive, deserter” and *mi* “come”.
- Death messenger was described as being unpredictable, merciless, and unreasonable in his choice of victims as he “snatches the son from his mother before the old man that walks by his side” thus, no one was safe from him.
- They indicated that, death messenger is even more powerful and hidden than the gods as “Of gods and men no one beholds him”.

³¹ El-Sebaie Sh. M.(2000), *The Destiny of the World : A Study on the End of the Universe in the Light of Ancient Egyptian Texts*, A Master of Arts thesis, University of Toronto, pp.1-2.

³² Burkes S.(1999), “*Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*” Society of Biblical Literature 170, Atlanta, p.155.

³³ Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, p.87; Faulkner R. O. (1973), *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts, Spells 1-1185 & Indexes*, Oxford, pp.260-269.

- They did not know how to appease this messenger in an attempt to escape death as “No messenger of death take offerings or any kind of gifts”.
- Such these thoughts had probably derived from their fear of the inevitability of death.

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