

Philosophical Debate in “A Man and His Ba”



The poem “A Man and His Ba”, is generally interpreted as an expression of an unknown writer’s suicide note, however this piece could also be perceived as a philosophical debate. The evidence for this piece as a philosophical debate can be seen within the text which does not conclude that a suicide has taken place, while maintaining the philosophical elements in the poem. The elements of debate which are present within “A Man and His Ba”, suggests that this is in fact one of the earliest accounts of philosophical literature. In addition, evidence could suggest that the writer may be Amenemhet I. Amenemhet I was a pharaoh from the 12th dynasty who did not commit suicide and has been involved in the production of other pieces of pessimistic literature such as “The prophecies of Neferti”, and “The Instruction of King Amenemhet I”.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis of the piece can conclude that the poem may have been created to promote new religious ideas. The poem “A Man and His Ba” depicts a debate by a man fed-up with his life. The man, who is left unnamed within this piece, begins to debate with his soul, or the ba, as to why he should remain alive. In response to this protest, the ba threatens to abandon the man if he chooses to commit suicide threatening that the writer will not pass onto the afterlife. Suicide is an act against the gods but despite this, the man continues to insist that his reasoning justifies his longing for death. The man makes a case for leaving life with evidence of evil and disloyalty among his peers, self-loathing, and his lack of desire to continue living. This is expressed through the man exclaiming that he has no one to talk to because “hearts are greedy, everyone robs his comrade’s goods... Kindness has perished, insolence assaults everyone.... One is content with evil” (Lichtheim, 2006, p.167). The man’s self-loathing within this piece is shown by asserting that “My name reeks....more than carrion small...more than a catch of fish” (Lichtheim, 2006, p.166). Near the end of the piece, the man begins to express a stronger desire for death. Beginning in part III, the man poetically expresses that “Death is before me now – the healthy state of sick man – like coming out in the air after suffering ... Like the fragrance of myrrh ... like the fragrance of flowers” (Foster, 1992, p.17). Clearly, the subject lacks fear of the gods’ refusal to issue him an afterlife and is confident in presenting his case. Despite this, the man’s ba explains to him that despite these feelings he is to live as long as intended and explains that only once his time comes to pass away. The man’s ba tells him that his death shall take place immutably commanding the man to “throw complaint on the [woodpile]” (Lichtheim, 2006, p.169). The ba suggests that the man eliminate such opinions and continue living.

The end of this poem does not confirm that the man ended his life. The ending of the poem is missing and what is known about the last parts of the poem could equally suggest that the man lived his life fully. When the man says, “it shall alight, after you are weary, therefore, let us make a harbor for the occasion,” he could mean that he will wait for death until his times has come. In the closing lines of the poem, the ba says “Whether you bear down on life, as you say, love me here when you have set aside in the West! But when it is wished that you attain the West, that your body joins the earth, I shall alight after you have become weary, and then we shall dwell together!” (Parkinson, 2006, p.169) which again, suggests that the man had lived his life until it was his time to pass on. Since the ba refers to the man’s death as “when *it* is wished” and not when *you* wish, we can assume that the context refers to the man’s death coming when it is the man’s time to pass on and not when the man himself wishes to end his own life. The

ending of the poem could indicate a death that is not of the man's choosing, suggesting that the ba has won the debate.

Philosophical Elements of the Debate between "A Man and His Ba"

Philosophical elements which are present within the poem "A Man and his Ba" depicts a piece of literature which may have acted as a list of philosophical questions and answers pertaining to the religious reforms of the Middle Kingdom. This would have correlated with some of the details that the people within the Egyptian Middle Kingdom were unsure about after the popularization of the Osiris religion. As demonstrated by Goedicke, the debate in "A Man and His Ba" consists of philosophical ideas about the afterlife and about decision making made by the mortal writer. "The ancient Egyptian, unlike many Western thinkers, is not content with the investigation of the problem but examines the possibilities of solving it. His interest is thus principally different from those displayed in the didactic literature, which has a specifically instructive tendency" (Goedicke, 1970, p.13).

As is comparable with modern debates, this piece reflects attributes such as a dominant and opposing voice. Similarly, the level of debate displayed with this piece of literature can be compared to a political debate. The role of the soul or the ba remains the more dominant or conservative voice of authority, while the man's responses consistently challenge the voice of the ba.

The man's rebuttal to his ba resembles modern day inspirational speeches that use repetition as a method to convince an audience of the opposing concept. This technique suggests that this piece may have an intended public audience, which could suggest that the author's intention was to convince other people of his views besides his ba. One could conclude that this piece was intended to communicate new ideas pertaining to the rules of mortal free will and new ideas about authority outside of conventional ancient Egyptian philosophies. An example of the method of persuasion by repetition can be seen in the "I Have a Dream" speech by Martin Luther King Junior, in which the phrase "I have a dream" is repeated and begins many sentences in the speech (King Jr., 1963, p.5). This is comparable to the distinctive repetitions in "A Man and His Ba". The phrases "to whom shall I speak today" and "Lo, my name reeks" is repeated throughout sections of the poem (Lichtheim 2006, p.166-167). Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech was composed with the intention to persuade the masses to drop hierarchical ways of thinking adopting more equitable ways of thinking. The same conflict of interest is portrayed in "A Man and His Ba", since similarly to King, the writer is arguing for a more democratic reforms and free will over his own life and afterlife. The man's request conflicts with the ideas expressed by the conservative Egyptian religious philosophies that are expressed through the man's ba. These details which are present within "A Man and His Ba" suggests the presence of an audience and that the poem was composed with an audience in mind. These attributes reflect the environment of a philosophical debate. In addition, the beginning of the poem is missing from the papyrus that it was written on. According to Egyptologist and Professor R.B. Parkinson, "The Man and His Ba" "may have contained an introduction spoken by the narrator, setting the backyard of the

debate. It has been suggested that it was set in the context of an audience of some sort” (1997, p.152). This context may be “perhaps as a court of the gods” (Goedicke, 1970, p. 40) but “there is no evidence for this besides the second-person plural pronoun in 11 *mj.tn* “Look”” (Allen, 2011, p.137).

The third section of “A Man and His Ba” continues the portrayal of conflicting views regarding life and death but in this section the ba is finally able to conform to some of the man’s ideas. The ba can be taken as a reasonable yet skeptical character, serving as a middle ground between the ba’s mortal human and the gods who are working to preserve the mortal’s life. The ba keeps the man content by finally agreeing to stay by his side but only if he tries to learn to enjoy life. This gesture works towards presenting pros to life as well as a presence of optimism, both of which are generally absent within the conventional suicide note (Holmes, 2005, p.81-85).

Later on in “A Man and His Ba”, other methods of striving to find a compromise begin to arise in a subtle fashion, thus convincing the audience of a new reform in rules and regulations regarding religious and afterlife beliefs .

The final couplet, in which the Soul bemoans the fact that [the man] is alone in his travail, is an ironic counter to the theme of the first section of the man’s speech. The opening couplet of [the second half] serves both to interpret the soul’s cited words and to counter his request for divine judgment. Its initial *ndm* “sweet” contrasts deliberately with the soul’s description as *sndm* “sweetening” in the previous section instead of the soul “sweetening in the west”. The man says it would be better if the gods made things “sweet” by removing these nagging thoughts of death (Allen, 2011, p. 144).

This portrays a compromise near the end of the poem, where the issue at hand is directed towards the gods. This is a pattern that is prevalent in pessimistic literature of the Middle Kingdom within Egypt. Examples of Pessimistic Literature from the Middle Kingdom include such as such text as “Prophecies of Neferti” and “Instruction of Amenemhet”. Both the “Prophecies of Neferti” and “Instruction of Amenemhet”, are infamous works that are categorized as pessimistic texts by many scholars. “A Man and His Ba” is also categorized within the pessimistic general since they all contain similar themes revolving around despair and a world turned upside down. According to Lichtheim, “The Instruction of King Amenemhet I” is distinguished by its personal tone and by the bitterness born of experience with which the old king castigates the treachery of his subjects, and warns his son not to place trust in any man. The theme, then, is regicide in contrast with the theme national distress.”(Lichtheim, 2006, p.135.) This piece, being written by Amenemhet I, contains very similar pessimistic themes as is found within the poem “A Man and His Ba”. The pessimistic texts “The Instruction of King Amenemhet I” and “A Man and His Ba” both portray similar writing themes, concerning Amenemhet I. Another piece which falls within this category is “The Prophecies of Neferti”. “The Prophecies of Neferti”, was also composed within the Middle Kingdom around the time of Amenemhet I’s rule. Containing similar pessimistic themes, is it interpreted that this piece worked as propagandistic literature in order to promote Amenemhet I’s rule. According to Lichtheim, “ the prophecy is a literary disguise, veiling the contemporary character of a work composed in the reign of Amenemhet I, and designed as a glorification of that king”(Lichtheim,2006, p.135.) Due to the propagandistic

nature of “The prophecies of Neferti” and the similar pessimistic theme which is used throughout other pieces of such as in “A Man and His Ba”, promotes ideologies that pertain to Amenemhet I in some way. “The prophecies of Neferti” works to promote Amenemhet I as a ruler which would restore order, while “A Man and His Ba” promotes religious afterlife reforms and democratization which was an initial result of the rise of the Osiris religion that Amenemhet I endorsed.

Amenemhet I and the Democratization of the Afterlife in “The Man and His Ba”

The approximate date in which the poem is composed corresponds with the change in afterlife beliefs which was caused by the uprising Osiris religion which was endorsed by Amenemhet I. Egypt also had established connections with Crete around this time, which could suggest that Egypt had acquired some political and religious influences from Crete.

Contradicting the idea that “A Man and His Ba” is a suicide note are the repetitive themes in the poem which reappear in other works such as “Instruction of King Amenemhet I” and “Prophecies of Neferti”. Considering the estimated dating of “A Man and His ba”, Amenemhet I may be the author of this piece. Amenemhet I wrote pieces of pessimistic literature with the themes of corruption, misdeeds, and a world upside down which are also present in “A Man and His Ba”. For example, the author of “A Man and His Ba” criticizes others around him, claiming that “men are proud of the evil they do, a man is maddened by evil fortune” (Foster, 1992, p.16). Historically, Amenemhet I’s men went as far as to attempt to take his life. Amenemhet I survived but then knew that his men were untrustworthy.

In “The Man and His Ba”, the man is arguing for more free will over his own afterlife. This is in conflict with the ideas expressed by the conservative Egyptian religious philosophies that are expressed through the man’s ba. Amenemhet I himself endorsed the Osiris religion and even “expressed his wish to partake in this religious procession” (Oppenheim, 2015, p. 262). The Osiris myth did not specify rules for passing into the afterlife and with the rise of the Osiris religion, old and new beliefs began to become intermingled, causing confusion regarding afterlife protocols. As the Osiris religion became a religious monopoly, the afterlife was no longer reserved strictly for the royals: “From now on, all men who were worthy had the promise of immortality in the realms ruled over by kingly divinity Osiris, not merely those who had known the pharaoh in life” (Aldred, *The Egyptians*, 1998, p. 138).

Within the dispute in “A Man and His Ba”, we see the author debating with his soul, expressing the confidence to present his case to the gods and to even attempt to bribe his soul into not abandoning him.

Within the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, there was a similar shift in beliefs about the afterlife. Within the Old Kingdom, tomb texts were commonly scriptures that detailed the virtues of the king in order to grant his afterlife among the gods but “by around the Middle Kingdom, we see

an increase of virtues inscribed within tombs of virtually every deceased person when spoken of by the living” (Breasted, 1909, p. 174). This demonstrates a reform in afterlife beliefs in the Middle Kingdom rule during Amenemhet I, as in the Middle Kingdom entitlement to an afterlife is prevalent among a wider demographic instead of being reserved solely for royalty. This demonstrates a democratization of Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife under the rule of Amenemhet I.

In line thirty-one of “A Man and His Ba”, a particular form is used to describe the writer. Considering that mainly literature of the prestigious class has been discovered and the dating of the man and his Ba, it is safe to assume that the author would have been someone of high rank, possibly a pharaoh or someone close to the pharaoh.

Conclusion

Based on the textual analysis, the poem “A Man and His Ba” could be argued to have been composed with an audience in mind and not created solely to portray suicide or self-harm. Within this piece, there is an indication of an audience within the composition style and method of rhetoric. One of the most noticeable techniques used within this piece is repetition. This allows the audience to better remember the points made within the poem. Lastly, the known ending of the poem includes details which conclude that the man in fact does not cause his own death. Philosophical elements also support the argument that the poem is not a suicide letter. Near the end of the poem, the tone becomes sympathetic, unlike in a suicide letter. The debate slowly begins to reach a compromise, entailing hopefulness about life, the future, and the afterlife. The rhetoric of “A Man and His Ba” works to convince the intended audience to embrace a more democratic conception of religion and the afterlife. It can be argued that the purpose of “A Man and His Ba” was to contribute to the democratization of funerary beliefs that was occurring at this time. Within the middle kingdom, the afterlife came to be believed to be available to everyone and not simply restricted to those of royal stature. With this in mind, we see a democratization of religious reform in the poem by the man, who is communicating his wishes to join the immortal afterlife on his own terms. It can be argued that the writer of “A Man and His Ba” survived and was the pharaoh Amenemhet I because the writing reflects various aspects which relate to Amenemhet I which includes religious changes, and social relations. With the presence of the idea of negotiating with the gods around the same time as the rise of Osiris religion which did not specify and details regarding the afterlife, as well as the association Egypt has with Crete at the time. Amenemhet himself endorsed this new belief system, displaying eagerness to participate in this religion. As was popular among many ancient cultures around the world, literature was composed to pursue the masses into adopting new religious and philosophical ideas. In many ways, “A Man and His Ba” could have easily played this role among society within the middle kingdom of Egypt.

References

- Adela Oppenheim, D. A. (2015). *Ancient Egypt Transformed: The Middle Kingdom*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art .
- Aldred, C. (1998). The Middle Kingdom. In C. Aldred, *The Egyptians* (pp. 126 – 147). London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.
- Allen, J. P. (2011). *The Debate Between a Man and His Soul A Masterpiece of Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Boston: Koninklijke Brill.
- Breasted, J. H. (1909). *A History of Egypt*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Foster, J. L. (1992). *Echoes of Egyptian Voices* . Duncan: University of Oklahoma Press.
- isiopolis.com. (2014). *isis the dark night of the soul*.
- King, M.L. (1963) *I Have a Dream*. www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf
- Goedicke, H. (1970). *The Report about the Dispute of a Man with his ba*. London: The Johns Hopkins Press Ltd.
- Lichtheim, M. (2006). *Ancient Egyptian Literature the Old and Middle Kingdoms*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Parkinson, R. B. (2002). *Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt*. London: Equinox.
- Powell, B. B. (2015). *Classical Myth Eighth Edition*. New Jersey: Pearson.
- Ronald M. Holmes, Stephen T. Holmes (2005) *Suicide: Theory, Practice and Investigation*: Sage

Trigger, B. G., Kemp, B. J., & Lloyd, A. B.3). *Ancient Egypt A Social History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.