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Two Letters to the Dead

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Two Letters to the Dead

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The Egyptian Letters to the Dead are a small though significant corpus of epistolary texts whose dates span the centuries of Pharaonic Egypt, ranging from the Old through the New Kingdoms. Alan H. Gardiner and Kurt Sethe were the first to identify these texts as a genre when they published in 1928 the seven Letters known at that time.¹ To date, thirteen Letters have been identified, two of which will be treated here—the Cairo Bowl and the Berlin Bowl.²

The genesis of this form of text derives from the Egyptian conception of the afterlife. The Egyptian netherworld was populated by the spirits of the dead, who were able to travel back and forth between their realm and the world of the living and were thus privy to the goings-on in both realms. The dead not only possessed this great knowledge, but they also had the power to harm or assist those whom they left behind.³

Generally, the dead were thought to use their power for their own protection; they were envisioned as being able to harm anyone who dared to desecrate their tombs, as well as to look favorably upon those who recited the appropriate utterances and left funerary offerings for their benefit.⁴ The power of the deceased transcended the bounds of the netherworld; their potency was capable of reaching into the world of the living.⁵ It was in the context of these beliefs that the Egyptian practice of composing Letters to the Dead arose. The Letters were written in the

hope that they would sway the deceased to use their influence on behalf of the living.

Although the corpus is relatively small, the contents of these texts are sufficiently similar to constitute a genre. The Letters to the Dead were never written with sentimentality; their authors assumed that the addressees were securely ensconced in the netherworld, so that any inquiry as to their well-being would be unnecessary. Since the dead were cognizant of occurrences in the mortal sphere, there was no need to write to them to keep them informed of day-to-day matters. The Letters to the Dead are thus not mere attempts by the living to communicate with spirits in the netherworld; rather, they are all missives with a practical intent, written specifically in order to rectify distressing situations on earth that could not be dealt with through available mortal channels.

All of the Letters to the Dead were sent by close relatives of the deceased: six of the letters were addressed to a parent, six to a spouse, one to a child, and one to a sibling.⁶ These Letters were written only to family members because they were the ones who were obligated to care for their deceased; they were responsible for providing offerings for the spirits, who were dependent upon their living descendants for their perpetual sustenance and continued well-being.⁷ Thus the authors of the majority of these texts joined their desire to send a message to the netherworld with their responsibilities to the deceased, and therefore accompanied their pleas with funerary gifts.⁸

Six of the Letters to the Dead were written on pottery bowls that could have held actual food offerings,⁹ and one Letter was written on a clay stand that was made to be used as a base to hold an offering bowl. The connection between these seven texts and the actual offerings that may have accompanied them is straightforward; a funerary gift could have been left inside the bowl for the spirit to take. Although there is no evidence to indicate that pal-

pable offerings were left for the spirit in the inscribed bowls, the presence in the tomb of the offering bowls themselves may well have served symbolically as the offering.¹⁰ The remaining three Letters to the Dead that can be linked with gifts to the spirits can be associated only with symbolic offerings.

These gifts, when offered in conjunction with the Letters to the Dead, served multiple functions. These offerings were not considered as guarantees to the outcome of the Letters' pleas; rather, they were combined with the petitions for purely practical purposes. Since the dead visited their tombs to receive the offerings that were brought to them, they could not help but notice the Letters that were left for them in conjunction with these offerings.¹¹ In this regard, the offerings may be seen as gifts that facilitate the sending of the Letters. In other respects, these offerings may have been intended as unsolicited gifts, or even as bribes to the spirits, brought either in order to placate them, or to entice them to look favorably upon the petition and the petitioner. Some may even have been intended as subtle threats to the spirit: if the plea was not favorably addressed, and the problem presented in the Letter not rectified to the author's satisfaction, then the author (or the person on whose behalf the Letter was written) would have no choice but to abandon the spirit by not bringing funerary offerings in the future.¹²

The situations that occasioned the Letters to the Dead were always family oriented, and their authors wrote either at their own behest, or on behalf of a close family member. Not written by members of the royal class, these documents afford us a glimpse into the workings of family life outside the royal sphere. Since these Letters were written only when problems arose, some of the information that may be gleaned from them relates to extraordinary, although acceptable, cultural practices of ancient Egypt. Five of the Letters deal with inheritance disputes, three of which

are cases revolving around fratriarchal versus patriarchal rights. From these three texts we see that a pattern of fratrilineal inheritance existed in Pharaonic Egypt even though it was not the norm.¹³

In addition to illuminating aspects of earthly life, these Letters shed some light on the Egyptian conception of the netherworld. The court in the netherworld, which judged the dead upon their demise so as to grant them entrance into the realm of the dead, is depicted throughout Egyptian literature and art.¹⁴ The Letters to the Dead show that this court had jurisdiction even after the deceased was allowed to enter the netherworld, that cases could be brought before it by members of the community of the dead, that the parties to the case need not all be dead, and that the verdicts handed down by the tribunal could reach beyond the netherworld and affect the living.¹⁵

Letters to the Dead, as such, are confined to the borders of Egypt. However, many aspects of these Egyptian Letters appear to anticipate elements of Semitic magical bowls. The greatest similarities may be seen between the Letters to the Dead that were written on pottery bowls and the Aramaic Incantation bowls of a later period.¹⁶ There are many points of contact between these bowls, the most obvious of which is the usage of bowls for communication. The Aramaic bowls were not designed to contact deceased relatives, nor were they intended to symbolize an offering, but since they were used as amulets and exorcising texts, they sought to invoke or coopt with the spiritual or demonic world. The choice medium for this contact, obviously, appears to have been pottery bowls, yet the Aramaic bowls sometimes refer to themselves as "letters,"¹⁷ showing that these bowls, just as the Egyptian bowls, were thought of as letters and that the physical bowls were secondary to the text themselves.¹⁸ The texts on the Semitic bowls are often written in a spiral, and both circular and spiral writing is found on the Letters to the Dead. One of

the Letters to the Dead has a figure inked on the bottom of the bowl; although this is unique among the extant Egyptian Letters, images are regularly found on the Semitic bowls.¹⁹ None of this is to say that the Egyptian Letters to the Dead are the same as the Semitic Incantation bowls; indeed, there are areas where these two genres do not overlap at all. But what is important to remember is that cultural practices never arise in a vacuum. Just as the Semitic bowls should be analyzed in light of their antecedents, so the Egyptian Letters to the Dead must be viewed in relation to the larger ancient Near Eastern world. As cultural practices transcend geographical boundaries, so too must one's study of them.

THE CAIRO BOWL

Description

This Twelfth Dynasty Letter was written on both the interior and the exterior of a nondescript red pottery bowl.²⁰ The first nine lines of the text are inscribed vertically on the inside of the bowl, and the text continues with two additional vertical columns on the outside. This is the only extant Letter to the Dead where the text of one Letter is started on the interior of the bowl and completed on its exterior.²¹

Translation

(1) Given by Dedí to the Hm-ntr priest, Intef born of Iw(2)nakht: As for this maid-servant, Im^cw who (3) is ill, you do not fight for her day and night with all (men)²² who are doers of evil (4) to her, (and) with all (women)²³ who are doers of evil to her. You wish your threshold destroyed (5) on account of what? Fight for her today like a new thing. Establish (6) her household (so that) water may be poured out for you. If there is nothing from your hand, then your house (7) will be destroyed! Can it be that you

do not know this? Doesn't this maid-servant (8) maintain your house among men? You (must) fight for [her]! (9) Watch over her! (10) Save her from everyone²⁴ (who is) doing evil to her. (11) Then your house and your children will be established. Good be your hearing.

Analysis

The general framework of this Letter follows the characteristics of the genre: there is a problem on earth that can be rectified only by the intercession of the dead. Yet this Letter cannot be understood completely at first reading, for it neither states the precise nature of the problem nor gives any direct clue as to the position of the main characters within the household. The text does reveal that a woman is sick but remains reticent about the specific details of the illness. Only by a careful analysis of the plea can we deduce the familial station of the sick woman and thereby clarify some of the inherent ambiguities of this Letter.

The text mentions three names—Dedí, Intef, and Im^cw—but it makes no explicit statements to indicate the roles of or the relationships between these people. Two plausible approaches to resolving the question of roles are initially apparent, and each reading results in a vastly different understanding of the circumstances that fostered the Letter's petition.

The first line, "Given by Dedí to the Hm-ntr priest, Intef born of Iwnakht," might only aim at introducing the characters. In that case, the simplest understanding would make Dedí, as sender of the Letter, the widowed wife whose house is in a state of upheaval, and who petitions her deceased husband to rectify the family's trouble.²⁵ Im^cw, "this maid-servant," would then be a highly valued retainer (a female majordomo), who is suffering from a malaise severe enough to jeopardize the stability of the household. Gardiner and Sethe's translation of this text

supports this view: they assume that Dedí is the widow, Intef the deceased, and Im^cw their prized servant.²⁶ Of course, this interpretation presupposes that a staff member's illness could and would destroy both a household and a family.

Even if an incapacitated servant could upset the balance of a family structure, the difficulty with this delegation of roles becomes obvious when one analyzes the key sentence in line six: "Establish her household so that water may be poured out for you." Here, the speaker explains to Intef, if indirectly, that the water offerings for the dead will cease if he does not intercede on behalf of the living. Given this context (the suggestion that if the household is destroyed the funerary offerings will stop), it must be assumed that Im^cw is in some way responsible for pouring out the water. In ancient Egypt, family members were primarily responsible for providing for the dead.²⁷ If, as implied in the text, Im^cw is responsible for pouring the water, she then must be related to the deceased. It therefore seems that Im^cw cannot be a servant in the conventional sense and that, as a relative of Intef, she may in fact be his widow. If so, her sickness would naturally upset the household's functioning and might even compromise the future lives of the family members.

If Im^cw is the widow, why does she refer to herself as "this maid-servant" when she might simply say, more personally, "me," or "your wife"?²⁸ This difficulty is a purely modern one. Whereas for a modern reader "this maid-servant" designates an occupation, for a contemporary reader of the Letter the phrase could be understood as a fictive title, employed as a means of humble self-reference.²⁹

The use of fictive titles was common throughout the Egypto-Semitic ecumene. A prime example may be found in the Bible, in the first book of Samuel, when the barren woman Hannah prays for a male child:

ותדר נדר ותאמר יהוה צבאות אם-ראה תראה |
 בעני אמתך וזכרתני ולא-תשכה את-אמתך
 ונתתה לאמתך זרע אנשים ונתתיו ליהוה כל-
 ימי חייו ומורה לא-יעלה על-ראשו:

So she vowed a vow and said: "Lord of Hosts, if You will see the suffering of Your maid-servant and will remember me and not forget Your maid-servant, so that You will give a male child to Your maid-servant, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor will come upon his head" (1 Samuel 1:11).

There can be no doubt that Hannah's petition, although different from Im'w's, is also a personal plea; the three biblical references to "Your maid-servant," as well as the Cairo bowl reference, "As for this maid-servant" (line two), indicate nothing more than polite subservience. These two petitions are directed to forces beyond the mortal sphere – Hannah's to God, and Im'w's to her deceased husband. Since both women are addressing superiors, the use of "servant," although not literal, is easily understood.

According to Egypto-Semitic epistolary custom, expressions of mock-servitude were also used, especially when a letter was addressed to a superior, but often when written to an equal. The writers of many of the Hekanakhte letters use *b3k* (servant) when referring to themselves in formal correspondence.³⁰ Similarly, the Amarna letters are rife with examples in which (*w*)*ardu* (slave) is used for self-reference. One illustration will suffice here:

li-ma-ad a-wa-te^{mes} ardi-ka an-nu-ti

Verily, understand these words of thy servant.³¹

There is no doubt that this practice was cross-cultural and widespread. When a term of humility is used in reference to oneself, as it is in Im'w's case, other evidence is needed to determine whether it is a fact of status or just a self-deprecating expression.³²

Now the message on the Cairo Bowl is crystal clear.

The widow Im^w is quite ill,³³ and she is worried about the future of her home and family. She is convinced that her sickness is caused by malevolent beings (whether in this world or the next).³⁴ She threatens to cease funerary offerings in the hope of enticing the aid of the spirit of her dead husband. Intervention from the netherworld is needed to arrest the progress of the evil-doers and, thus, to protect her home and her family.

Line Notes

1. *dī Ddī n.* The fact that Dedi "gives" the Letter, rather than "speaking" it, or even "writing" it substantiates the argument that she is not the author of this text but only a secondary messenger or letter-carrier.³⁵

Hm-ntr. The common Egyptian title (*Hm* = servant, and *ntr* = god) has semantic parallels in the Bible where "servant of God" or "servant of the Lord," is a recurrent appellation.³⁶ Whereas "God/the Lord" in these biblical expressions refers specifically to the God of Israel, in the Egyptian term *Hm-ntr*, "*ntr* is clearly the most general abstract concept, which covers the multiplicity of divine manifestations."³⁷

1/2. *Intf ms n lwnht.* The use of the matronymic is unusual although easily explainable. Sympathetic and propitiatory magic tends to identify people with matronymics rather than patronymics; a person is referred to as the son or daughter of their mother. The texts of the Aramaic Incantation bowls regularly identify the clients as the child of the mother, not the child of the father. To this day, when a prayer is uttered for the recovery of a sick person, the standard Jewish custom is to identify that individual as the child of his mother.³⁸

2. *b3kt.* See T. G. H. James, *The Hekanakhte Papers and Other Middle Kingdom Documents* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian Expedition, 1962), 128, for a discussion of *b3k* in introductory phrases of letters.

3. *mrt*. This word (*mr* + feminine ending *t*) is related to the Ugaritic *mrr*,³⁹ and to the Hebrew root *mrr*, from which derive the meanings “bitter” or “bitter distress.” In Hebrew the root never refers to a physical illness, but it may indicate psychological distress. A clear illustration is found in Ruth 1:13 when Naomi is speaking to her two widowed daughters-in-law. She attempts to convince them to return to their maternal homes rather than remain with her in the hope that she would bear sons for Levirate marriages.⁴⁰

הלהן | תשברנה עד אשר יגדלו הלהן תעגנה
לבלחי היות לאיש אל בנתי כי־מר־לי מאד מכם
כי־יצאה בי יד־יהוה:

Should you wait for them to grow up? Should you, for their sakes, be without husbands? No, my daughters, for it embitters me greatly for you that the Lord has gone out (against) me (Ruth 1:13).

Naomi is psychologically distressed on account of the plight of her daughters-in-law.

grh r. This is a merism meaning “all of the time.”

lrrl. The person who “does” can do either good or evil (*tr* = doer [of good], and *lrr* = [doer of evil]). The opposing nuances of “do” are not restricted to the Egyptian language. These same expanded meanings for deed/doer are also found in biblical Hebrew as well as in Akkadian. The Hebrew root *ʿll*, “deed or practice,” can indicate a generic deed, a good deed, or an evil deed.

אני יהוה חקר לב בחן כליות ולתת לאיש כדרכו
כפרי מעלליו:

I, the Lord, search the heart, examine the mind, so that (I may) give to (every) man according to his way with the fruit of his deeds (Jeremiah 17:10).

Here *ʿll* has a clearly generic meaning, that a man’s deeds are judged on their individual merit; the text does

not support an interpretation of a specific view of the deeds.

גם במעלליו יתנכר נער אס-זך ואס-ישר פעלו:

A youth is known by his deeds, if they are blameless and they are proper (Proverbs 20:11).

In this verse, *ll* parallels the child's "blameless and proper" actions, and therefore connotes good deeds.

יהוה אלהינו אתה עניתם אל נשא היית להם ונקם
על-עלילותם:

O Lord our God, You have answered them; You were a forgiving God to them; yet You took vengeance for their misdeeds (Psalms 99:8).

Here the translation speaks for itself; *ll* is simply "misdeeds."

4. *ryt*. For a discussion of this word in relation to Late Egyptian *rt*, see William A. Ward, "Late Egyptian *r.t*: The So-called Upper Room," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44/4 (1985): 329-32.

5. *grg*. See Hans J. Polotsky, "The Stela of Heka-yeb," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 16 (1930): 198, for a discussion of *grg* "to establish" as the object of *pr*.

THE BERLIN BOWL

Description

Two physical characteristics of the red pottery Berlin Bowl make it unique among the extant Letters to the Dead – the format of the inscription and the presence of a central figure.⁴¹ Unlike any of the other texts, its plea is inscribed in two concentric circles, the first comprising a complete circle, and the second three-quarters of a circle.⁴² Even more interesting than the circular arrangement of the text is the introduction of a portrait in its center.⁴³ Though crude, this line figure is true to the Egyptian style of draw-

ing, in which the face is portrayed in profile, and the shoulders by a full frontal view.⁴⁴ Gardiner identifies the form as female, representing the addressee.⁴⁵ Since the letter is addressed to a woman, it follows that the picture on the bowl should in some way represent her, perhaps in order to appease her spirit. However, the image is totally asexual – there is no indication (in the text or in the picture itself) that the image represents a woman. The only possibly telling feature is the headdress, but because it is rough and ambiguous, a case could be made just as easily for its being a man's wig as for its being a woman's. Therefore, it is not certain that the image is that of the deceased wife; the figure could reasonably represent the bereaved husband, the author of the Letter who is beseeching his wife for assistance and includes a picture of himself as a remembrance to his wife. Nonetheless, the presence of a central figure is noteworthy.⁴⁶

Translation

(1) May the King be gracious and grant (your desires),⁴⁷ Osiris and Anubis upon his mountain,⁴⁸ offerings to venerated [. . .]tet.⁴⁹ You were brought there to the city of eternity⁵⁰ without any of your spell(s) against me. If evil has been done, or if these blows (occurred) with your knowledge, behold the house of your children⁵¹ is in a fresh misery!

(2) Could it be that evil is being done by your error? Great is your father (in) the necropolis. If there is a complaint in your body, forget it for the sake of your children! Be gracious! Be gracious! May the gods of this place be gracious to you.

Analysis

Though there is a lacuna at the beginning of the Berlin Bowl that is impossible and unnecessary to fill, it is certain that the plea was addressed to a deceased woman. All that

is missing from the text is the full spelling of her name; the designation of her being deceased (*im3h*), here translated as “venerated,” and the female determinative remain intact. It is logical to assume that this Letter was sent by her husband.⁵² The widower is apparently concerned about the current suffering of his household, but he cannot fathom its cause. He is certain only that the evils facing him are neither of his making, nor of this world: something or someone in the netherworld must be the root of this misfortune. He therefore makes the standard plea of the Letters to the Dead, beseeching his wife for aid.

This short text lends itself to be broken into concise, yet meaningful segments. The formulaic beginning (*Htp di nsw*) at first appears awkward for a letter of this type because it was generally used for funerary offerings, and not for Letters to the Dead. But this unusual beginning is a key to understanding part of the widower’s strategy in presenting the letter to enlist his wife’s assistance.

Because the letter was written on a bowl (which is more difficult to inscribe than a flat surface), the medium must have served a function. Coupled with the *Htp di nsw* formula, the bowl probably was intended to hold a food offering, either real or representative. The presence of this formula in the text, therefore, shows that an offering was intended to accompany the letter, and that the husband sought either to appease his wife with the offering, or to entice her to read the letter and act on his request.

The next sentence, “You were brought here . . . against me,” is the center of the petitioner’s confusion. He implies that when his wife died everything was just as it should have been—that she was brought “to the city of eternity/to the necropolis” indicates that she was given a proper burial; that she died without any of her spells against her husband shows that the author felt that his wife bore no grudge against him at the time of her death. The author’s working assumption is that if there had been

enmity between him and his wife before her death he would have become aware of it, for she would have set her "spells" against him. Indeed, he apparently felt that she was content when she died, and, at that time, he assumed that his home and his family were secure. The widower is convinced of his innocence and in the first line of the text he does not even consider the possibility that he may have had some responsibility for his current woes. Up to this point the implied question the author is asking is "How could you do this to me?" Short of actually accusing his wife, he is hinting that she might be ruining his earthly existence without cause.

The strongest argument the widower presents in this sentence of his petition is that his wife received a proper burial. It was very important to the Egyptians, as well as to many ancient people, that a corpse be properly interred. At the end of the Middle Egyptian tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor, the giant serpent reassures the sailor that:

You (the sailor) will arrive home in two months, you will hug your children, you will be vigorous, at home you will be buried.⁵³

The emphasis is placed not only upon the return home, but also on the assurance of a proper burial in the land of Egypt – anything less would be a disgrace.

In the Bible, God condemns the corpses of the people associated with the rebel Jeroboam to remain unburied, and therefore to be devoured by animals:

המת לירבעם בעיר יאכלו הכלבים והמת בשדה
יאכלו עוף השמים כי יהוה דבר:

The dead of Jeroboam who are in the city, they shall be eaten by dogs, and the dead who are in the field, they shall be eaten by the birds of the sky, so says the Lord (1 Kings 14:11).⁵⁴

In the classical sphere, the story of Antigone is a prime

example of the importance placed upon a dignified burial to ensure the repose of the deceased. Antigone, the model of sororal fidelity, gives up her own life in the attempt to bury the body of her slain brother Polynices, which has been left, by royal edict, to be preyed upon by dogs and vultures.

In the Roman epic *The Aeneid*, Aeneas, during his journey to the underworld (Book VI), met "the resourceless, who had no burial."⁵⁵ These souls were doomed to wander for a hundred years without crossing the river Styx because they had been left unburied. Aeneas encounters his former helmsman Palinurus who begs him to "rescue me from my plight. . . . Cast soil upon me yourself . . . that at least in death I may rest at a place of calm."⁵⁶ Aeneas is moved by the fate of his former colleague and desires to bury him, but he cannot because he must continue on his mission.

Conversely, in the Apocrypha, Tobit, while listing his righteous deeds, states proudly that he took the task of locating and burying abandoned bodies. He declares:

I performed many acts of charity to my brethren. I would give my bread to the hungry and my clothing to the naked; and if I saw any one of my people dead and thrown out behind the wall of Nineveh, I would bury him. And if Senacherib the king put to death any who came fleeing from Judea, I buried them secretly. For in his anger he put many to death. When the bodies were sought by the king, they were not found. Then one of the men of Nineveh went and informed the king about me, that I was burying them; so I hid myself. When I learned that I was being searched for to be put to death, I left home in fear.⁵⁷

The setting of this apocryphal work is a literary device, its date being centuries later than the situation described, yet it attests to the continuity of the value placed upon respect for the corpse, a societal value which spanned borders.⁵⁸ Attending to the dead by giving them a proper burial

was essential, for the dead to remain untended (and, for the Egyptians to be buried outside the confines of Egypt), threatened a terrible fate for the soul.

In the last sentence of the first line of the text, "If evil has been done . . . ," the author changes his plan of action by appealing to his wife's maternal instincts. He subtly informs her that if she does not put an end to these machinations, indeed if she even has the vaguest knowledge of what is going on, she herself is responsible for the destruction of her former home and for the ruination of her family. He does not mention here that he himself is in some sort of trouble; he relies instead upon her concern for her children to awaken her to his plight.⁵⁹

Line two begins by once again changing the strategy of the letter: "Could it be that evil is being done by your error?" Here the husband appears incredulous – he is still the innocent one, but he does not accuse her of malice aforethought as he did above. In the first line of the text he all but states that his wife is guilty, but now he indicates his disbelief in her evil intentions by giving his wife the benefit of the doubt. After all she might not be aware of her role in what has been happening on earth. Whether or not she is aware of her family's misfortunes, his question is most likely a subtle way of telling her to discover the cause of his misfortune and to try to rectify his plight.

Once he has placated her by recognizing the possibility of her innocence, the husband continues his plea and includes the shrewdly worded compliment, "Great is your father (in) the necropolis," which sends a twofold message to the deceased. On the one hand the statement reminds her that she has access to higher powers in the netherworld who might be able to assist, but on the other hand it indirectly threatens her that if she does not come to the aid of her family, other ancestors might be appealed to.

Finally, the husband admits that his wife might indeed bear him a grudge for some conceivable grievance: "If there

is a complaint . . . for the sake of your children.” Reluctantly he acknowledges that she may have a grievance against him – for everyone may transgress unwittingly. He argues, however, that she should forget her displeasure not for his sake, but for the sake of their children. This is the second time in this short letter where maternal protection is sought. The author is not relying upon his wife’s beneficent feelings toward him; rather, he stresses the fact that their children are being threatened. By this point three possibilities for the family’s troubles have been covered by the author: the deceased wife is purposefully meddling in the earthly goings-on; she is an innocent who does not know what and why things are happening; or finally, almost as an afterthought, the husband acknowledges that he may have done something to have brought about his current predicament.

The conclusion of the letter indicates just how confident the petitioner is that everything will be rectified in the end. The parting phrases are his last attempt to influence his dead wife, where he entreats her to be gracious. Then the husband indicates his good will and shows his faith in a favorable outcome by invoking blessings on her spirit.

Line Notes

1. *Wstr Inpw*. These two gods, as well as the king, give boons. Therefore, this should be understood as a shorthand for *Htp dl Wstr, Htp dl Inpw*. “May Osiris be gracious and grant (your desires), and may Anubis be gracious and grant (your desires).”⁶⁰

Im3h. “Blessed state of the dead”⁶¹ indicates that the lady whose name follows in the lacuna is the deceased.

‘3. Context demands the translation “there” for this adverb whose usual translation is “here.”⁶² ‘3 is employed six times in the corpus of the Hekanakhte letters, three times ‘3 “certainly means ‘there’ where the recipient is.”⁶³

So, at least in letters, this one adverb may refer either to "there, where you are," or "here, where I am."

r nltwt nt nhh. "To the city of eternity" is the same phrase as, and is used in a similar way as, the Hebrew phrase *bet 'ôlamô*, "house of eternity/grave" which is found in the Bible:

גם מגבה יראו וחתחתים בדרך וינאץ השקד
ויסתבל החגב ותפר האביונה כי הלך האדם
אל בית עולמו וסבבו בשוק הספדים:

Also when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are on the road, and the almond tree is in blossom, and the grasshopper is burdened, and the caper bush buds anew; but a man goes to the house of his eternity,⁶⁴ and the mourners go about in the market place (Ecclesiastes 12:5).

spt. Here translated as "spell" may be cognate to *šlptu*, Akkadian for "incantation."⁶⁵

hrdw.t = Ugaritic *hrd*, "child/youth."⁶⁶ Both of these words may be related to *hardatu*, which is the Eblaite term for "female slaves"; see Dietz O. Edzard, *Hymnen, Beschwörungen und Verwandtes*, Archivi reali di Ebla, Testi V (Rome: Missione archeologica italiana in Siria, 1984), #3 (5:5). Although used at Ebla specifically for "slaves," it may be a cognate to the generic Egypto-Semitic term for children.

m3. See Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Worterbuch der aegyptischen Sprache* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1982), 2:43.

2. *m msdd.t*. This is a perfect correlation to the Hebrew *bišgāgāh*, "a sin of inadvertence."⁶⁷

sp sn. This is parallel in usage to Sumerian *KI MIN* for "read twice" (commonly used as a Sumerogram in Akkadian).

Conclusion

Even though the Letters to the Dead are a genre of literature unique to Egypt, the ancient Egyptians were not

unique in their desire to communicate with the dead. The mythology of the ancient Mediterranean world lauds both heroes and gods who travel to and from the netherworld and make contact with the dead.⁶⁸ The Bible has no records of anyone who actually traveled to the realm of the dead, but it does recount the successful attempt by Saul to speak with the spirit of the deceased prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 28:5-19).⁶⁹ In the mythology, as well as in the Bible, the living inquire of the dead to get a glimpse of the future or to clarify aspects of the past. The dead spirits usually address these inquiries by participating in some form of dialogue with the living.

The Egyptian Letters to the Dead are distinct from these attempts at communication with the dead insofar as the Egyptians did not expect any reciprocal communication from the netherworld. The authors of the Letters to the Dead neither present questions to, nor expect to receive verbal answers from, the deceased. The Letters to the Dead do not seek insight into the future, nor do they attempt to understand the past; the sole aim of these Letters is to convince the addressed spirits to use their acknowledged powers to assist the living so as to rectify distressing situations on earth. The authors of the Letters to the Dead want action, not discussion.⁷⁰

This paper has stressed the areas of contact exhibited between these texts and the larger Egypto-Semitic ecumene. Cultural practices that were prevalent in other areas of the ancient Near East illuminate many of the situations presented in the Letters to the Dead, such as the importance of the proper interment of a corpse in a specific location, and the practice of praying for the birth of a child.

Just as there are similarities between the Egyptian and the ancient Near Eastern spheres, so too are there areas of divergence. When things are borrowed from one culture into another, certain aspects remain the same and others change. The antecedents of the Semitic magic bowls, for

example, are most certainly in ancient Egypt, yet these two sets of bowl communications are not identical. Only one of the Egyptian Letters to the Dead was written in a spiral, and only one of the Egyptian bowls has a figure inked on the bottom. In contrast, many of the Semitic magic bowls and both of the inscribed bowls from Minoan Crete exhibit these features. This paper has indicated that Egyptian texts offer insight into the cultures of people beyond the strict confines of Egypt without diminishing the importance of acknowledging points of divergence; it is in elucidating the often overlooked areas of agreement that the broader aspects of both the Egyptian and the Semitic worlds will be better understood.

APPENDIX: THE CAIRO BOWL

Inside

- (1) dī Ddī n hm-nṯr Intf ms n Iw
- (2) nht ín⁷¹ ír t3 b3kt Imíw ntt
- (3) mrt nn ḥ3.n.k hr.s grh r^c hn^c írrí nb
- (4) r.s hn^c írrt nbt r.s mrr.k wšt ṛryt.
- (5) k hr íh ḥ3.tw hr.s mín mí m3t grg
- (6) pr.s stí n.k mw ír nfr.n mk k3 pr.k
- (7) ḥb3 ín⁷² wn nn rh.n.k ntt ín t3 b3kt
- (8) ír pr.k m rmt ḥ3.tw hr.[s]
- (9) rst hr.s

Outside

- (10) nhm.s hn^{c73} írrí nb / írrt nbt
- (11) íh grg pr.k hrdw.k nfr sdm.k

THE BERLIN BOWL

(1) htp dī nsw h Wsír Inpw tp dw.f prt-ḥrw
n ím3h [. . .]tt ; ín.ṯ ṽ3 r níwt nt nhh nn špt.t
nb r.í ír wn írr.t nn skr.w m rh.ṯ mt̄ pr m-
hrdw.ṯ wgg m3

(2) *ir wn irr.t m msdd.t 3 it.t (m) hr-ntr ir
wn srh m ht.t smh sw n-ib-n hrdw.t htp sp sn
(= htp htp) htp.n.t ntrw t3w-wr*

Notes

1. Alan H. Gardiner and Kurt Sethe, *Egyptian Letters to the Dead Mainly from the Old and Middle Kingdoms* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1928).

2. The Kaw bowl and the Misplaced Letter to the Dead each have two Letters to the Dead inscribed upon them. There are thus eleven extant objects which contain the thirteen Letters to the Dead.

3. For a general discussion, see Alan H. Gardiner, *The Attitude of the Ancient Egyptians to Death and the Dead* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1935).

4. Gardiner and Sethe, *Egyptian Letters*, 10. See also William K. Simpson, "A Hatnub Stelae of Abydos," *Mitteilungen des deutschen archaologischen Instituts-Abteilung Kairo* 16 (1958): 298-309, and J. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy According to Ancient Egyptian Conceptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 197-200.

5. See Dows Dunham, "The Biographical Inscriptions of Nekhhebu in Boston and Cairo," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 24 (1938): 1-8, for a discussion of a funerary stele in which the deceased reminds the living that they will want him to intercede for them in the necropolis, and therefore they should remember to make appropriate funerary offerings to his spirit.

6. The Cairo Text on Linen has two authors; a wife and a son write jointly to their deceased husband/father respectively. There are thus fourteen authors for thirteen Letters.

7. For a discussion of the food-offerings that were brought to the dead, see A. J. Spencer, *Death in Ancient Egypt* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1982), 54-61.

8. Only three of the texts, the Cairo Text on Linen, the Letter to the Dead from the Tomb of Meru, and the Letter to the Dead from Nag ed-Deir N3500, cannot, at this time, be connected in some manner with funerary offerings.

9. There are six Letters that were written on five bowls, the Kaw bowl is inscribed with two Letters, one on its interior and the other on its exterior.

10. The mere presence of the offering bowl would indicate an offering in perpetuity.

11. Gardiner and Sethe, *Egyptian Letters*, 10.

12. Threatening the spirit with the cessation of funerary offerings is a common ploy mentioned in the Letters.

13. Other issues that these Letters address are more commonplace: one is a simple prayer for a male child, another is designed to ward off a specific nightmare, and three deal with sickness (either physical or psychological). The remaining three Letters rely totally on the prior knowledge of the deceased addressee and do not divulge the nature of the pleas.

14. For a general discussion, see S. G. F. Brandon, *The Judgment of the Dead* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), chap. 1. Many of the Coffin Text spells were intended to assist the deceased when he went before the tribunal of the god(s). The standard artistic representation of the Egyptian nethercourt is the scene of the "weighing of the heart" regularly found in the Book of the Dead.

15. This is distinct from the phenomena of the dead participating in earthly court proceedings from their place in the netherworld. The prime example of that in Egypt is the trial after the murder of Ramses III in which the testimony of the dead king himself was used in the court; see Battiscombe Gunn, "Notes on Ammenemes I," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 27 (1941): 2-6. The dead could also participate in judicial proceedings through oracles. The deified Amenophis I was approached with a case involving an inheritance dispute which he was to help adjudicate and deliver his decision via an oracle; see J. J. Janssen and P. W. Pestman, "Burial and Inheritance in the Community of the Necropolis Workmen at Thebes," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 11 (1968): 146.

16. In addition, the two Minoan Linear A bowls found at Knossos also have striking resemblances to the Letters to the Dead as well as to the Semitic Incantation bowls.

17. William Rossell, *A Handbook of Aramaic Magical Texts* (Ringwood, NJ: Shelton College, 1953), 122.

18. The primary element was the text, not the medium upon which it was written. The three Letters to the Dead which cannot be connected with offerings to the spirits still must have been considered efficacious by their authors, or they would not have been written in that manner.

19. Both of the bowls from Knossos have figures inked on the bottom of the bowls which cannot be part of the text and are most likely images of some sort.

20. Gardiner and Sethe, *Egyptian Letters*, 8. Until now this text was most recently treated by Cyrus H. Gordon, *Forgotten Scripts*:

Their Ongoing Discovery and Decipherment (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 182-83.

21. The Kaw Bowl consists of two distinct Letters, one written on the inside of the bowl, and the other on the outside.

22. A male determinative is used here.

23. A female determinative is used here.

24. Determined with both a male and a female sign.

25. Intef may or may not be the addressee: all that is evident from the text is that he is a Hm-ntr priest. It makes no practical difference, however, whether he is the husband to whom the letter is addressed, or whether he is simply a priest who is acting as intermediary, that is, as the deliverer of this petition. In this commentary, however, it will be assumed that the deceased is Intef. The difficulty inherent in understanding this text revolves around the identify of Im^cw, not that of the other characters.

26. Gardiner and Sethe, *Egyptian Letters*, 7.

27. Mortuary priests could be hired to provide for the dead, but the major responsibility remained within the family. See Spencer, *Death in Ancient Egypt*, 54.

28. Or she might even employ the common device of "your sister."

29. Although it sounds contrite to the modern ear, epistolary style still encourages such usages, for example, "your humble servant."

30. T. G. H. James, *The Hekanakhte Papers and Other Middle Kingdom Documents* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian Expedition, 1962), 128.

31. S. A. B. Mercer, *The Tell El-Amarna Tablets* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1939), 728-29. For further examples see *The Assyrian Dictionary*, Ignace J. Gelb et al., eds. (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1960-), vol. 1, pt. 2, 251, s.v. *ardu*.

32. Another expression of personal humility employed in the Bible and the cuneiform world is "dog." See 2 Samuel 7:21 and 1 Chronicles 17:19; in both of these examples the Masoretes have pointed the word to read "your heart," but they should read "your dog" as a parallel to "your servant." For Akkadian examples, see *The Assyrian Dictionary* 8:72, s.v. *kalbu*.

33. Whether her illness is physical or psychological is undetermined.

34. Gardiner and Sethe, *Egyptian Letters*, 8.

35. See 'Abd el-Mohsen Bakir, *Egyptian Epistolography from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-first Dynasty* (Cairo: Institut Français d'ar-

cheologie orientale du Caire, 1970), 29-32, for a discussion of delivering letters, and the name of the deliverer as part of the address.

36. *‘ebed-YHWH* (Deuteronomy 34:5 ad passim), *‘ebed ‘Ādonāi* (Daniel 10:17), and *‘ebed ha-‘Ēlohim* (Daniel 9:11, Nehemiah 10:30, 1 Chronicles 6:34, and 2 Chronicles 24:9) are all biblical terms for servant of God/the Lord.

37. Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (Oxford: Griffith Institute at the University Press, 1976), 27.

38. In most other instances Jewish custom dictates using the patronymic.

39. William A. Ward, "Comparative Studies in Egyptian and Ugaritic," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 20 (1961): 36.

40. For a discussion of Levirate marriage, see Clair Gottlieb, "Varieties of Marriage in the Old Testament," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1989.

41. For the physical description of and the rationale for dating this bowl to the Eleventh Dynasty, see Gardiner and Sethe, *Egyptian Letters*, 5.

42. The Letter to the Dead which most closely approximates this pattern of inscription is the Letter to the Dead on a Bowl in the Louvre which combines both circular and spiral writing. The first line of the text is a complete circle, and the second line spirals down to the center of the bowl.

43. For Gardiner's rendition of the portrait, see Gardiner and Sethe, *Egyptian Letters*, pl. 5.

44. There is also an indication of the beginning of one arm.

45. Gardiner and Sethe, *Egyptian Letters*, 7. Battiscombe Gunn, "Notices of Recent Publications," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 16 (1938): 152, feels that the picture of the deceased is a "symbolic way of addressing the communication."

46. Stylistically, the Berlin Bowl has many parallels with the Aramaic Incantation bowls. The circular inscription is akin to the spiral writing commonly found on the Incantation bowls as well as on the two Minoan Linear A bowls found at Knossos. The central figure is also an element familiar from these bowls. It should be noted, however, that the figures on the Incantation bowls are usually demonic.

47. Reading with Gardiner and Sethe, *Egyptian Letters*, 7.

48. The wish is for these two gods also to grant the desires of the deceased. See line notes below.

49. Only the last two elements of the name of the addressee and the feminine determinative are visible after the lacuna.

50. The necropolis.
51. Reading with Gunn, "Notices of Recent Publications," 152.
52. A case could be made for the author of the letter being the son of the deceased. After all, the evil appears to affect the children, "behold the house of your children" (line 1), "for the sake of your children" (line 2). The first person pronominal suffix is used only once in the text (line 1), which could be understood as a reference to the one who fulfilled the obligation of burial: "You were buried (by me) without any of your spells against me." But this reading, making the sender the son, would, of course, raise many unanswerable questions—What happened to the father/husband? Why isn't the letter addressed to "Mother"? and so forth. Since the letter does not cite the relationships of the individuals to each other, any one rendering would only be speculative. Therefore, we must go along with an interpretation that appears to make the most logical sense: the sender is the widower, and the addressee is his deceased wife.
53. Translated from A. de Buck, *Egyptian Readingbook* (Chicago: Ares, 1977), 105.
54. See also 1 Kings 16:4.
55. Vergil, *The Aeneid*, tr. W. F. Jackson Knight (Middlesex: Penguin, 1956), 157.
56. *Ibid.*, 158.
57. Tobit 1:16-20. Bruce Metzger, tr., *The Apocrypha of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 64.
58. Tobit reflects Zoroastrian religious institutions in the Persian Empire.
59. The phrase "against me" in sentence 2 indicates that the troubles are not just affecting their children.
60. Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1957), 170-71.
61. Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1976), 20.
62. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 155.
63. James, *Hekanakhte Papers*, 110-11.
64. To his "grave."
65. For a discussion of this reading, see Cyrus H. Gordon, "Hby, Possessor of Horns and Tail," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 18 (1986): 131.
66. UT 19.1002.
67. As observed by Constance Wallace in a private communication.
68. Gilgamesh, Odysseus, and Aeneas are but three legendary mortals whose travels took them to the realm of the dead where they actually spoke with the spirits whom they encountered.

69. The fact that necromancy was outlawed indicates that it was a widespread practice. The professionals, like the Witch of Endor, must have had a following, for there is no need to prohibit something which is rare or nonexistent.

70. The Egyptians felt that their Letters were answered when the situations they were complaining about were rectified.

71. Gunn, "Notices of Recent Publications," 152.

72. Ibid.

73. Read *m*^c with Gardiner and Sethe, *Egyptian Letters*, 22.