

London Landscape

The book of death: weighing your heart

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The classic exposition of judgement at death comes in the *Book of Coming Forth by Day*, in chapter/spell 30 and in chapter/spell 125, and the so-called weighing of the heart. To the Egyptians, the heart, or *ib*, rather than the brain, was the source of human wisdom and the centre of emotions and memory. Because of its apparent links with intellect, personality and memory, it was considered the most important of the internal organs. It could reveal the person's true character, even after death, so the belief went, and therefore the heart was left in the deceased's body during mummification. In the weighing of the heart rite, the heart of the deceased is weighed on the scale against the feather of the goddess Maat, who personifies order, truth, and what is right. Spell 30 was often inscribed on heart scarabs that were placed with the deceased. The spell appeals to the heart not to weigh down the balance or testify against the deceased to the keeper of the balance. Part of the spell gives instructions for making the heart scarab: 'Make a scarab of nephrite adorned with gold and put within a man's breast, and perform for him the ceremony of opening the mouth, the scarab being anointed with myrrh.'¹

In Egyptian religion, the heart was the key to the afterlife. It was conceived as surviving death in the Netherworld, where it gave evidence for, or against, its possessor. It was thought that the heart was examined by Anubis and the deities during the weighing of the heart ceremony. If the heart weighed more than the feather of Maat, it was immediately consumed by the monster Ammit.²

What is The Book of the Dead?

The Book of the Dead is a modern term for a collection of magical spells that the Egyptians used to help them get into the afterlife. They imagined the afterlife as a kind of journey you had to make to get to paradise – but it was quite a hazardous journey so you would need magical help along the way.

The Book of the Dead isn't a finite text – it's not like the *Bible*, it's not a collection of doctrine or a statement of faith or anything like that – it's a practical

guide to the next world, with spells that would help you on your journey.³

The 'book' is usually a roll of papyrus with lots and lots of spells written on it in hieroglyphic script. The rolls of papyrus usually have beautiful coloured illustrations as well. They would have been quite expensive so only wealthy, high-status people would have had them. Depending on how rich you were, you could either go along and buy a ready-made papyrus, which would have blank spaces for your name to be written in, or you could spend a bit more and probably choose which spells you wanted.

Some of the spells are to make sure you can control your own body after death. The ancient Egyptians believed that a person was made up of different elements: body, spirit, name, heart, all embodiments of a person, and they were afraid that these elements would disperse when you died. So there are a lot of spells to make sure you do not lose your head or your heart, that your body does not decay, as well as other spells about keeping alive by breathing air, having water to drink, having food to eat.

There are also spells about protecting yourself, because the ancient Egyptians expected to be attacked on the journey to the afterlife by snakes, crocodiles and insects – an idea very much based on the threats they knew in real life, only much more frightening and much more dangerous.

As well as the animals, you could be attacked by gods or demons who served the gods. In the next world, there are a lot of gods guarding gateways that you have to get through, and if you do not give the right answers to their questions at the gates, they can attack you because they have knives and snakes in their hands.

Without the correct spells to protect you, you could be punished in a variety of ways: you could be put on to the slaughter block, you could be decapitated or you could be turned upside down (which meant your digestive process worked in reverse so you had to eat faeces and drink urine forever!).

The worst thing that could happen is what was called the second death. This meant you were killed and your spirit could not come back and so you would have no afterlife at all. It was a world of great fear that they believed they were going into, and *The Book of the*

Dead provided guidance and protection on this journey.

All this was possible to visit for the first and last time at the British Museum as a major exhibition.

The British Museum has one of the most comprehensive collections of *Book of the Dead* manuscripts on papyrus in the world, and this exhibition was the first opportunity to see so many examples displayed together. Because of the fragility of the papyri and their sensitivity to light, it is extremely rare for any of these manuscripts to ever be displayed, so this was a truly unique opportunity to view them. The exhibition included the longest *Book of the Dead* in the world, the Greenfield Papyrus, which measures 37 metres and has never been shown publicly in its entirety before. Also on display were the famous paintings from the papyri of Ani and Hunefer, together with selected masterpieces on loan from major international collections. These treasures were exhibited alongside a dazzling array of painted coffins, gilded masks, amulets, jewellery, tomb figurines and mummy trappings. State-of-the-art visualisation technology provided new ways of accessing and understanding this key source in the history of world religions.⁴

The *Book of the Dead* opens a window onto the complex belief systems of the ancient Egyptians where death and afterlife were a central focus. Although the

name may be familiar today, the wealth of magical images and texts is actually much richer than is generally known. Beautifully coloured illustrations graphically show the fields and rivers of the Netherworld, the gods and demons whom the deceased would meet, and the critical 'weighing of the heart' ritual, the judgement which would determine whether the soul was admitted into the afterlife or condemned to destruction at the hands of the monstrous 'Devourer'. What a heartsink.

REFERENCES

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- 4 Taylor JH (Editor). *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead: journey through the afterlife*. British Museum Press: London, 2010.

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