



The Book of the Dead as canon

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When the term canon is used in ancient Egypt, it is usually applied to proportions in artwork (Iversen 1968; Simon 1993), or to the king list on P.Turin 1874 (Gardiner 1959; Malék 1982). Outside of Egyptian art, however, canon is normally applied to a 'collection or list of books,' distinguishing that collection or list as sacred, and can refer to 'any set of sacred books' (*OED*, s.v. canon). The question can at least be asked: did the ancient Egyptians have a canon in the sense of a set of sacred writings?

Canon

The term necessarily invokes biblical studies,

the one discipline devoted to exploring what a canon is, how it emerges historically, how its texts relate to one another, and how it effects the community that espouses it (Levinson 2003, 3).

The word canon

has come to be used with reference to the corpus of scriptural writings that is considered authoritative and standard for defining and determining 'orthodox' religious beliefs and practices (Sanders 1992, 837).

It is not clear that there is a concept of orthodoxy in ancient Egyptian religion. The English term derives from the Greek term *orthodoxia* which is first listed as appearing in the second century AD works of Julius Pollux of Naucratis (Liddell et al. 1968, 1248) in his *Onomasticon* (4.7.3), although its principle usage in Greek is by Christians. The concept of canon is largely the focus of Christians.

Though the concept of the canon and most of the terms that define it come from Christianity, it can be applied to Egyptian religion because many of the features we find with the Christian canon are also found in the Book of the Dead. At the beginning of a book on Egyptian theology, Jan Assmann writes,

There was no explicit and coherent explanation of Egyptian theology on the metalevel of theoretical discourse in ancient Egypt any more than there were theoretical explications in other areas, such as grammar, rhetoric, or historiography (Assmann 2001, 9).

There seems to be no setting forth of beliefs in systematic or other fashion, or any other attempt at doing what is called *theology* in modern parlance. Yet the fact that the ancient

Egyptians had no theology has not prevented Egyptologists from writing about their non-existent theology.

When we look for criteria for canonization that do not require looking into the religious outlook we can come up with a number of criteria that we might test, including: the number of manuscripts, standardization, quotation, usage in commentaries, and archaeological placement. Assmann surveys a number of different, external, factors leading to canonisation (2008, 90–105); the ones considered here, on the other hand, are all internal to the culture.

Number of manuscripts

Canonical texts tend to be found more frequently than non-canonical texts. Thus we find that among papyri, the Leuven database lists 1901 records for copies of Homer found in Egypt in a twelve-century span, 802 for the Old Testament, and 656 for the New Testament.¹ The Book of the Dead easily dwarfs these manuscript numbers, with over 3500 manuscripts known (Kockelmann 2006, 161–62).

Standardisation

Some have argued that

a canon results when someone seeks to impose a strict boundary around a smaller subset of writings or teachings with the larger, slowly evolving ‘cloud of sacred texts,’ and thus ‘a canon of scripture,’ properly so called, did not appear until church officials, acting under the guidance of the highest levels of the Roman government, met together on several specific occasions to create a rigid boundary around the approved texts (Dungan 2007, 3).

Nonetheless, it has been pointed out years ago that

these decisions by bishops or synods are only a sanctioning of much earlier traditions, and a discussion continued in the Christian churches which led to the concept of ‘proto’- and ‘deutero’-canonical writings which is still used today (Schillebeeckx 1983, 67).

The Rosetta Stone illustrates the convocation of priestly synods to ratify changes, but records of such synods are scarce. The Rosetta Stone itself claims that copies of its texts were set up in all the temples, but few copies have actually survived. If no copies had survived, would that mean that the synod did not take place? I mention this merely to point out that we know little about how developments in Egyptian religion were adopted, even when we can document consistent and wide-spread changes.

The effects of such boundaries can be seen in the standardisation of the texts, such as we

¹ www.trismegistos.org/ldab/ [1 June 2010].

find in the Book of the Dead starting in Dynasty 26. It is commonly maintained that there was no standardisation in the Book of the Dead before the Saite Period (Anonymous 1975, 92; Bohleke 1997, 116), though it is attested through standard strings of texts in Dynasty 18 examples. These include:

BD 17–18–1–22–23–25–26–28–27–30A–43–24–31–33–34–35–74–45–93–91–41–42–14–68–92–63A–105–95–72 (Lapp 1997, 36–7; already attested in Dynasty 17).

BD 124–83–84–85–82–77–86–99B–119–7–102–38A–27–14–39–65–116–91–64–30B (Munro 1994, 14–15).

BD 76–85–82–77–86–124–83–84–81–87–88 (Lapp 1997, 39).

BD 141/2–190–133–136A–134–130–131–89–154 (Lapp 1997, 40).

BD 115–116–112–113 (Lapp 1997, 40).

BD 100–102–136A–136B–149–150 (Lapp 1997, 42).

Another standard sequence is found in the Third Intermediate Period:²

Adoration of Osiris–BD 23–24–26–28–27–162

Quotation

Another sign of canonicity is the quotation of texts. One of the most frequently quoted is BD 17,³ which is just the later version of Coffin Text 335 (CT 335 IV 184–326). The number of manuscripts for this text in any particular period of time dwarf those of any Egyptian text regardless of time period.⁴ It has been called ‘the most frequently copied of all major Egyptian funerary texts’ (Allen 2003, 15). The earliest manuscripts of the text that we have may be from late Dynasty 11, but if one compares the phrases in the tenth section, one can see that they are quoted in several Old Kingdom tomb biographies, which would indicate that the text originates no later than Dynasty 5. Thus the Coffin Text version is:

² P. Mich. 3524, P. Berlin P. 10466, P. Bologna KS 3163, P. Dublin MS 1674, P. Cairo S.R. VII 10271, P. Cairo JE 95716 (=S.R. IV 650), P. Leiden T 25, P. BM EA 10044, P. BM EA 74135, P. BM EA 10329, P. BM EA 10207, P. BM EA 10327, P. Manchester 2, P. New York MMA 26.2.51, P. Paris Louvre E. 31856, P. Turin 1855, P. Zagreb Arch. Mus. 887.

³ For text, conveniently, BD 17, in *Urk.* V, 1–99. For bibliography, see Gulden and Munro 1998, 84–89.

⁴ Compare four manuscripts of the *Eloquent Peasant* (Parkinson 1991, ix–xxviii), thirty-three manuscripts of *Simuhe* (Koch 1990, vi), one manuscript each for the *Shipwrecked Sailor* and the tales of P. Westcar (Parkinson 1997, 91, 105), twenty-seven Middle Kingdom manuscripts of CT 335 known to de Buck (CT 335 IV 184–326). Several new Middle Kingdom manuscripts have been discovered since de Buck’s publication. The number of manuscripts from the New Kingdom and onwards numbers in the hundreds.

ii.n=i m niw.t=i
pr.n=i m t3=i
h3=i r sp3.t=i
wnn=i hn^c it=i itm m hr.t-hrw nt r^c nb

‘After I came from my city,⁵ I went out from my land, that I might go down to my district and I might be with my father Atum in the course of every day’ (CT 335 IV 207 T3Be).

The version that begins to appear in autobiographies beginning in late Dynasty 5 is:

ii.n=i m niw.t=i
h3.n=i m sp3.t

‘After I came from my city, I went down to my district.’⁶

The phrase appears at the very beginning of the autobiography,⁷ and alludes to the Coffin Text with variations of lines quoted from that document. The frequent quotation of the text is an indicator of its status and the esteem in which it was held, and thus a measure of its canonicity.

BD 125 is quoted extensively both in the Document of Breathings Made by Isis⁸ and the Book of the Temple (Grieshammer 1974, 19–25; Merkelbach 1968, 7–30; Merkelbach 1987; Assmann 1989: 135–37). In the daily temple liturgy, several of the texts end with the formulae: *htp-di-nsw* and *iw=i w^cb.kwi*. The *htp-di-nsw* formula is familiar, but the second formula seems to find its fullest expression in BD 125:

iw=i w^cb.kwi sp-4
bw=i bw bnw pw 3 nty m nny-nsw
hr-ntt ink is fnd pw n nb bw s^cnh rhyt nbt hrw pwy n mh wd3t m iwnw m 3bd 2 prt rgy
m-b3h n nb t3 pn

‘I am pure four times. The purity of that great phoenix which is in Herakleopolis is my purity because I, however, am the nose of the lord of breath who makes all the people live on that day of filling the *wedjat* in Heliopolis on the last day of Mecheir before the lord of this land’ (BD 125 A, end, in Maystre 1937, 51–55).

⁵ The translation of the grammar follows the parallel case in *Urk.* VI, 63; see Gee 2009.

⁶ *Urk.* I 57, 80, 121, 150, 263, 265; *Urk.* VII, 4, 8, 63; Edel 1944, 47–48; Janssen 1946, 1:38–39; 2:58–60.

⁷ Edel 1944, 47–48; Kloth 2002, 54–61. For the dating, see Kloth 2002, 57–59.

⁸ For the text, see now Herbin 2008 (11–49), but supplement with Rhodes 2002, which has inexplicably been omitted.

Commentary

One of the signs of canonical status is the tendency for canonical texts to spark commentaries. Among the Christian canon, the tradition of commentaries on texts starts with Heracleon, who wrote a commentary (now lost) on the Gospel of John (Quasten 1950, 1:262). Origen composed commentaries on the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John, the Epistles to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Hebrews, Titus, and Philemon, and the Old Testament books of Genesis, Kings, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and the minor prophets (Quasten 1950, 2:48–51). Origen's contemporary, Hippolytus of Rome, composed commentaries on Daniel and the Song of Songs (Quasten 1950, 2:171–74). The earliest commentaries are on texts that would later be termed canonical. So one way of measuring canonicity is the extent to which commentaries are made on the text.

BD 17 is known for commentaries on the text, located within the text itself. The earliest manuscript I know of, P. Cairo 28023 (=T1C), dates to after year 39 of Mentuhotep II and contains two copies of the text (Willems 1988, 113). The first eight sections of the text in this manuscript contain no commentary (CT 335 IV 184–203 T1C a and b). Starting with the ninth section, full-blown commentary appears in one of the copies (CT 335 IV 204–206 T1C b). This indicates that the tradition of commentary on the text is in fact older than our earliest copy, and that the copyist tried unsuccessfully to remove the commentary from the text. Without the commentary, the Coffin Text speaks of being saved from various unpleasanties of the next life—such as death, burning, or losing one's soul—because of the individual's purity, rectitude, and his closeness to the gods. It was also used by the living to 'prosper on earth,' 'always escape any fire,' and make it so that 'no evil thing [could] reach [them]' (BD 17, in *Urk.* V 96). This larger context is invoked by the quotation in the autobiographies and is more than just 'passing from life to death,' as maintained by some (Kloth 2002, 54–56).

Archaeological placement

It is well known that the Book of the Dead was placed in the coffin. This practice continued into Christian times. The earliest Coptic manuscript of the Gospel of John was found in a pot in a Roman period cemetery at Qau (Petrie 1924, ix), while the oldest surviving complete Coptic Psalter 'was placed open as a pillow beneath the head of an adolescent girl in a humble cemetery at Al-Mudil, forty kilometers northeast of Oxyrhynchus' (Brown 2006, 74–75; Emmenegger 2007, 1; Gabra 1995). This may be seen as the continuation of a cultural practice. Sacred texts are buried with the dead, but in the later time period the text buried is canonical. What then should we think about the earlier case of the Book of the Dead? Should it not be a text of comparable esteem in the earlier religious tradition? Granted, not everyone is buried with a Bible, but neither is everyone buried with a Book of the Dead. In fact, only the upper stratum of society could afford a Book of the Dead in pharaonic times, as a survey of New Kingdom intact burials demonstrates (Smith 1992, 201, 219).

'The Book of the Dead is my amulet,' declares one manuscript (P. Louvre N 3083 6/7, Herbin 1999, 211). Kockelmann has provided numerous examples of the Book of the Dead's

use as an amulet in mummy wrappings (2008). In Christian times a popular amulet is one containing quotations of the opening lines of all four gospels. This too should be seen as a cultural continuation, indicating that the Bible was seen as the equivalent of the Book of the Dead.

Divinely inspired scripture

The word canon as a collection of standard texts is first used by Athanasius in his Festal Letter 39 (AD 367):

‘Forasmuch as some have taken in hand,’ to reduce into order for themselves the books termed apocryphal, and to mix them up with the divinely inspired Scripture, concerning which we have been fully persuaded, as they who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word, delivered to the fathers; it seemed good to me also, having been urged thereto by true brethren, and having learned from the beginning, to set before you the books included in the Canon, and handed down, and accredited as Divine; to the end that any one who has fallen into error may condemn those who have led him astray (Schaff and Wace [1890] 1980, 551–52).

So for Athanasius, canon was the collection of ‘divinely inspired Scripture.’ This notion picks up from the apostle Paul.

Any divinely inspired writing is also useful for teaching, for proof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3.16 [author’s translation]).

As Egyptologists, we tend to bristle at the thought of the Egyptians having divinely inspired Scripture, but they viewed many texts as such (Gee 2007, 807–13). Thus, it should come as no surprise to find in the postscript of BD 30B,

This text was found in Hermopolis under the feet of the majesty of this god, written on an iron brick as a writing of the god himself (*m sh ntr ds=f*), in the time of King Mycerinos, by the Prince Hordjedef, he found it as he went forth to inspect the temples (BD 30B from P. Parma, in Naville 1886, 2:99; Assmann and Kucharek 2008, 405; Hornung 1990, 96–97).

This terminal comment does not appear in all copies of this text. Should we interpret the result that only one ancient Egyptian viewed the text as divinely inspired, that at least one ancient Egyptian viewed it so, or that it was so commonly viewed that most scribes did not feel the need to write the obvious?

A similar colophon is found at the end of BD 64, which is not that different from BD 30B. Ptolemaic versions include BD 30B within BD 64, in the terminal comments after the story of Hordjedef (BD 64T in Lepsius 1842, pl. XXV). Another similar colophon occurs at the end of BD 137A, which changes a couple of details:

It was the king's son, Hordjedef, vindicated, who found this scroll in a secret box in writing of the god himself in the temple of Wenut, mistress of Wenu when he made an inspection of the temples of the gods of Upper and Lower Egypt. He brought it as a marvel to his majesty when he saw that it was an effective truth, a great thing remaining for eternity (BD 64T, in Lapp 2004, pl. 71).⁹

While the rubrics for BD 30B and 64 only claim the divine writing of the individual texts (*r3*), BD 137A claims it for the entire scroll (*md3.t tn*). We know from other passages that the Book of the Dead was considered to be a *md3.t* compiled of multiple individual *r3*:

'Beginning of the texts (*r3.w*) of the Book of the Dead (*pr m hrw*)' (BD 1 rubric, in Lepsius 1842, Taf. I).

'Texts (*r3.w*) of exalting and making glorified spirits and making a procession (*pr*)¹⁰ in the god's property' (BD 17 rubric, in Lepsius 1842, Taf. VII).

'Texts (*r3.w*) brought to another book (*šft*) in addition to the Book of the Dead (*pr m hrw*)' (BD 165 rubric, in Lepsius 1842, Taf. LXXVII).

The Book of the Dead also contained various *md3.t*:

'Scroll (*md3.t*) of entering into the hall of justice' (BD 125 rubric).

This story about the discovery (or discoveries) by Hordjedef of a text written by the god himself, and hidden in a box at a cult place, seems to be the basis for one of the parts of the Setne story (P. Setne I, in Goldbrunner 2006). Hordjedef becomes Naneferkaptah, the god who wrote the text is specified as Thoth, and the cult centre is changed to Coptos. The scroll that Setne recovers deserves more attention in comparison to the Book of the Dead. The scroll contained two texts (*hp*, P. Setne I, 3/35–7). The first of these allowed the individual to encircle (*phr*) heaven, earth, the netherworld, the mountains and the sea, to discover everything that the birds, the fish and the beasts said (P. Setne I, 3/35–6). The second allowed the individual to see sun appearing in heaven along with his associated deities, the moon, the stars, and the fish in the water (P. Setne I, 3/36–7). These purposes can be found in the rubrics to the Book of the Dead.

The Book of the Dead is not the only Egyptian text thought to be divinely written. Coffin Texts 131–135 are explicitly said to be written by Geb (CT 131 II 151; see also Gee 2007, 808), as are the oracular amuletic decrees (Edwards 1960), the Ptolemaic divine decrees (Quaegebeur 1988; Kakosy 1992), and the so-called Book of Breathings Made by Isis (Gee 2007, 808–9).

Mathieu has extended authorship by Thoth to both the Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts (2008, 259), and questions whether a distinction can be drawn between the two. The same distinction between the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead becomes questionable when

⁹ This papyrus is also the source of the version in Naville 1886, 1:pl. CL.

¹⁰ For this nuance, see Wilson 1997, 356–57.

we look at the Second Intermediate Period material. The picture that emerges is that this is a single work, whose contents change over time. We thus are dealing with an open rather than a closed canon.

Thus the Book of the Dead, to the Egyptians, fills the same category of divinely inspired scripture that the Christian canon does for the Christians. And we know that at least 55 of the 192 chapters (29%) of the Book of the Dead were certainly used by the living as well as by the dead (Gee 2006, 73–81), so this canonicity was recognised by living Egyptians.

Conclusions

In Egyptology, the denial of canon for the Book of the Dead provides an excuse not to study the text. The normally insightful Barry Kemp begins a book called *How to read the Egyptian Book of the Dead* with an admission that writing the book finally gave him the opportunity ‘to confront a text I have long avoided’ (Kemp 2007, ix). Someone who has avoided a text is not the obvious selection to write a book on how to read that text, and it certainly would have helped if the editors had picked someone who actually studied the text and was at least familiar with it. But most Egyptologists fall into the camp of those who avoid the Book of the Dead: ‘most modern scholars regard [the Book of the Dead] with a lack of interest bordering on contempt’ (Bohleke 1997, 115). Given the importance of the Book of the Dead to the Egyptians, this neglect by Egyptologists is inexcusable. Granted, it is not an easy set of texts to understand, but the difficulty should not deter us. If any text in ancient Egypt was canonical, it was the Book of the Dead.

Cover image: Papyrus roll, British Museum EA 10748.

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