

UCLA

UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology

Title

Judgment after Death (Negative Confession)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/07s1t6kj>

Journal

UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology, 1(1)

Author

Stadler, Martin

Publication Date

2008-04-16

Copyright Information

Copyright 2008 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

JUDGMENT AFTER DEATH
(NEGATIVE CONFESSION)
المحاكمه بعد الموت (إعتراف سلبي)

Martin A. Stadler

EDITORS

WILLEKE WENDRICH

Editor-in-Chief

University of California, Los Angeles

JACCO DIELEMAN

Editor

Area Editor Religion

University of California, Los Angeles

ELIZABETH FROOD

Editor

University of Oxford

JOHN BAINES

Senior Editorial Consultant

University of Oxford

Short Citation:

Stadler, 2008, Judgment after Death (Negative Confession). *UEE*.

Full Citation:

Stadler, Martin A., 2008, Judgment after Death (Negative Confession). In Jacco Dieleman and Willeke Wendrich (eds.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles.

<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz000s3mg4>

1013 Version 1, April 2008

<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz000s3mg4>

JUDGMENT AFTER DEATH (NEGATIVE CONFESSION) المحاكمة بعد الموت (إعتراف سلبي)

Martin A. Stadler

Totengericht (negatives Sündenbekenntnis), Jenseitsgericht
Jugement des morts (confession négative)

In Egyptian funerary practices, trials composed a crucial phase through which the deceased had to pass in order to become “justified”—that is, worthy of entering the hereafter. The trials featured in Book of the Dead spells 18 and 20 are representative, the most popular pictorial representation of the judgment after death being the vignette of BD spell 125, the spell proper of which provides a text that summarizes Egyptian ethical standards. There is reason to consider that the text may stem from priestly initiation oaths.

كانت محاكمة الموتى في الطقوس الجنائزية المصرية القديمة تعد مرحلة حاسمة لا بُد أن يعبرها المتوفي لكي يُصبح «مُبَرَّرًا»، أي مستحقاً لدخول العالم الآخر. التعويذات رقم 18 و 20 بكتاب الموتى مثلاً لهذه المحاكمات. التمثيل التصويري الأكثر شعبيةً للمحاكمة بعد الموت هو التعويذه رقم 125 من كتاب الموتى والتي يمثل نصّها المعايير الأخلاقية المصرية. من المحتمل ان النصّ ناجم عن قَسَم الكهنة قبل بدء منصبهم.

According to Egyptian funerary beliefs, judgment after death was a process the deceased had to undergo in order to become “justified” and thus qualify for entrance into the hereafter. In this sense judgment can be considered to have been an initiation ritual. From the Middle Kingdom onward, judgment comprised a series of “posthumous” trials set in various Egyptian cities of particular mythic and cultic significance (featured in *The Book of the Dead*, spells 18 and 20, with precursors in the Coffin Texts and other Middle Kingdom sources). These trials, based upon the mythological judgment and subsequent justification of Osiris, constituted a model for each deceased’s justification. The most popular concept of judgment after death was expressed in BD spell 125, which supplied

both the relevant text to be recited (including the “negative confession” proper) and a depiction of the judgment scene. First attestations of BD spell 125 do not predate the New Kingdom; we therefore have good reason to assume that the concept of judgment after death was not fully developed before that period. However, there are precursors in the Coffin Texts, which themselves may have precursors reaching as far back as the Old Kingdom (based on the discovery of Pyramid Texts containing spells that were previously known only from Middle Kingdom coffins).

The roots of the belief in judgment after death possibly lie in the addresses to visitors found in tombs of the 4th Dynasty. Some of these texts threaten entrants who violate the ritual purity of the tomb or mortuary cult with

a judgment in the hereafter before the Great God. Certain elements of the belief, such as the scale upon which the heart (or other body part) of the deceased would be weighed in judgment, are present in the Coffin Texts. The concept of judgment after death first appears fully developed, however, in *Book of the Dead* papyri of the New Kingdom and is depicted as such in the relevant vignettes therein. BD spell 125 has survived in numerous copies, chiefly in cursive hieroglyphs and hieratic, but a demotic version (dated to 63 CE by its colophon) is also known.

The vignette of the judgment after death, attested from the mid-18th Dynasty onward, gives us an idea of the actual trial procedures. Although its association with *Book of the Dead* spell 125 is well known, the vignette is also found in accompaniment to other BD spells associated with the judgment. After the New Kingdom, the representation is found in a variety of contexts—coffins, shabti chests, mummy bandages, shrouds, and in one instance, a relief in the small Ptolemaic temple of Deir el-Medina. Although the set of figures displayed in the judgment scene changes over time, a typical representation comprises the introduction of the deceased to the judgment hall by a deity (Anubis, Thoth, *Maat*, or the Goddess of the West); a scale on which the deceased's heart is weighed against a feather (the symbol of *maat*: cosmic order and justice); a devourer (a beast that is part lion, part crocodile, and part hippopotamus), who stands by, ready to eat the heart of—and thereby annihilate—the sinful deceased; Thoth, who records the result in writing; and the enthroned Osiris, presiding as chief judge. All or some of a group of 42 judges are also shown. Abbreviated versions of the vignette exist, as well as more elaborate depictions.

According to its title, BD spell 125 is to be recited by the deceased when entering the judgment hall. It is intended to ensure that the individual will pass through the judgment phase and be found ethically worthy to enter the realm of Osiris. To this end, the deceased claims to know the names of the judges and

asserts his purity. As the knowledge he displays reveals familiarity with cults, rituals, and cult topography, it presents him as one who is versed in religious matters. In the spell's main section, the deceased addresses each of the 42 judges by his name and cult center. Each address is followed by the deceased's denial of having committed a specific sin, hence the term "negative confession." The 42 negative confessions confirm the speaker's equanimity—that is, they confirm that his behavior did not undermine or disturb the societal peace (for example, through theft, adultery, murder, or adding to the balance) and that he acted according to the cultic prescriptions, such as that of respecting the cultic chastity. Together with Egyptian instructions that parallel BD spell 125, and autobiographical texts that commemorate the achievements of individuals of the Egyptian elite, the negative confession is a major source of ancient Egyptian ethical standards. A life lived in accordance with these standards was a life lived according to *maat*. Over the more than 1500 years of the spell's tradition, the set of negative confessions remained remarkably stable, varying from (BD) manuscript to manuscript only in sequence. Variations are particularly noticeable between the redactions of the New Kingdom, Third Intermediate Period, and Late Period, where it is apparent, at least in some cases, that scribes had re- or misinterpreted words or phrases when copying.

Some scholars have suggested that BD spell 125 is an adaptation of the oaths of purity sworn by priests during their initiations. This suggestion is prompted by the texts of two priestly oaths whose structure and content are reminiscent of the negative confession of BD 125. The oaths, however, are written in Greek on papyri of Roman date. It has been argued that the recent discovery that the oaths are in fact translations from Egyptian constitutes further support for the suggestion. The oaths' Egyptian version is contained in the so-called *Book of the Temple*, a manual on the ideal Egyptian temple. However, there are no known manuscripts of *The Book of the Temple*

that predate the Roman Period. Therefore, the text might be much younger than the first witnesses of BD spell 125, although a Middle Kingdom date for the Egyptian priestly oaths has been advocated on the basis of *The Book of the Temple's* Middle Egyptian grammar. This dating method has not been unanimously accepted by Egyptologists; thus it cannot be definitely excluded that there is a reverse dependence, i.e., that the priestly oaths are, in fact, adaptations of BD spell 125. The known and available Egyptian sources do not presently allow a decisive conclusion, but it can be stated that there is a relationship between ritual texts pertaining to the temple context and texts that were used for funerary rituals, or as mortuary compositions.

The concept of judgment after death appears in sources other than *The Book of the Dead*. In *The Book of Gates*, for example, first

attested in King Horemheb's tomb (KV 57), the judgment hall of Osiris is featured. There the judgment process is conceptualized as being complexly linked to the solar journey through the netherworld, during which the sun god is vindicated, thus providing a model for the deceased. There are also references to a judgment after death in Egyptian wisdom texts, including *The Instruction of Merikara* (E 53–56) and *The Demotic Wisdom Book* (P. Insinger 4, 7 and 5, 7f.).

Some researchers have proposed, on the basis of Diodorus I 91–93, that a judgment of the deceased was “performed” as a drama at the tomb during the burial rites and have tried to find support in Egyptian sources for the proposition. Opponents of this hypothesis consider that Diodorus likely demythologized what he had heard about Egyptian religion and the mythic judgment after death.

Bibliographic Notes

Sources for *Book of the Dead* spell 125 are abundant (Gülden and Munro 1998: 140 - 147). Allen's translations of the spell (1960: 196 - 208) and (1974: 97 - 101) are perhaps more philologically precise than, and thus preferable to, those by Faulkner (1972: 29 - 34) and Hornung (1979: 233 - 245). The most comprehensive treatment of the judgment after death in the Coffin Texts is Grieshammer (1970); see also Assmann (2001: 372 - 393). The tradition, iconography, and development of the vignette through Egyptian history are discussed in detail by Seeber (1976). For the judgment as it appears in *The Book of Gates* see Manassa (2006). Assmann's classical study (1990) on *maat* explains the connection between ethical behavior and life in the hereafter by referring to sources other than BD spell 125. The demotic version of BD spell 125 is re-edited by Stadler (2003a) alongside commentary on scribal re- and misinterpretations of words and phrases and their relationship to the older hieroglyphic and hieratic versions; additionally, the discussion of whether BD spell 125 may derive from priestly oaths is summarized on pages 23 and 24. For this possible derivation also see Gee (1998), who could not have known that the Greek priestly oaths from Egypt were, in fact, translations from Egyptian, as shown by Quack (1997). *The Book of the Temple* is still more or less unpublished; for one of the most recent preliminary reports see Quack (2005: 105, n. 1), with references to the earlier preliminary reports. For judgment after death in *The Instruction of Merikara* and *The Demotic Wisdom Book*, see Quack (1992: 34 - 35) and (1999), to which some modifications have been proposed by Stadler (2001) and (2003b). Stadler (2001) discusses whether a dramatic performance of the judgment was a component of Egyptian burial rites.

References

Allen, Thomas

- 1960 *The Egyptian Book of the Dead. Documents in the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago.* Oriental Institute Publications 82. (Translation.) Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- 1974 *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day: Ideas of the ancient Egyptians concerning the hereafter as expressed in their own terms.* Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilizations 37. (Translation.) Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Assmann, Jan

- 1990 *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten.* Munich: C. H. Beck.
- 2001 *Tod und Jenseits im alten Ägypten.* Munich: C. H. Beck.

Faulkner, Raymond

- 1972 *The ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead.* (Translation.) London: British Museum Publications.

Gee, John

- 1998 *The requirements of ritual purity in ancient Egypt.* Ph.D. Dissertation: Yale University.

Grieshammer, Reinhard

- 1970 *Das Jenseitsgericht in den Sargtexten.* Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 20. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Gülden, Svenja, and Irmtraut Munro

- 1998 *Bibliographie zum Altägyptischen Totenbuch.* Studien zum Altägyptischen Totenbuch 1. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Hornung, Erik

- 1979 *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter.* Zurich and Munich: Artemis.

Manassa, Colleen

- 2006 The judgment hall of Osiris in the Book of Gates. *Revue d'Égyptologie* 57, pp. 109 - 150.

Quack, Joachim

- 1992 *Studien zur Lehre für Merikare.* Göttinger Orientforschungen 4. 23. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- 1997 Ein ägyptisches Handbuch des Tempels und seine griechische Übersetzung. *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 119, pp. 297 - 300.
- 1999 Balsamierung und Totengericht im Papyrus Insinger. *Enchoria* 25, pp. 27 - 38.
- 2005 Die Überlieferungsstruktur des Buches vom Tempel. In *Tebtynis und Soknopaiu Nesos: Leben im römischen Fajum. Akten des Internationalen Symposiums vom 11. bis 13. Dezember 2003 in Sommerhausen bei Würzburg*, ed. Sandra Lippert, and Maren Schentuleit, pp. 105 - 115. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Seeber, Christine

- 1976 *Untersuchungen zur Darstellung des Totengerichts im Alten Ägypten.* Münchner Ägyptologische Studien 35. Munich and Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag.

Stadler, Martin

- 2001 War eine dramatische Aufführung eines Totengerichtes Teil der ägyptischen Totenriten? In *Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur* 29, pp. 331 - 348.
- 2003a *Der Totenpapyrus des Pa-Month (P. Bibl. nat. 149).* Studien zum Altägyptischen Totenbuch 6. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- 2003b Zwei Bemerkungen zum Papyrus Insinger. *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 130, pp. 186 - 196.