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6. Empty Threats? How Egyptians' Self-Ontology Should Affect the Way We Read Many Texts

Kerry Muhlestein

Abstract

Egyptologists have typically divided texts into those that dealt with the divine and those that treated the mundane. This false dichotomy is not one that the Egyptians themselves would have imposed. They saw themselves as mortal beings that interacted with the divine realm and the afterlife. The texts they created reflect this understanding, and thus we are greatly hampered when we insist that the language of a decree, threat formula, or other texts, must refer to *either* the mundane *or* the supernatural, but not both. There is ample evidence that the Egyptians often intended specific wording to invoke multiple realms, by use of metaphoric and divine language, and by doing so they increased the efficacy of their texts. Without this understanding, we will misunderstand many of the texts we study.

Key words

Threat-formulae, divine language, textual interpretation, charms, inscriptions

I aver that in our own lives most Academicians, whether religious or not, make divisions between the natural and supernatural, compartmentalizing the mundane and ultramundane.¹ We do this as Enlightenment-influenced creatures who habitually and consciously – often even unconsciously – bifurcate the religious and the secular. The Academy, almost regardless of geographic location, usually strengthens this Western tendency. While this training is invaluable as we form our methodologies, it concurrently creates a world-view barrier between us and those of ancient or modern cultures who do not create such mental dichotomies. Because we operate in light of our own experience,² we tend to superimpose this Western compartmentalization on the ancient Egyptians. However, this contravenes the world view that the Egyptians themselves possessed. The other-worldly, or preternatural, was superjacent in all aspects of Egyptian life. We understand this when the Egyptians employ language in the form of simile, explicitly comparing themselves to the divine, such as when the king “appeared against them *like* Montu.”³ Recognizing Egyptian self-identification with the preternatural becomes more difficult when the similes give way to other rhetorical devices in which the comparison or self-identification is less transparent. I call this divine language, such as when the king “*is* the strong bull, sharp of horns and resolute;”⁴ or when the king destroys enemies with “*his* flame.”⁵ Differences between these terms will be discussed below, but from the outset we must understand that supernatural similes and divine language were not employed merely as literary devices; instead they reflect the Egyptian tendency to see themselves in light of both the mortal and supra-mortal realms. They lived in their metaphor, considering themselves ontologically to have a presence simultaneously in what we would consider to be a number of different planes; such a multivalent self-view is commonly reflected in Egyptian texts. Failure to realize this hampers us in our efforts to understand many such texts.

There can be no doubt that the ancient Egyptians considered themselves entities with elements of existence in a number of spheres. They were not a conglomeration of flesh and bones that existed for the few moments of mortality and then ceased to exist, creating minimal ramifications upon others and the cosmos. Instead they were beings that existed in a mortal realm, interacting with the divine sphere, and moving on to an afterlife which was at least partially integrated with the divine, but which also continued to collude with the mortal realm. Moreover, their actions in any of these spheres *could* have cosmic influence.

While this multivalent impact must have, to some degree, weighed heavily on the Egyptians themselves, their response to such an existence also proves bedeviling for Egyptologists. Philological evidence regarding the multivalence of Egyptian personalities is inherently skewed. Naturally those actions which could have effect in multiple realms would be deemed of enough import that the likelihood of its being recorded increased greatly. In a cycle of increasing importance, the creation of the written record dealing with such events invoked the numinous power of writing; the writing itself lifted the level of force which the events could have, creating perpetuity and enhanced multivalence.

Even more bewildering is the tendency for these records to be intentionally ambiguous, employing language that could simultaneously have impact in more than one sphere. This multi-leveled language often leaves the modern philologist in a quandary as to how to interpret the wording encountered. Is the language speaking of something a mortal man will do, or of events belonging to other realms? The question itself reveals that our conundrum is increased when we operate under the false dichotomy that inscriptional language must refer to either one realm or another.⁶

This compartmentalization is not one that the Egyptians themselves employed. When we label a text as having to do with either the mortal or supra-mortal realm, we make the assumption that texts must have been intended for only one realm at a time. This assumption also leads to presumptions about the juridical efficacy of certain texts and their agents of enforcement. We will find ourselves understanding the ancient Egyptians much better if we abandon such anachronistic divisions and look for intentional polyvalence. This will also better enable us to evaluate individual inscriptions. More levels of understanding unfold when we let the Egyptians speak in the manner they conceived, looking specifically for the tendency to preternaturalize and multiply the spheres of ramification. Approaching Egyptian texts with a lens that allows for the Egyptian conception of multivalent entities operating in various spheres will enhance our understanding of what the Egyptians themselves understood the texts to mean.

Undoubtedly the degree and type of multi-spherical references changed over the course of Egypt's long and splended history. Future studies must undertake a careful analysis of the types of references made in each time period, accounting for the medium on which the texts were created and the social and archaeological context for each text. For example, as concepts of what was sacred and the appropriate way to interact with the sacred changed,⁷ surely the method of identifying with the sacred must have been influenced. Similarly, changing views as to the relation between mortals and the divine⁸ had to impact the way in which the Egyptians sacralized their lives. Much can be gained from examining the current topic historically, searching for continuity and change. However, we must first more carefully address the core issues. I aver that while the specifics of doing so probably changed over time, the habit of creating texts intended to concurrently address more than one realm was present in all ages of Egyptian society.

As a discipline, we have intuitively seen this multivalence in the acts of kings, rites and spells. We have had more difficulty when looking at proscriptions, juridical expressions, and tomb threats. These are issues that have appeared sporadically in the research of myself and others when discussing tomb threats, spells, etc.; however, I believe that pulling together these separate threads in a concentrated examination will be productive and useful.

Preternaturalization

There can be no dispute about the ancient Egyptian tendency to equate mortal circumstances with preternatural characters and events. The textual reflections of this are manifested in at least three ways. The most recognizable is through the employment of simile. For example, Senusret III was said to “shoot arrows as does Sakhmet.”⁹ A string of similes is employed to liken the military exploits of Thutmose III to the preternatural, such as his being like Amun, stars, a bull, a crocodile, a lion, a divine hawk, the jackal of Upper Egypt and Horus.¹⁰ Merneptah reports that “like the flooding of the Nile, I caused Egypt to be.”¹¹ Ramesses II “appeared against them like Montu.”¹² Moreover, he “is like Montu, [grasping] his bow, like Horus in his array, with his bow he is like Bastet, and his arrow is like the Son of Nut;”¹³ and he will be “given life like Re.”¹⁴ Language about having valor, stability, dominion, protection, life or health like Re is ubiquitous.¹⁵ The use of similes relating the acts of mortals (especially *royal* mortals, we will consider others below) to the supernatural is so common it is readily overlooked. In the case of similes we understand that the characters and acts of other spheres have been superimposed upon the acts of mortals, and vice versa.

A similar equation with the other-worldly was made with the use of divine language. Yet this textual tendency is less transparent, lending itself to ambiguity regarding whether the acts spoken of belonged to this realm, the next, or both. Examples of divine language include when Senusret III, who used common military tactics in his campaigns, had these exploits described as smiting “foreign countries with his crown.”¹⁶ Similarly, Merneptah “has the strength of Re,”¹⁷ and Ramesses II is the “strong bull, sharp of horns and resolute.”¹⁸ Moreover, Thutmose III is told in regards to a northern campaign, that the serpent upon his brow will consume those in foreign lands, that she would burn them with her flame, and that “she cuts off the heads (*dn=s tpw*) of the Asiatics.”¹⁹ While Thutmose’s armies certainly enacted all kinds of literal mayhem on the Asiatics, those acts are described metaphorically as the Uraeus burning and beheading.

The use of divine language can include imagery in which the wording no longer attributes to men phenomenal abilities or divine accouterments with such, but instead attests that these mortals carried out acts generally only credited to the divine. In this kind of divine language, phraseology is employed that, were the name of a mortal not included, we would associate only with deities. The prophecy of Neferti describes Ameni with such language. The line “Libyans will fall to his flame (*nswt=f*),”²⁰ uses divine language to ascribe to the king divine abilities, such as producing a consuming flame. This is done a few lines later in another sense: “The Uraeus at his fore pacifies the hostile for him” (*shri.ti n=f h3k-ibw*).²¹ Both lines describe the same type of thing, but the former arrogates the power directly to Ameni, as opposed to a divine element (such as the Uraeus) assisting him. Both are types of divine language, but the former incident can be more confusing to modern interpreters. Similarly, Ramesses II is referred to as “Re, born of the gods” (*r mss ntrw*).²² Elsewhere he says “I am Re, Lord of heaven, who is upon the earth” (*ink r nb pt nty hr tp t3*).²³ Clearly he is charged with divine attributes here, via divine language.

As Egyptologists our academic background, with its insistence on the verifiable, generally heightens the likelihood that we will underestimate the Egyptian proclivity for seeing the supernatural in the mundane. We must remember that the supernatural was much more real and immediate to the typical Egyptian than to modern Egyptologists. Even lore associated with *sp tpi* and other foundational events was not something of the distant past, but were actions that had occurred, were presently taking place, and would happen yet again in the future. These *historiolae* were carried out by real characters who had a real impact on the life of Egyptians. Thus, while some circumstances may have been desirably preternaturalized, and others less so, interacting with the supra-mundane was inevitable and unavoidable.

We cannot know the extent to which a narrative myth concerning supernatural characters existed in various phases of Egyptian history.²⁴ We are also incapable of deducing with how much of any given mythical narrative an average Egyptian would have been familiar. Yet the tendency to preternaturalize does not depend on narrative nor full familiarity with narrative. Identification with the supernatural had more to do with the qualities of cosmic identities and incidents than with storyline. The cryptic allusions and citations of supernatural characters and events within the pyramid texts demonstrate that it was qualities and powers, not stories, from which it was important to draw, even from the earliest periods of Egyptian texts. I generally, though not completely, avoid the use of the term “myth” in this study because of the baggage the term carries and because it is quite possible to identify with the preternatural whether or not texts dealing with divine narrative exist.

Preternaturalization of the Political

The use of preternatural language exceeded the reflection of a world view, and was more than creating texts as political propaganda.²⁵ The purpose went beyond convincing others of a particular viewpoint. Instead it actuated that viewpoint, both by appeal to *historiolae* and by enforcing the numinous power of writing in multiple realms. These texts may have convinced, but more importantly, by means of identification with the preternatural, they created, enforced, and empowered.

Such preternaturalization is most readily seen in the political sphere. Egyptologists understand well that the death of the king and the ascension of his successor was viewed as an event both quotidian and as a re-enactment of the story of Osiris and Horus. Other actions of the king were also often identified with the divine. For example, after burning (*rkḫ.tw*) a group of Theban rebels, Prince Osorkon identifies what he has done with bringing the eye of Re, an allusion to the Myth of the Heavenly Cow.²⁶ Osorkon then serves warning that any rebellion in the future would be met with the fire (*nbi*) of Mut (divine language).²⁷ Given that Osorkon himself had just burned malefactors, we can assume that he would do so to any who acted likewise in the future; yet he equated this punishment with divine fire. In his mind the punishment he had inflicted had taken place multivalently on both a mundane and supra-mundane level; necessarily so, since the rebellion against royal authority he had been dealing with clearly had cosmic ramifications.²⁸ He also raised any future rebellions to the same supernatural level, along with the punishment that would ensue. Such a warning, with its obvious reference to real burning, casts illumination on other threats of action from supernatural beings in royal decrees and elsewhere. If the threat could have real consequences in this inscription, was it thus in others?

We should ask, for example, what should be made of a donation stela from the time of Shabako. The text states that any who harmed the donated fields would fall to the sword of the king (literal), and that Sakhmet would somehow punish them (divine language), though a lacuna makes this section so unreadable as to render it impossible to tell exactly what Sakhmet would do.²⁹ Since the donation had been given to a temple, and since Shabako was pictured on the stela, we may assume that the land in question had come under state protection. It seems very unlikely that those who harmed state property would not be punished by the state. Yet in this case, as with so many others, the crime and punishment have been raised to the preternatural level. This does not mean that a worldly punishment would not be enacted; instead it extended the efficacy of that punishment to multiple realms.

Such preternaturalization happens again and again. We will highlight only a few more examples. Those who might misappropriate the tomb personnel of Amenhotep son of Hapu are warned that they would go “to the fire of the king on the day of his fury (literal). His Uraeus shall spit fire on their heads (divine language), annihilating their bodies and devouring their flesh, having become like Apophis on the morn of the New Year (simile).”³⁰ When possible, misappropriation of tomb personnel was punished by the state.³¹ Here we should note that the state’s potential response to it has been preternaturalized.

A stela from Dakhla states that any who disregarded its inscription would be killed by Amun-Re and Sakhmet, and was “an enemy of Osiris, lord of Abydos” (*hrwy n wsir nbt zbdw*).³² The enemy of Osiris is Seth; additionally, Amun-Re and Sakhmet jointly killing is reminiscent of the narrative of Sakhmet killing rebellious mankind for Re. In this case, the inscription makes mortals congruent with a number of elements from two specific *historiolae* of *sp tpi*. Similarly, a hymn to Amun likens Apophis to those who rebel: “The weapon is in Apophis the injurer, felled by his sword (divine language). Our rebels, they are cut down (literal).”³³ Again, mortal rebels are narratively identified with the other-worldly. In a ritual designed to thwart foreign incursions, Seth and Apophis are told they can no longer enter Egypt, equating the entrance of foreigners with preternatural characters.³⁴ Hornung notes a Ptolemaic tomb inscription which identifies potential violators with Apophis.³⁵ A Ramesseum papyrus equates rebels with the son of Nut.³⁶ Late sources speak of red foreigners being killed to represent eradicating Seth and all the enemies of Osiris.³⁷ Even animals could be sacralized, such as when when an oryx, goat, or other animals were associated with Seth or Apophis,³⁸ and thus their destruction was also preternaturalized.³⁹ In each of these cases a quotidian event has been transformed into something larger as it is equated with sacral *historiolae*.

The fluid movement between the mortal and preternatural introduces elements of ambiguity in the Teachings for Merikare. Here, Merikare is told “Do not strike down (*m skr*), it does not empower you. Punish with beatings, with captivity, and thus will the land be established. Except for the rebel whose plans are discovered, for god knows those who plot treason, god smites his obstacles in blood (divine language)” (*hwi ntr sdbw=f hr snfw*).⁴⁰ Here it is expressed that god will smite the rebel, but since it is the king who is told not to strike people down except for the rebels, it is clearly the king who must enact the smiting of those rebels, lest he lose his throne. Similarly, Merikare is admonished that “He who is silent toward the violent (*grw r shm-ib*) diminishes the offerings. God will attack the rebel for the sake of the temple (divine language)” (*tkk ntr sbi hr r pr*).⁴¹ Again the reference is to god attacking the rebel, but implicitly Merikare is warned that this attack must come from him because of the danger of being silent towards violence. In both of these cases the language is divine, but the actions refer to the king. The language does not have reference

to the actions of two different beings, instead it lifts the actions of the king to the divine realm, causing his attack to be efficacious in multiple spheres.

I believe we see similar ambiguity in the Hatshepsut inscriptions at Deir el-Bahri. In the account of her coronation ceremony, it is written that Thutmose I declared that “he who shall speak an evil thing in the path of her majesty shall die (literal).”⁴² This pseudopigraphic edict is probably due to the extenuating circumstances of Hatshepsut’s need for suppressing anything that would detract from her legitimacy, and it is difficult to imagine that this threat would not be employed under the aegis of the queen herself. Yet later in the inscription it is recorded “as for anyone who will speak against the name of her majesty, immediately god shall cause his death (divine language).”⁴³ While the agent of the punishment has been preternaturalized by the use of divine language, surely the royal court would see to its enactment, as intimated earlier in the inscription.

Another example of preternaturalization can be found when Ramesses II had his actions in the battle of Qadesh described as:

On my brow my serpent was felling my foes for me, (divine language)
 Casting her blast of flame in the faces of my enemies, (divine language)
 I was like Re when he rises at dawn, (simile)
 My rays burned the flesh of the rebels.⁴⁴ (divine language)

Ramesses being like Re when he rises is in parallel with his rays burning rebels. This hearkens to Re having those who rebelled against him killed by his eye at the beginning of a new day. Such a preternatural identification is strengthened in the next four lines of the poem, wherein Ramesses’ enemies describe him as Sakhmet the great. In the myth of the Heavenly Cow, it was Sakhmet who destroyed rebellious mankind for Re. Clearly Ramesses intended to identify his actions not only with preternatural characters, but with a specific *illo tempore* mythical event.

More evidence could be brought forth, but there is already a great deal of acceptance that the political realm demonstrated a tendency to preternaturalize.⁴⁵ Three things are lacking from this general understanding. First, we have typically failed to see the connection between supernatural references and mortal actions, such as those posed by Prince Osorkon, Ramesses II, Hatshepsut, and others as noted above. Second, there is abundant evidence that the disposition to preternaturalize extended beyond the political. Third, there is a general failure to apply this tendency to other types of Egyptian texts.

The Preternaturalization of the Individual

Undoubtedly the average Egyptian often identified his own quotidian acts with those which took place in other realms. This is most transparent in charms and spells. It has been long understood by Egyptologists that in this genre the individual sought identification with the supernatural, hoping to influence their own lives by choosing with which ultramundane occurrence their circumstance would be equated. For example, a spell for warding off plagues equates the owner with Horus, saying “I am Horus,” and further “I am your Horus, Sakhmet (divine language).”⁴⁶ Similarly, in a spell to fend off bad dreams, a man is to call on his mother Isis, who will draw the bad dream out of him, referring to him as Horus (divine language).⁴⁷ In a spell designed to help in a conflict, the man asking for help says that Montu and Seth will strike the antagonist, and that if this adversary were to “seize my feet, I am Montu. If you kill, I am Osiris

(divine language).⁴⁸ Spells dealing with child birth lifted the laboring mother from the mortal realm to the divine, regarding her as Hathor⁴⁹ or Isis (divine language).⁵⁰ Vaginal hemorrhages (*snf*) could be equated with the inundation (Hapy) wherein Anubis was invoked to stop the flood (divine language).⁵¹ In one spell dealing with a snake, the protagonist claims “I wield your catching-fork as Horus” (simile).⁵² A variety of spells for easing a burn identify the burn victim with Horus, asking for Isis to aid him (divine language).⁵³ Dozens of spells dealing with scorpions identify mortals with Horus, Isis, Re, Geb, and other deities (divine language).⁵⁴ Spells could even go so far as to sacralize inanimate objects, such as when a spell for protecting a house indicates that the bolts of the door are actually Ptah (divine language).⁵⁵ While preternatural identifications in this genre are overt, equating mundane and real actions with divine events, what is surprising is that such an acknowledgment is not extended to similar trends in other genres.

Threat Formulae, Ritual Texts and Decrees

Operating under the old tendency to dichotomize texts into the categories of mortal or supra-mortal, Egyptologists have debated the conundrum as to whether or not tomb curses were ever meant to be acted out during mortal life,⁵⁶ or if they were always intended to take effect in another realm.⁵⁷ It seems to me that these need not be mutually exclusive. It is even plausible that a double meaning may be intended, indicating action that should take place in the here and now, but insuring *both* that those actions would have effect in other realms, *and* that if the action did not take place in this life, it would in the next. The fluidity of thought expressed in the threats, and their incumbent philological difficulty is illustrated by Assmann, who first wrote that threats could have no impact on this realm,⁵⁸ but later modified his position to reflect that the Ankhtifi curse “is not, then, a curse in the normal sense but the announcement of laws; malediction and jurisdiction intermingle in a curious way.”⁵⁹ Assmann’s earlier objections stem from what Baines identified as his tendency to separate the divine and “real” world in a problematic way since “it could suggest that the world of the gods is not real. For the actors that world is real, even if its status may be less straightforward than the human world.”⁶⁰

Undoubtedly there are a whole host of threats which could only be enacted by the supernatural, such as being hated (*hbd*) by Re,⁶¹ being judged with the deceased by a god,⁶² or being consigned to the prison of the netherworld.⁶³ Often these types of punishments are strung together, making it quite clear that they belong to other spheres of existence.⁶⁴ Concomitantly, many threats had to be intended to be acted out in the mortal realm. For example, Willems has pointed out that the loss of burial and identity prescribed in threats is a well known juridical punishment.⁶⁵ By the time a person arrived at a tribunal in the next life it would be too late to deny him a burial, indicating that the denial of burial was at least intended to be enacted by “the living.” Willems also demonstrates that curses of death by fire mirror perfectly texts which are certainly juridical;⁶⁶ Sottas compares threats from the Old Kingdom with royal decree punitive clauses;⁶⁷ Nordh notes that the threat formulae used in execration rituals often coincided with a legal enactment of their texts;⁶⁸ both Goedicke and Morschauser have outlined threat formula terminology that indicates the pronouncement of capital punishment.⁶⁹

Yet the middle ground – texts which could be taken as either intended for this life, the next, or both – is much larger than we have previously acknowledged. I believe this is true of both threats pronounced by individuals, and those associated with the state or king. While elsewhere I have written about the likelihood that threats had elements which either dictated or mirrored mortal

actions,⁷⁰ my thinking about some of the elements previously discussed has shifted. Language that we once considered quite clear has become much more ambiguous in my mind. For example, if Prince Osorkon could literally enact the fire of Mut, and Shabako that of Sekhmet, what is to dictate that other textual uses of these sacral figures and punishments did not have real life referents? Should we not understand the many texts which speak of the Uraeus spitting fire to really reflect a punishment by the king?⁷¹ Operating under the knowledge that burning was a form of capital punishment commonly employed,⁷² and that burning enacted by mortals could be referred to with divine language, why should ubiquitous phrases such as “the fire (*ꜣht*) will consume his limbs,”⁷³ “he will go to the flame (*hh*) of Sekhmet,”⁷⁴ or “he will go to Osiris’ brazier (*ꜥh*),”⁷⁵ not be taken literally? Could being cursed to fall to the “knives (*dsw*) of Horus,”⁷⁶ have reference to real knives enacted by real people? Why would not “belonging to the knife (*šꜥd*) of Amun-Ra,”⁷⁷ or going “to the knife (*ds*) of those who slaughter (*hnbw*),”⁷⁸ represent a preternaturalization of punishments that were actually to be inflicted in mortality?

Furthermore, we must question our assumptions about references to unearthly tribunals. After all, we know that the punishments enacted in the Harem Conspiracy were viewed as being directed by the gods. In this case, several of those punished found that “the great punishment of death (*sbꜣyt ꜥꜣy n mwt*) was applied to him, which the gods said, ‘Do them to him’” (*dd nꜣ nꜥrw ii st r=f*).⁷⁹ Since this punishment was attributed to the gods, but enacted by mortals, we must ask ourselves if other punishments ascribed to the divine via any number of phrases may not have reflected that which was done by mankind. In this light, why should mention of being prosecuted (*wšb*) by a tribunal in Heliopolis⁸⁰ not refer to an earthly tribunal? This seems especially likely in view of the fact that sometimes it was stipulated that it would be earthly officials who would enact judgment.⁸¹ Why would references to being condemned by a god⁸² not be a way of combining a preternatural event with an earthly tribunal? Should we not take the many references to having a plea or case heard “in the place of litigation,” (*bw nty wꜥꜥ-mdw im*)⁸³ as a likely reference to a real mortal judgment hall? This is more ambiguous when the judgment or litigation is to be done by the Great God.⁸⁴ While this may refer solely to a divine enactment, it seems even more probable that the tribunal would be hoped for either in both the mortal and divine realm, or that a tribunal held in the mortal realm would create a similar effect in the divine.

We can say of divine language in threat formulae (or, indeed, in almost any Egyptian text) what John Baines said of references to the “mythical” in the Pyramid Texts: “To call them allusions to myths is to weaken the implications of their presence in the texts, in which they enact rather than evoke, an identification between a ritual action and a divine occurrence.”⁸⁵

We find further evidence for this intentional ambiguity of language in ritual texts. For example, in the Bremner-Rhind papyrus the description of a ritual which specifies that fire is literally to be used, refers to this fire as “the fire which issues from the Eye of Horus,”⁸⁶ or as the “Mistress of Burning,” the flame from the “eye of Re,” flame of the “fiery one,” or Sekhmet, all of which fires are to consume Apophis.⁸⁷ The stabbing of the figures is referred to as going to “the executioners of Sakhmet.”⁸⁸ While the language of the text is highly preternatural, and very similar to that of tomb threats and other textual proscriptions, it is made very clear from the rubrics that the figures being assaulted were to literally be burned with a fire made by the priests, who ultimately represent Horus, Re, and others. This multivalent language is representative of the cross-spheric interaction which permeated the Egyptian world – especially the textual world – whether in formal ritual or elsewhere.

Multivalence of language seems even more apt in official spheres. When Seti I wrote that the Ennead will judge those who strayed from the stipulations he outlined in the Kanais decree,⁸⁹ he probably intended that a mortal and immortal tribunal would judge the transgressor; or perhaps even more likely that the action taken by a mortal tribunal would have effect in the immortal realm. In fact, in many ways the Kanais decree mirrors a similar Seti I decree from Nauri.⁹⁰ The Nauri decree is precise about which offenses demanded what punishments, and which mortal councils would enact them. The Kanais decree echoes this, but the agents of enforcement are Osiris, Isis, and Khonsu.⁹¹ In this case the mundane agents of the Nauri decree must have still been intended, but they had been preternaturalized. We must attune ourselves to just such multivalent phrases which could be understood as both invoking an action on earth and equating it with the supernatural. This language causes the action taken in the mortal realm to have efficacy in other spheres of existence. Such must be the case when Taharqa stipulated that he who violated a decree would go to the knife of Ptah-Sokar and that Amun-Ra would slaughter him.⁹² Surely Taharqa wanted a punishment to be pursued in this world, but the language of his inscription intentionally preternaturalized the desired events. A congruent identification of mortal actions with the divine is seen when Psametichus I threatens that the guilty would belong to the knife of Amun-Ra and Ptah, being destined for the flame of Sekhmet, while his son would not be allowed to succeed him.⁹³ Clearly Psametichus intended for the punishment of the offender to be enacted in mortality as much as he meant for the lack of succession to be. It is only the preternaturalization of the agents of enforcement, who are equated with Amun-Ra, Ptah, and Sekhmet, that distracts us from this conclusion.

My thoughts regarding the concept of not having an offering accepted by a god⁹⁴ have also evolved over time. I have long held this type of punishment to be something that could only be enacted in the supernatural realm. I now believe that this may represent actions taken on earth that were preternaturalized as part of the process of having effect in multiple spheres. Being excluded from aspects of religious life was a possible real worldly punishment, and threats such as not being allowed to participate in the festivals of Amun⁹⁵ probably were meant to be enforced in the mortal realm, with clear ramifications in the divine. As noted above, Willems has argued, and eventually Assmann agreed, that Ankhtifi's threats were intended for actual enactments; among these threats were that Hemen would not accept the offender's meat offering.⁹⁶ If Willems' supposition is correct, at least part of the reason Hemen would not *accept* the offering is because the offender would not be allowed to *make* an offering. It is likely, then, that this would be the ideal in countless cases wherein a curse entailed that gods would not accept offerings such as white-bread.⁹⁷ If this hypothesis is true, it would represent the withdrawal of earthly privileges – which actions were intended to interact with the divine – in an effort to affect the offender in multiple realms. While we will never know if any of these inscriptions were ever enacted, the possibility changes the way we understand the text.

It is not as important to determine which inscriptions were meant for which realm(s) – indeed, often this is beyond our reach – as it is to realize that the language employed in many cases is more fluid than we are accustomed to. Such a realization can open new interpretations and understandings of both texts and historical events. Yet this realization must be accompanied by a frank admission. While the ancient Egyptians likely understood what situations were appropriate for preternaturalization, and what phraseology would indicate such, we have not cracked this code. We simply do not presently have the knowledge available to develop a master key which can explain every text in light of the preternaturalization tendency. A healthy dose of skepticism on both sides

of the issue is in order. We must be open to the possibility of sacral metaphor in many texts, while acknowledging that we frequently cannot make a certain determination. We will experience difficulties in keeping our feet under us as we tread among such fluid wording.

It is probable that some curses really were intended for “when justice fails,” by which I mean that the curse was intended to be acted out in this life, but if that failed to happen, characters and forces of the next would have to be relied on. This is typical of the Egyptian “system of redundancy,”⁹⁸ wherein they made many provisions for those things that were important to the afterlife in case there was a problem with any one of them. For instance, mummification was designed to ensure a place for the *ka*. However, in case there was a problem with the mummified body, a statue, or many statues, were also often provided (resources permitting), along with spells and drawings. Likewise, while actual offerings were ideally provided for the dead, the redundancy system included drawings of offerings, funerary spells, and offering spells for passers by to read,⁹⁹ all aimed at ensuring the provision of offerings. However, I do not think that references to the preternatural in threat formulae were only for when justice fails, but were commonly employed to multiply the realms of inscriptional efficacy.

The fluidity of cross-realm interaction found in the threat formulae is highlighted in another genre. A curious reversal takes place in many “divine decrees,” wherein the language of worldly policies and procedures is adopted by those in the divine realm.¹⁰⁰ For example, terms typical of human decrees, such as *šꜥt* or *wꜥ*, come to be used in divine decrees¹⁰¹ or by divine figures in funerary literature.¹⁰² The adoption of the mundane by the supra-mundane underscores the degree to which the Egyptians saw their realms colluding.

Inscriptional Efficacy

The reasons underlying Egypt’s tendency to textually identify themselves with the preternatural make it likely that the language employed in most inscriptional genres intentionally caused actions, in whatever realm they occurred, to be potent in a variety of spheres. In an increasingly secular academe, this becomes more and more difficult to identify due to our lack of tendency to resonate with a people who had a multi-leveled ontological view of themselves. We cannot let this ebb of empathy with an Egyptian worldview prevent us from recognizing how they conceived of themselves. It is specifically because they viewed their actions as potentially having impact on multiple spheres that they invoked language which also had effect in those same spheres. They sought to expand the effectiveness and role of writing, not to limit it.

The preternaturalization examples cited above indicate that many fugacious acts were viewed as having supernatural parallels and ramifications. This was necessary for ontologically multivalent beings. Crimes against tombs, temples, memorial inscriptions, and a variety of other aspects of life simultaneously affected a person’s existence in both the mortal and supernatural realms, and were viewed as the repetition of rebellious acts which had happened in the sacred *historiolae* of *sp tpi*, creating cosmic consequences, and thus demanding appeals to preternatural narrative elements. The authors of such appeals were well aware of the many layers of “reality” in which they were attempting to be efficacious, hence they used language which is confusing to those who try to compartmentalize the texts’ spheres of influence. Those who carried out actions, whether good or ill, with ramifications in other realms supervened their merely mortal natures, and thus were transmogrified into characters which demanded multivalent actions and texts. When we allow the Egyptians to operate in all of the planes they intended, we are able to make much more sense of

many of their inscriptions, allowing us to realize their viability and applicability in both the mortal and extramortal realms. This is not only true of curses, but of much in the way of juridical and political terminology. These numinous writings were designed to operate in a multivalent manner. It was just such a perception of the numinousity of texts that caused Christians to later damage the texts; they reacted against the perceived power and multivalence of the inscriptions.

Because of their continual interaction with many spheres, in all eras of Egyptian history we find several mechanisms which enabled influence in multiple planes of existence. Ritual certainly constituted one such mechanism, as well as many actions which were intended to eradicate not just the mortal existence of a person, but their immortal elements as well (such as burning). Seeing a collusion of the mundane and supramundane within these actions has allowed us to more fully understand them. It has become apparent that the same must be done with texts, and that in so doing, we will be able to more fully understand the intent of the language employed. The careful crafting of language and phrases intended layers of interaction. The sacred power of writing and language was yet another tool employed as the Egyptians felt their way through realms both seen and unseen.

NOTES

¹ As Eliade has opined, life is lived on two planes: the human plane and the transhuman, or cosmic plane. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 167.

² As is noted in Antonio Loprieno, "Slaves," in *The Egyptians*, ed. Sergio Donadoni (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 186.

³ *KRI* 2:85, repeated lines.

⁴ *KRI* 2:166, line 2.

⁵ P.Leningrad 1116B, lines 62-64, as in Wolfgang Helck, *Die Prophezeihung des Nfr. tj* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1970), 53.

⁶ Such as when Shmuel Ahituv, "Review of *Ceremonial Execution and Public Rewards*," *IEJ* 41, no. 4 (1991), 303, argues that all of the elements of a scene must be either a depiction of a real event or were completely symbolic, insisting that there can be no mixing of the realistic with other elements.

⁷ See Antonio Loprieno, *La pensée et L'écriture; pour une analyse sémiotique de la culture égyptienne* (Paris: Cybele, 2001), 13-50.

⁸ See, for example, Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, Andrew Jenkins, trans. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 229-246.

⁹ Kurt Sethe, *Aegyptische Lesestücke* (1924-37), 65.

¹⁰ Urk. 4: 614-619, lines 13-24.

¹¹ *KRI* 4:10, line 71.

¹² *KRI* 2:85, various lines.

¹³ *KRI* 2:154, lines 2-4.

¹⁴ *KRI* 2:153, line 16.

¹⁵ See, for example, Stela Cairo JE 35256, upper section, as in Anthony Leahy, "A Protective Measure at Abydos in the Thirteenth Dynasty," *JEA* 75 (1989), 41-60, wherein Ugaf (and then Neferhotep after usurpation of the stela) is given life, dominion, health and joy, like Re, forever.

¹⁶ Kurt Sethe, *Aegyptische Lesestücke* (1924-37), 65.

¹⁷ *KRI* 4:10, lines 69-70.

¹⁸ *KRI* 2:166, line 2.

¹⁹ Urk. 4: 613-614, lines 9-10.

²⁰ P.Leningrad 1116B, lines 62-64, as in Wolfgang Helck, *Die Prophezeiung des Nfr. tj* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1970), 53.

²¹ P.Leningrad 1116B, lines 64-65.

²² *KRI* 2:202, line 19.

²³ *KRI* 2:320, line 25.

²⁴ See John Baines, "Myth and Literature," in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms*, ed. Antonio Loprieno (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996), 361-377; and idem, "Egyptian Myth and Discourse: Myth, Gods, and the Early Written and Iconographic Record," *JNES* 50/2 (1991), 82.

²⁵ See Edward Bleiberg, "Historical Texts as Political Propaganda During the New Kingdom," *BES* 7 (1985/6), 5-13.

²⁶ Bubastite Portal, Annals of the High Priest Osorkon, inscription of Year 11 of Takelot II, cols. 35-36, as in Harold Hayden Nelson and University of Chicago Oriental Institute. Epigraphic Survey, *Reliefs and Inscriptions at Karnak* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), pls. 16, and 18-19; also see Ricardo Caminos, *The Chronicle of Prince Osorkon* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1958), 48.

²⁷ Nelson, pl. 19; and Caminos, 73.

²⁸ As was noted in the teachings for Merikare, when he was told that any who rebelled against him were "destroying heaven." See P. Leningrad 1116A, line 40, as in Joachim Friedrich Quack, *Studien zur Lehre für Merikare* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1992).

²⁹ Emil Brugsch-Bey, "Mittheilungen von Emil Brugsch-Bey," *ZÄS* 34 (1896), 84.

³⁰ C. Robichon and A. Varille, *Le temple du scribe royal Amenhotep, fils de Hapou* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1936), line 8.

³¹ See, for example, the inscription by Sheshonq the Elder who obtained the death penalty (*hdb*) for those who misappropriated tomb goods and personnel from his son's tomb, as recorded in Auguste Mariette, *Abydos. Choix de Monuments* vol. II (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1880), pl. 36.

³² Jac. Jansen, "The Smaller Dakhla Stela," *JEA* 54, pl. XXVa, line 14.

³³ Leiden hymn 30, as in J. Zandee, *De Hymnen aan Amon van Papyrus Leiden I 350* (Leiden: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, 1947), pl. 2, lines 20-21. John L. Foster, *Echoes of Egyptian Voices: An Anthology of Ancient Egyptian Poetry* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 67, emends the “Apophis” I have included here.

³⁴ Urk. 6: 17, various lines.

³⁵ Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt. The One and the Many*, trans. John Baines (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 158, n. 57. In some cases, the role of Apophis was occupied by the similar snake *Rerek*. See J. F. Borghouts, “The Victorious Eyes: a Structural Analysis of Two Egyptian Mythologizing Texts of the Middle Kingdom,” *Studien zu Sprache und Religion Ägyptens, Band 2: Religion, Zu Ehren von Wolfhart Westendorf überreicht von seinen Freunden und Schülern* (Göttingen: Hubert & Co., 1984), 703-709.

³⁶ P. Ram. IX, 2, 2-5 as in Alan H. Gardiner, *The Ramesseum Papyri: Plates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), pl. 41.

³⁷ J. Gwyn Griffiths, “Human Sacrifices in Egypt: The Classical Evidence,” *ASAE* 48 (1948), 417.

³⁸ Jan Assmann, “Spruch 23 der Pyramidentexte und die Ächtung der Feinde Pharaos,” in *Hommages à Jean Leclant*, ed. Catherine Berger, Gisèle Clerc, and Nicolas-Christophe Grimal (Le Caire: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1994), 52; also Philippe Germond, “L’oryx, un mal-amie, du bestiaire égyptien,” *BSEG* 13 (1989), 54.

³⁹ See, for example, Mark Ciccarello, “Shesmu the Letopolite” in, *Studies in Honor of George R. Hughes*, SAOC 39 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1976), 51; and Philippe Derchain, *Le sacrifice de l’oryx* (Brussels: Fondation égyptologique reine Élisabeth, 1962).

⁴⁰ P. Leningrad 1116A, lines 47-50. David Lorton, “The Treatment of Criminals in Ancient Egypt through the New Kingdom,” *JESHO* 20 (1977), 13, feels that only intentions are spoken of, and thus the king cannot punish but only god. He musters no evidence that the king cannot punish for intent, applying this Western ideal in the face of examples of the king punishing for intent in later periods, such as in the Harem Conspiracy.

⁴¹ P. Leningrad 1116A, line 110.

⁴² Urk 4:257, line 16.

⁴³ Urk 4:259, line 1.

⁴⁴ *KRI* 2:86-87, lines 280-84.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Erik Hornung, *Altägyptische Höllenvorstellungen*. Abhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-historische Klasse Bd. 59, Heft 3 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1968), 27.

⁴⁶ P. Edwin Smith XX lines 1-2, as in James Henry Breasted, *Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus, published in facsimile and hieroglyphic transliteration with translation and commentary in two volumes*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 484 in vol. I, and plate XX in vol. II.

⁴⁷ P. Chester Beatty III, col. 10, lines 10-9, as in J. F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 3.

⁴⁸ O Armytage, line 2-3. Ostrakon reproduced and transcribed in Alan W. Shorter, “A Magical Ostrakon,” *JEA* (1936), plates VIII, and IX.

⁴⁹ P Leiden I 348 recto col. 13, lines 9-11, from A. de Buck and B. Stricker, *OMRO* 1 (1920).

⁵⁰ P. Leiden I 348 verso col. 11, lines 2-8.

⁵¹ P. British Museum 10059 [41] 13, 14-14 as in Hermann Grapow, *Die Medizinischen Texte in Hieroglyphischer Umschreibung Autographiert* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958), 482.

⁵² Borghouts, "Victorious Eyes," 704.

⁵³ Borghouts, *Magical Texts*, 24-26.

⁵⁴ Borghouts, *Magical Texts*, 51-82.

⁵⁵ P. Chester Beatty B III, verso col. 1, lines 1-2, as in Borghouts, *Magical Texts*, 10.

⁵⁶ As Harco Willems, "Crime, Cult and Capital Punishment (Mo'alla Inscription 8)," *JEA* 76 (1990), 27-54 argues.

⁵⁷ As Jan Assmann, "Inscriptional Violence and the Art of Cursing: A Study of Performative Writing," *Stanford Literature Review* 9, no. 1 (1992a): 43-65; Jan Assmann, "When Justice Fails: Jurisdiction and Imprecation in Ancient Egypt and the Near East," *JEA* 78 (1992): 149-162; or Scott Morschauser, *Threat-Formulae in Ancient Egypt* (Baltimore: Halgo Inc., 1991); 20, argues. Morschauser's monograph has been most helpful in this study.

⁵⁸ Assmann, "Art of Cursing;" and Assmann, "When Justice Fails."

⁵⁹ Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, Andrew Jenkins, trans. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 99.

⁶⁰ Baines, "Myth and Discourse," 86.

⁶¹ Urk. 4:1491, line 4 and again in line 12.

⁶² David Silverman, "The Threat-Formula and Biographical Text in Tomb of Hezi at Saqqara," *JARCE* 37 (2001), 11.

⁶³ *KRI* 1:69, lines 6-7.

⁶⁴ For example, see *KRI* 1:69, lines 2-7.

⁶⁵ Willems, "Crime, Cult and Capital Punishment," 42.

⁶⁶ Willems, "Crime, Cult and Capital Punishment," 42.

⁶⁷ Henri Sottas, *La préservation de la propriété funéraire dans l'ancienne Égypte, avec le recueil des formules d'imprécation* (Paris: H. Champion, 1913), 36-40.

⁶⁸ Katarina Nordh, *Aspects of Ancient Egyptian Curses and Blessings: Conceptual Background and Transmission* (Stockholm: Gotab, 1996), 95.

⁶⁹ Morschauser, *Threat Formulae*, 155; and Hans Goedicke, "Juridical Expressions of the Old Kingdom," *JNES* 15 (1956), 58-59.

⁷⁰ Kerry Muhlestein, *Violence in the Service of Order: The Religious Framework for Sanctioned Killing* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Los Angeles, 2003), 107-116.

⁷¹ See, for example, C. Robichon and A. Varille, *Amenhotep, fils de Hapou*, Text No. 27, line 8.

⁷² See Anthony Leahy, "Death by Fire in Ancient Egypt," *JESHO* 27, no. II (1984); and Muhlestein, 269.

⁷³ *KRI* 1:69, line 11.

⁷⁴ Urk. 3:107, lines 2-3.

⁷⁵ P. Rylands IX, line 23, as in F. Ll Griffith, *Catalogue of the Demotic Papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, with Facsimiles and Complete Translations* (London: University press, 1909).

⁷⁶ Kurt Sethe, *Aegyptische Lesestücke* (1924-37), 87, line 13. This would be contra Morschauser, 168, who believes such references are never intended literally.

⁷⁷ Urk. 3:107, lines 2-3.

⁷⁸ P. Rylands IX, line 23.

⁷⁹ As from Papyri Lee and Rollin, reproduced in Hans Goedicke, "Was Magic Used in the Harem Conspiracy Against Ramesses III?" *JEA* 49 (1963), 78.

⁸⁰ *KRI* 1:69, lines 3-4.

⁸¹ See, for example *KRI* 1:70, line 4, which stipulates that the officials (*srw*) of the sacred land/cemetery (*t3-dsr*) would bring the charge against the offender; or Stela Cairo JE 35256, as in Leahy, "Protective Measure," which outlines precisely the punishment to be enacted by officials.

⁸² Such as when Thoth is to condemn a perpetrator in Elmar Edel, *Die Inschriften der Grabfronten der Siut-Gräber in Mittelägypten aus der Herakleopolitenzeit : eine Wiederherstellung nach den Zeichnungen der Description de l'Égypte*, *Abhandlungen der Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften Bd. 71* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1984), 190-95.

⁸³ See, for example, Urk. 1:35, line 3.

⁸⁴ See Urk. 1:51, line 1.

⁸⁵ Baines, "Egyptian Myth and Discourse," 85.

⁸⁶ Raymond O. Faulkner, "The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus III: D. The Book of Overthrowing 'Apep,'" *JEA* 23/2 (1937): 169.

⁸⁷ Faulkner, "Bremner-Rhind Papyrus III," 169-170.

⁸⁸ Raymond O. Falkner, "The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus IV," *JEA* 24/1 (1938): 43.

⁸⁹ *KRI* 1: 69.

⁹⁰ See F. Ll. Griffith, "The Abydos Decree of Seti I at Nauri," *JEA* 13, no. I-IV (1927), pl. XLII, lines 74-78. See also *KRI* 1: 55-56.

⁹¹ See Morschauser, 188.

⁹² Morschauser, 234.

⁹³ P. Turin 248, as in Morschauser, 237.

⁹⁴ See, for example, P. Berlin 19400.

⁹⁵ As in *KRI* 4: 359, lines 5-6.

⁹⁶ See Jacques Vandier, *Mo'alla. La tombe d'Ankhtifi et la tombe de Sébekhotep* (Le Caire: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1950), 206.

⁹⁷ See for example, Siut Inscription 225, as in Edel, 193.

⁹⁸ Systems with multiple elements intentionally designed to accomplish the same purpose in order to insure that the desired outcome is reached. These are usually mechanical safety systems.

⁹⁹ This was one of many possible functions of funerary inscriptions which the living could read. See, for example, the purpose of preserving social ties and memory as argued by Jan Assmann, *Tod und Jenseits im alten Ägypten* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2001), 54-82.

¹⁰⁰ I am grateful to Dr. John Gee who pointed this out to me during his work on economic texts.

¹⁰¹ Such as Jan Quaegebeur, "Lettres de Thot et Décrets pour Osiris," in *Funerary Symbols and Religion, Essays dedicated to professor M.S.H.G. Heerma van Voss on the occasion of his retirement from the Chair of the History*, ed. J. H. Kamstra, H. Milde, and K. Wagtendonk (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1988), 106; Jan Quaegebeur, "P. Brux. Dem. E. 8258 une lettre de recommandation pou l'au-delà," in *Studies in Egyptology Presented to Miriam Lichtheim, vol. 2* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1990), 779; and L. Kákosy, "Three Decrees of Gods from Theban Tomb 32," *OLP* 23:321.

¹⁰² For example, see in CT 131 Geb decrees (mirroring royal decrees) that a man's family will be given to him. See Raymond O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts, Volume I* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1973), 114, n.1; similarly in Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings, a translation and commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University, 2002), 28.