

## CHAPTER 13

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# THE BOOK OF THE DEAD AS A SOURCE FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION

*Methodology, Problems, Prospects*

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## AN EPITOME OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION

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ALMOST every study on ancient Egyptian religion cites spells or excerpts as evidence from the more or less loose collection of religious texts for which Carl Richard Lepsius established the name *Totenbuch*, or “Book of the Dead” (Lepsius, 1842), a collection that is less homogeneous than such a title might suggest. Some deny that the Book of the Dead is a well-defined collection of spells assembled by the Egyptians themselves and instead stress the corpus’s openness (e.g., Quack, 2009b; Gestermann, 2010: 289). It is important in this chapter to keep this problem in mind, perhaps even more so than for other chapters in this handbook, simply for pragmatic reasons. The term “Book of the Dead” is used to refer to a series of spells that occur in tomb inscriptions, funerary papyri, and shrouds, repeatedly in the same combination with other spells (from these so-called spell sequences are established), as well as in temple inscriptions or liturgies. The core of the Book of the Dead goes back to the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom, they themselves being a complement to the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts (Gestermann, this volume), but new evidence has forced researchers to revise this received wisdom (e.g., Assmann, 2005: 250) and to cast doubt on how, or even whether, it is permissible to distinguish between those latter two corpora (Bickel, 2004; Smith, 2009; Hays, 2011). Such a genealogy has left its traces in the themes and contents of the spells

assembled under the heading “Book of the Dead,” a remarkable corpus, even if it at times gives a false impression of stability of ancient Egyptian beliefs. The Book of the Dead first appeared in the seventeenth century BCE, underwent an editing process in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE (Gerstermann, this volume), and was quite standardized from then on, remaining in use for some 1,700 years until the first century BCE or even CE (Töpfer and Müller-Roth, 2011; Stadler, 2003; see also Albert and Kucharek, this volume). Thus, the Book of the Dead can guide us through more than two millennia of Egyptian religious history, if we include the Coffin Texts’ roots. Its significance as a source is not limited solely to the funerary sphere, which can hardly be isolated from the religious practice, as attested in temples and magical papyri (Rößler-Köhler, 1979: 345–46; Assmann, 1983a; Voss, 1996; Quack, 1999: 13–14). In fact, a series of spells do occur as inscriptions in temples (Kockelmann, this volume), and in many cases funerary spells in general evoke the impression that they are appropriations from temple and royal rituals (Stadler, 2015, 2017). All this has shaped the Egyptological mind and led to a perception of the Book of the Dead as a well-defined corpus, an epitome of the Egyptian belief system, virtually comparable to one of the holy books of the three great monotheistic religions.

Yet this long tradition resulted in a considerable variation in the Egyptians’ understanding of the contents. This is hardly surprising. The Book of the Dead provides reasonably homogeneous copies during specific phases of ancient Egyptian history. Even so, no two single manuscripts are identical. Historical changes exerted influence not just on the wording, but also on the contents as a consequence of developments in the language, during which some expressions became obsolete and succeeding generations no longer understood them. Scribes did not shy away from varying and reinterpreting the original, thus creating new religious ideas and changing the contents (cf. e.g., Stadler, 2003). This is a general phenomenon of ancient Egyptian textual transmission (Pries, 2015) that could be termed as “open,” but is distinctively more prominent with religious texts (for further examples see Pries, 2013b) because scribes were able to draw upon a wealth of internalized knowledge (Quack, 1994: 19–23; for the Coffin Texts, see also Willems, 2001: 257; Mathieu, 2004: 248). Thus, each period of Egyptian history between about 1700 BCE and 100 CE had its own understanding that calls for studying the Book of the Dead along certain axes of time, the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom as the principal root, the New Kingdom, the Third Intermediate Period, and the Late Period with its so-called Saite recension. Further refining of individual examples is possible (cf. for the Coffin Texts, e.g., Willems, 1996; Meyer-Dietrich, 2006; for the Book of the Dead, e.g., Milde, 1991). Rita Lucarelli (2006) shows how complex such an undertaking can be and how differently some details can be judged by those with a different Egyptological background and point of view (e.g., Pries, 2011: 201 n. 854).

## RESISTANCE TO DECRYPTION

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Apart from its long tradition, the Book of the Dead has been the focus of more than 150 years of Egyptological study and has become a subject rich in prerequisites for those

working in this area. Although we are focusing here on the text of the Book of the Dead, this holds true for the paratextual information accompanying the spells—the vignettes (Mosher, this volume). Almost all full translations taking the Book of the Dead as a coherent corpus (esp. Barguet, 1967; Allen, 1974; Hornung, 1979; Quirke, 2013) differ from each other in more or less significant aspects. This is due to our limited knowledge of the Egyptian language, which allows for—to put it cautiously—alternative interpretations and, due to the basic approach of each translator (Backes, this volume), interpolation of an idealized version from the 3,000 or so manuscripts that have survived, or, more likely, from just a fraction of them. In fact, determined by the available publications of their time, translators were bound to arbitrarily select examples and did not concern themselves too much about the textual tradition and its peculiarities. This is particularly true of Paul Barguet (1967) and Erik Hornung (1979), who—it must be said in defense of these books—tried to make the Book of the Dead available and accessible to a wider audience. Hornung shows a marked tendency toward the *lectio facilior*, i.e., to the version in a certain manuscript that is easier for us to understand nowadays, and then quickly jumping to the next papyrus without further notice if it provides yet another *lectio facilior*. Such an approach ignores the principle that the most difficult reading is the more probable one (*lectio difficilior lectio probabili*; Vette, 2008). The brief comments in Hornung's appendix cannot counterbalance those deficiencies for a scholarly community for which a hybrid rendering is of limited use. And how much can a non-Egyptologist reader gain from the translation without detailed explanations? Nevertheless, scholars have intensively cited Hornung as the standard reference work.

Five years earlier, an English translation was published that provides information for each spell accompanied by specific examples (Allen, 1974). For spells where Allen drew on different papyri, he even mentions the source for each paragraph. If the Book of the Dead tradition had significantly changed as a result of reinterpretation or if it was unclear to him, he quite often went back to the Coffin Text root and thus presents us with a version of the Coffin Text spell that was incorporated into the Book of the Dead. This conceals the historic development and creates the illusion of an unchangeable religious continuity.

In contrast, those editions of specific later papyri providing a full translation of particular manuscripts (e.g., Allen, 1960; Verhoeven, 1993; O'Rourke, 2016) do not face the difficulties of selection and of establishing a standard version. Rather, they allow for insight into the changes in what certain Egyptians understood and what they reinterpreted. Having said this, a methodological issue raised by the 3,000 or so known examples is addressed: Which papyrus contains the authoritative reading and which reading is faulty? To tackle this problem, some Egyptologists resorted to the method of textual criticism using a form of stemmatics first introduced by Wolfgang Schenkel (1978; see also Luft, 2015a for a description). This kind of textual criticism was developed chiefly in biblical studies and German Classics to establish the correct version of an author's work or the Bible. Particularly in postwar German Egyptology, it dominated the research of the Coffin Texts (e.g., Kahl, 1999; Topmann, 2002; Backes, 2005; Gestermann, 2005), and was applied primarily by Ursula Rößler-Köhler (1979,

1999) to the Book of the Dead, but possibly went unnoticed by some in the anglophone Egyptology world who advocated a “strong dose of textual criticism” (Lesko, 2000: 317). By meticulously analyzing deviations in, ideally, all available examples of a certain text and by establishing a stemma of those examples, stemmatics endeavors to identify corruptions and to reconstruct a hypothetical archetype, i.e., the version that the author created. However, no individual ancient authors are known for Egyptian religious texts, which belong to an open tradition, and thus it is questionable whether recreating an unattested version is sensible because a famous author’s individuality cannot be determined, nor can a constitutive religious attitude be reconstructed like in the Bible since it is characteristic for Egyptian religious thinking to develop new ideas by associative speculation and reinterpretation (Stadler, 2009: 43–47; for a criticism of stemmatic textual criticism, see also Pries, 2011: 1–7; Hagen, 2012: 216–17; for an apology, see Backes, 2011; Gestermann, 2017). Such a version claims to come as close as possible to the original, but it actually just represents another example, except this time one created by a modern redactor. If it really once existed, its readings might have quickly lost relevance for the succeeding epochs, which developed their own understanding and interpretation as testified in their copies that have survived. The necessarily limited horizon of the modern editor, who is not a native speaker of the Egyptian language and works only with an accidentally preserved selection of evidence, determines what is considered to be correct or wrong. This is especially true of the process of *divinatio*, which must take into account an author’s intention as well as his cultural and historic context. However, if a certain notion and its rare attestation have escaped a scholar’s attention—and who dares to boast of knowing all Egyptian religious texts by heart?—she or he might deem a deviation as a corruption or an error and emend it, even though it is actually correct. Yekatarina Barbash (2015), for instance, sees graphic variations as intentional scribal devices, whereas others might consider these mere scribal mistakes despite their use of the neutral term “deviation.” In fact, the textual criticism, which is critiqued here and which asserts some objectivity, entails a high degree of subjectivity as even proponents of this method such as Gestermann (2017: esp. 283) concede. Admittedly, all scholarly work is governed by subjectivity. Therefore, this method of textual criticism should be allowed as an alternative because it does have its merits, whereas some kind of new textual criticism adapted to the needs of Egyptology (Pries, 2011) would be the other legitimate and prolific way of dealing with the Book of the Dead (contra Gestermann, 2017: 271 n. 22). Thus, to peruse the Book of the Dead as a source for the study of ancient Egyptian religion requires some fleshing out. The study of its contents is one of the prerequisites for the application of textual criticism, whereas the latter’s results might again affect our understanding of the contents. It is with such a system of checks and balances that the Book of the Dead will eventually be decoded.

In any case, students of ancient Egyptian religion in general and of the Book of the Dead in particular must return to the individual manuscript and compare it to as many parallels as possible, and to the precursors in the Coffin Texts or even Pyramid Texts, in order to gain an impression of what the general message of a passage in a Book of the Dead spell might be. For this purpose, various publications are at hand and give

an impression of how a Book of the Dead spell as well as the belief system alters over time. These publications document the last approach to understanding the Book of the Dead to be mentioned here: a simple “edition” of the papyri without a translation and a study of its content. Such an “edition”—at best—includes annotations citing variants and commenting on possible mistakes made by the ancient scribe (e.g., Munro, 1994; Lapp, 1997; and the volumes of the series *Handschriften des altägyptischen Totenbuchs*).

## THE MILIEU OF THE BOOK OF THE DEAD: AUTHORS, COPYISTS, CUSTOMERS

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Textual criticism is an adequate method for examples that stem from the reproductive phase of a given text’s tradition, and generally the Book of the Dead is—like most religious texts with a tendency for reproductivity (Assmann, 1983b: 38, 40)—classified as belonging to the reproductive sphere. However, the sharp distinction between productive and reproductive work in a text, while the latter ultimately leads to an increasing corruption and a decreasing understanding, cannot be maintained in strict linearity. Doubtless, there are phases during which scribes merely copied Book of the Dead papyri to sell them as a commodity (Verhoeven, this volume)—and the combination of religious texts with accounts and other economic notes demonstrate a rather sober attitude toward “holy scriptures” (Quack, 2014). However, even during periods when less care was taken in writing down Book of the Dead papyri, or shortly thereafter, scribes were busy creating or recreating an intelligible body of spells. Generally speaking, those papyri were bought by members of the literate elite, i.e., officials, priestesses, and priests who should have been able to read the texts (cf. Quirke, 1993; Kockelmann, 2008: II 244–87; Albert, 2012; for the latter, see Stadler, 2014: 250). The serious work with the text is attested for individual manuscripts at any time as well as for those of the so-called Saite recension—which is, in fact, rather a late Kushite recension (Lesko, 2000; Munro, 2010: 58): Late Period and Ptolemaic papyri display a higher awareness for grammatical issues and carefulness than some, but not all Ramesside or Third Intermediate Period versions do. Those late copies even testify to an ancient Egyptian philology (for this phenomenon in ancient Egyptian literature in general, see Fischer-Elfert, 1996, Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl, 2018) or even textual criticism in noting variants by marking them as *ky dd* (lit. “other speech”). This is the result of Egyptian priestly scholars critically reviewing presumably archival copies. These scribes introduced corrections, emendations, and additions and established a standard version. Of course, such an endeavor is not really productive but rather reproductive, although it is still not evidence for a decay of philological competence.

Such an observation of Egyptian philology strongly hints at the existence of religious archives that preserved master copies. Admittedly, the Book of the Dead was to some extent a commodity, but the Saite recension and its implications point to the Book of the Dead’s religious character and it being rooted in a religious corpus from which the Book

of the Dead is an excerpt. The Book of the Dead's textual history, as briefly presented in the chapter's beginning, is another reason why the Book of the Dead provides us with insight into the milieu where the spells were created: Egyptian scribes dealing with rituals in the broadest sense who were even members of the House of Life—an institution that in earlier times was associated with both the temple and the king (Eyre, 2013: 311–15, Stadler, 2017a: 35–46). This double association might have facilitated the mobility of concepts, themes, and wordings between the various ritual spheres (temple, tomb, king, magic) (for an example, see Stadler, 2017b).

Rituals also play an important role in medicinal magic, and thus there are parallels to this corpus (Quack, 1999). Headings and colophons of quite a few Book of the Dead spells display a pronounced this-worldly reference, too. For example, the assertion “A truly excellent spell [proved] a million times” (BD 18, 20 [Stadler, 2009: 320–51], 31, 72, 86, 99, 134, 135, 137A [Luft, 2009], 144, 148, 155, 175 [Wüthrich, 2012]) is also well-known from magical and indeed medical spells (e.g., Borghouts, 1978: 45, 49, 55, and *passim*). “You shall say it over yourself over the bright and early in the morning, (for) it is a great protection. A truly excellent spell (proved) a million times.” BD 19 appears like a prescription to consume medicine every morning. In some cases, a Book of the Dead spell does have a decisively magical tone, such as BD 18, an invocation to Thoth, pleading for the god to help the deceased during the judgment. In the Ramesside P.Chester Beatty VIII, a magical papyrus, the composition recurs, but there is a threat against Thoth to betray his misdeeds that is added to the pious hymn: “If you do not listen to what I am saying, I will fall into saying that you ( . . . ) have robbed the offering of the ennead on the day of its feast (in) that night of Concealing the Great ( . . . ).” The text returns to an appeasing tone by adding a litany to Thoth. The Third Intermediate Period P.Greenfield (P.London BM EA 10554) follows this very tradition, but it is not a magical papyrus; rather, it is the Book of the Dead papyrus of the priestess Nesitanebisheru (Stadler, 2009: 343–49)!

Apart from being attested as inscriptions in a temple (Kockelmann, this volume), some colophons indicate an original context within the temple cult. The most illustrative examples are BD 137A, B, and 144. BD 137A seems to be a pastiche combining elements of various other rituals, whereas BD 137B originates in the temple cult of Osiris (Luft, 2009; and 2015b for further examples, e.g., BD 128 and 181). The Saite recension of BD 144 clearly states in the respective colophon: “To be used during the dawn of the Thoth festival.” Therefore, it can be connected to festivals celebrating the return of the Dangerous Goddess, an important date in any temple's calendar (Stadler, 2009: 256–63, for the Thoth festival see Medini, 2017). This spell is also an example, among many others in the Book of the Dead, of their importance to members of the Egyptian elite—and it is certainly they alone who could afford to buy a scroll as burial equipment—to document their familiarities with mythology and cultic knowledge, a qualification for entering the realm of Osiris. Thus, the Book of the Dead is a compendium to be used in the afterlife, but at the same time it reflects what a priestess or priest ought to know during his or her lifetime.

Evidence for the formation of individual spells is generally indirect. There is no case of a clear statement saying that a scribe has copied a spell from a scroll in a temple



library and incorporated it into the collection of texts that we call the Book of the Dead. Nevertheless, there is a *topos* in Book of the Dead colophons that informs us about how the text was discovered and thus assigning a high authority to it by claiming its *anciennité* (Baines, 2007: 179–201). According to these, King Khufu's son Hordjedef found some spells in the temple of Hermopolis during an inspection campaign around the temples of Egypt in the first half of the twenty-sixth century BCE, and in some versions the colophons maintain that Thoth himself authored the spells. Clearly such information cannot be taken seriously as proof of the actual history of the text, but it still helps us to understand both the Egyptians' concept of their history and how esteemed that particular temple was for the ancient Egyptians (Stadler, 2009: 66–109). The colophon's variation in wording and evocation of significant alternative details also suggest an un-historical character. For the so-called *chapitres supplémentaires* (Wüthrich, this volume) this is even more evident: the two attested manuscripts of BD 167 (Pleyte) give two different indications. One states that Amenhotep, son of Hapu (early 14th century BCE), found it; the other attributes it to Khaemwaset (13th century BCE), who is supposed to have discovered it with a mummy in the Memphite necropolis (Allen, 1974: 216).

## PROSPECTS: HOW FRUITFUL CAN A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF THE DEAD BE?

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Having said all this, it comes as a surprise and a paradox to find that Egyptologists very rarely use the whole body of the Book of the Dead for a systematic diachronic study of specific topics in ancient Egyptian religion. This calls for an explanation. To understand it, we have to understand what Egyptologists think the Book of the Dead is after all. Is it a ritual text or a collection of spells to accompany funerary rites by recitation, or is it rather a mythological compendium of religious knowledge and thus a book of magic? The answer will have some influence on the potential to use the Book of the Dead as a source for the study of ancient Egyptian religion in general.

For some scholars it is a mythological compendium, despite many references to ritual performance as a context. In this vein, Daniela Luft (2009: 87–90) is puzzled to discover something in the Book of the Dead that she identifies as a ritual text, and, by critically reviewing the tradition of that perspective, aims to maintain it and argues to reconcile her findings with it by postulating a secondary use of liturgical texts in the Book of the Dead. The very same intention seems to lie at the base of her verbose and theoretical article, published six years later without changing things fundamentally (Luft, 2015a). Similarly, Rita Lucarelli (e.g., 2006: 177) suggests the incorporation of ritual texts into the Book of the Dead is a phenomenon from the Third Intermediate Period onwards, implying that this practice is not original to the Book of the Dead. BD 17 (Rößler-Köhler, 1979, 1998, 1999), for instance, does support viewing the Book of the Dead as a wisdom book because it combines mythological statements with explanatory glosses,

even though those explanations are still arcane for us. Its title already suggests that it is a summary of the Book of the Dead—the small caps in the following excerpt indicate rubricized text in the original:

“BEGINNING OF THE GLORIFICATIONS (TO BE USED AT) GOING FORTH FROM AND DESCENDING TO THE GOD’S DOMAIN, BECOMING A BLESSED ONE IN THE BEAUTIFUL WEST, BEING IN THE RETINUE OF OSIRIS, BEING SATISFIED WITH THE OFFERING MEALS OF WENNEFER, OF COMING FORTH BY DAY, ASSUMING WHATEVER FORM ONE WILL, PLAYING THE SENET GAME, SITTING IN A PAVILION, GOING FORTH AS A LIVING BA BY N AFTER MOORING. IT IS EFFICACIOUS FOR ONE WHO PERFORMS IT ON EARTH. The words come to pass to the Lord of All:

(...)

I am the benu-bird who is in Heliopolis, the examiner of what exists.

Who is he?

He is Osiris. As for ‘what exists’: It is his wounds and his corpses—var. (*ky dd*): It is the neheh-eternity and the djet-perpetuity. As for ‘neheh-eternity’: That is day. As for ‘djet-perpetuity’: That is night. (...)

I am the Twin ba who is in the midst of his two children.

Who is he?

Osiris at entering Mendes. He found Ra’s ba there. Then they embraced each other. Then his Twin ba came into being. As for ‘his two children’: That is Horus who protects his father, and Horus Mekhenti-Irty.—var. (*ky dd*): As for the ‘Twin ba’: That is Ra’s ba, that is Osiris’ ba, that is the soul of him who is in Shu, who is in Tefnut, that is the soul of him who is in Mendes. (...)

(after Rößler-Köhler, 1979: 157, 158, 161, 212, 214–15, 223)

However, our perception of what constitutes a ritual and what a mythological text is might not concur with the ancient Egyptian classification. In the title of the previously quoted BD 17, the Egyptian term *sh.w* “glorifications” was used, and this refers to a genre of texts to be used ritually (cf. Assmann, 2002: 13–37). Indeed, there are mythological narratives that their original Egyptian title surprisingly terms as “ritual” (*nt-·*), i.e., they are to be recited accompanying cultic actions (cf. Quack, 2009a; Luft, 2015b: 49–50). Hymns, too, undoubtedly have a cultic setting and occur in the Book of the Dead as well (e.g., BD 15, cf. Assmann, 1969: 263–332; 1999: 106–7, 111–12, 120–34). Luft’s consternation about this might be rooted in her Heidelberg academic socialization, where Assmann (2001: 337–38; 2005: 251–52) declared:

The Book of the Dead is a book of magic. It contains rituals for domestic use. (...)  
The Book of the Dead, too, gained three-dimensionality and the power of magical imagination through its images. The mortuary liturgies are mostly excluded from this context. (...) The mortuary liturgies are essentially more accessible to our



comprehension than the mortuary literature. They have the considerable advantage of a ritual context and a textual coherence that seem to be absent from the texts dealing with magical knowledge.

However, it must be admitted that some spells of the Book of the Dead (e.g., BD 64, “the spell for knowing the spells for going forth [by day] in a single spell”) are indeed not easily understood and require a high exegetical effort to decode and elucidate them, and this might have led Assmann to his definition. To cope with this perceived predicament, he suggested distinguishing between mortuary and funerary literature. However, upon closer inspection, the system does not work coherently, as it was built up by Assmann in a series of works: he identifies the Book of the Dead as funerary literature and thus still inaccessible to our comprehension, while—according to him—we can, within limitations, understand mortuary liturgies, i.e., texts that are called *sḥ.w* in Egyptian. Yet, as we have just seen, one of the key spells in the Book of the Dead, BD 17, bears this very word *sḥ.w* in its title, and BD 17 is undoubtedly a wisdom text. Consequently, the distinction has been rejected with good reason (Baines, 2004: 15 n. 2; Smith, 2009: 209–14) and cannot be expressed properly: Assmann (1990) tried to find a terminological solution in English first (mortuary versus funerary), while in his native German tongue this option is not available. The English differentiation is not understood either, even by native English speakers who translated Assmann’s work (2005: 237–52; cf. Stadler, 2012: 128–29) and blurred his original intention. The quote from the English version of Assmann’s book given above is a good example of this because what is rendered there as mortuary literature should be “funerary literature” to be in keeping with Assmann (1990).

In fact, Assmann’s distinction is the result of a conviction that goes back to some of his earlier Egyptological work and is based on his view that “priestly cult religion and popular religion begin to diverge as the religious discourse becomes a distinct entity within the entire system of cultural communication, becoming a corpus of canonical texts and esoteric knowledge in the hands of few specialists” (Assmann, 2009: 6; first published in German; Assmann, 1983b: 11).

Of course, Assmann’s classification and his rationale behind it are a big step forward when compared, for instance, to the verdict by Kurt Sethe (1935–1939; 1962: II 177), who did not hesitate to deem a spell such as BD 5 to be “doubtless nonsense,” for, in contrast to Sethe, Assmann does not exclude the possibility that an understanding will be found sometime in the future. BD 5 is a good example of how much lies at the heart of even a short spell that appears enigmatic, if not strange, at first sight and that may confirm Assmann’s contention:

“SPELL FOR NOT MAKING A MAN WORK IN THE GOD’S DOMAIN. TO BE SAID BY N:

I am the one who judges the son of the Torpid One,

who came forth from Hermopolis.

I live on the baboon’s entrails.”

The spell was inherited from the Coffin Texts and was slightly, but significantly, changed in its wording. A Coffin Text version goes as follows:

“This N is the glutton, Torpid One,  
 who came forth from Nun/who came forth from Hermopolis.  
 This N, his is every ba.  
 On the baboon’s entrails this N lives.”

The high number of variants in individual Book of the Dead papyri testifies to the problems that the Egyptians already had. Thus, the papyrus of Nu (P.London BM EA 10477) changed what was perhaps by that time an enigmatic nomenclature, “the glutton,” to “the one who judged” combined with the son of the Torpid One, i.e., referring to Horus and his father Osiris, and evoking the idea of Thoth judging Horus. Most other manuscripts of the Book of the Dead have differing variants, though. The association with Thoth was presumably already present in the Coffin Texts with its reference “who came forth from Wenu (= Hermopolis).” Further hints to Thoth paradoxically come from the last statement, in which the speaker claims to live from the baboon’s entrails, as the baboon is Thoth’s sacred animal. In fact, the claim to live on the baboon’s entrails is all the more surprising because the passage immediately preceding it asserts a connection to Hermopolis, one of the principal cult centers of Thoth, who may be represented as a baboon. It is hard to understand why somebody who claims to be from Hermopolis would be proud to eat the entrails of an animal sacred to Thoth. Since some of the Middle Kingdom coffins from the Hermopolitan necropolis have the same notion, it was apparently acceptable in the Hermopolitan nome. Is this confirmation of the deceased breaking a taboo? I have suggested that it is a relic of early rites performed in royal surroundings (Stadler, 2009: 189–99): During those postulated performances, the baboon symbolized the royal ancestors who were eaten—or, rather, instead of whom baboons were consumed—in a cultic setting to internalize the ancestors’ power. Later, figurines of baboons replaced the sacrifice of actual animals. In this early period, Thoth, or rather the ibis god, was more of a royal deity than in later times, and Hermopolis was probably not his original home where the baboon deity Hedj-wer might have had his cult center. Does the spell reveal traces of Thoth’s migration to Hermopolis? This would postulate an actual existence of a ritual from the royal context that lost its function and significance and fell out of use, or that votive offerings of ape figurines in early temples (Bussmann, 2009) might be a later adaptation. However, the function and the intentions of those who donated the ape votives are unclear. The same is true of the little clay baboons now on display in the Luxor Museum, which were found in Ramesses XI’s tomb (KV 4); they remained unfinished and were reused several times for various purposes. Lacking a proper publication, even their archaeological context is more or less undocumented (cf. Reeves, 1990: 121–23), but it is tempting to interpret them as belonging to the genre speculated here, i.e., as symbols of the ancestors. In any case, in Hermopolis it could have been mythologically reinterpreted by identifying Thoth/ibis as a royal deity and

Hedj-wer/baboon as a royal ancestor and retained some expressiveness. Thus, maybe BD 5 and its precursor in the Coffin Texts are evidence for an etiology of Hermopolis as an outstanding place of Thoth's veneration, encapsulating the memory of Hedj-wer's worship there, and also evidence for the appropriation of formerly exclusively royal texts by Hermopolitan elites. To be sure, such an exegesis is risky because it entails a good deal of speculation and hypothesizing—as the many “maybes,” “perhaps,” “woulds,” and “coulds” in the preceding lines indicate. The lack of securely attested cultic performances, or rather, their metaphorical and enigmatic evidence in Egyptian prehistory, prompts such cautiousness. If there is some truth in the proposed interpretation, Hermopolis's adoption through the ibis god must have taken place during a very early phase, since Thoth is already associated with Hermopolis in the Old Kingdom. Despite, or rather because of, those provisos that appeal to us, Seth's verdict does not do justice to the spell.

## CONCLUSIONS

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BD 5 is one of the shortest spells in the Book of the Dead, and its exegesis as it is summarized here has been conducted by looking at it in isolation from the rest of the spells—explaining longer spells can fill entire books (e.g., Borghouts, 2007; Wüthrich and Stöhr, 2013). However, it is integrated into sequences of spells (cf. Weber, this volume) both in the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead, and these sequences change over time. Do the surrounding texts in the single manuscripts contribute to an understanding of each other? Is there a certain logic or—to use a problematic and well-worn term (Pries, 2013a)—a grammar of selection and combination behind them? Egyptologists have not dealt with those questions widely, and the sheer amount of texts witnesses, the great variation among them, and the range of manifold attestation contexts of the Book of the Dead seem to be a substantial obstacle. I assume that one would have to study and analyze each example separately. Luckily, there are ancient workshops with their distinct traditions (Verhoeven, this volume) that allow us to pool together a whole series of coffins or papyri so that the results have some validity beyond just one isolated realization.

Within the limited space of this chapter, however, BD 5 exemplifies what is required for using the Book of the Dead as a source for Egyptian religion and what can be gained from such an approach: a sensitivity for textual history helps to understand the process of text formation. Whether a dogmatic application of stemmatic textual criticism is necessary and whether it brings us further than we might be able to go without it is doubtful. The spell's rewording and rewriting show the problems that Egyptian scribes themselves experienced over the course of time. Their reaction is one of emendation and reinterpretation. Diagnosing those approaches allows us to observe the changes and the continuities in the history of ancient Egyptian religion, in the case of some chapters like BD 5, even over the course of more than two millennia. Thus, we learn what held importance for the Egyptians in specific periods, what became obsolete, and what remained

relevant over long time spans. In this sense, the Book of the Dead is a valuable guide to Egyptian religion even beyond the funerary sphere.

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