

## THEODICY

”الثيوديسية“ (التحقيق فى عدالة الأولوهية)

*Roland Enmarch*

Version 2

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## THEODICY

## ”الثيوديسية“ (التحقيق في عدالة الأولوهية)

Roland Enmarch

Theodizee  
Théodicée

*Theodicy, the inquiry as to the justness of the divine, is a prominent theme in mythological descriptions of the struggle between order and chaos. It is also an important feature of Middle Egyptian pessimistic poetry, which probes weaknesses in this mythological argument. Although less explicitly articulated, theodicean concerns recur in Egyptian written culture down at least to the Greco-Roman Period.*

”الثيوديسية“، أو التحقيق في عدالة الأولوهية، موضوع بارز في الأوصاف الأسطورية للكفاح بين النظام والفوضى. هي أيضاً عنصر مهم للشعر المصري المتوسط المتشائم، الذي يتقصى الضعف في هذا الجدل الأسطوري. المخاوف ”الثيوديسية“ استمرت في الثقافة المصرية المكتوبة حتى العصر اليوناني الروماني على الأقل ولكن تصور بأقل وضوح.



theodicy is an attempt to reconcile belief in divine justice with the existence of evil and suffering in the world. Although the term itself is comparatively recent (originally coined in a Judeo-Christian cultural context by Leibniz in 1710; see Laato and de Moor 2003: x), awareness of suffering and the problematization of evil are central to many diverse religious and philosophical traditions, including those of ancient Near Eastern cultures (see Sitzler 1995).

Several areas of Egyptian written discourse (primarily mythological, literary, and biographical) explicitly address theodicean topics, advancing a range of theodicean positions. The question of the origin of evil is closely bound to Egyptian ontological conceptions: non-existence/chaos (*num*) preceded the creation of the ordered cosmos and constantly threatened to overwhelm it again. In Egyptian mythology, good and evil are hence respectively identified with cosmic order (*maat*; Assmann 2006) and disorder (*isfet*; Parys 2024), an opposition attested as early as

the Old Kingdom, where it is featured in the Pyramid Texts (Loprieno 2003: 31-33, 44). In older sources, *isfet* is characterized as the inversion of all things ordered (Frandsen 2000: 13; 2002 – 2003: 65), becoming later a more widely used term for all things evil.

While the cosmos’s return to chaos was regarded as undesirable, Egyptologists take differing views on whether the cosmos itself was created in an original state of perfection, which was later spoiled by divine or human agency (see, e.g., Assmann 1994; Bickel 1994: 225; Kemboly 2010), or whether chaotic imperfection was an inherent feature of the cosmos from its creation (e.g., Hornung 1982: 213; Junge 1993: 156-157; Borrego Gallardo 2016: 41-43). To some degree, support for both viewpoints can be found in discrete Egyptian textual sources, and it is perhaps unsurprising to find a variety of viewpoints expressed in a culture that endured for such a long period of time. Some of the differences of emphasis may relate to different aspects of creation: from a cosmogonic viewpoint, the threat of the return to uncreation (personified

by entities such as Apophis) is strongly implied to be primordial; for example, Apophis is described as the umbilical cord of the solar creator god, the being whose manifestation began the cosmos (Quack 2015: 379; Ritner 2017: 282; see, however, the differing view of Kemboly 2017: 175). By contrast, other mythological texts associate the arrival of disorder in the cosmos with the birth of the unruly god Seth (Borrego Gallardo 2016: 38) in the fourth generation of the Heliopolitan Ennead of gods, which would make disorder decidedly secondary. It is unlikely that the apparent surface contradiction between these mythemes would have unduly perturbed the Egyptians, however, because Egyptian religious thought “accepted differing explanations of a single phenomenon as equally valid” (Allen 2004: 533), viewing these explanations as complementary.

The origin of evil among human beings is more clearly described as a secondary development. A strand of theodicean discourse, which first becomes prominent in the Coffin Texts and in Middle Egyptian poetry, focuses on the relationship between humanity and the divine. The deity whose justice is in question here usually assumes the role of solar creator god. According to these texts, humanity was not created to behave chaotically, but their own hearts subsequently chose to do so and rebelled against the creator god despite his benevolent treatment of them. In the wake of this rebellion, the creator god withdrew up to heaven, away from direct contact with humanity; it is this distancing of the solar creator god that permits the existence of darkness and suffering in the world of humans (von Lieven 2018: 177). Two of the clearest early references to humankind’s rebellion are in the declaration of the creator god in Coffin Text spell 1130 (CT VII, 464b), first attested in the 11<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (Parkinson 2002: 131, note 1), and in the Book of the Heavenly Cow (Hornung 1997), a mythological text first attested in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (for a discussion of some later Egyptian texts featuring the same motifs, see Smith 2000: 95-96).

The interplay between these cosmic and anthropocentric conceptions of evil, particularly over the question of the balance between human and divine responsibility for suffering on earth, underlies most Egyptian theodicean discourse. In earlier periods the cosmic and political aspects of the struggle between order and chaos predominate, but as time progresses there is an increasing emphasis on the everyday human experience of imperfection and injustice in earthly life, and the reasons for it.

The Egyptians’ essentially negative cosmology (for this term, see Assmann 2006: 201-222), and their negative evaluation of human nature (arising from humanity’s rebellion against the creator god), potentially absolved the gods of blame for the world’s imperfections by inculcating humanity (cf. Bickel 1994: 212-217). Theodicean interpretations of divine action have implications for social structure and tend to encourage normative cultural and political values. From at least the Middle Kingdom onwards, theodicy formed the basis of the legitimation of the pharaonic state, where strong and sometimes violent action on the part of the king was required in order to curb humanity’s chaotic tendencies (Assmann 2000: 42; 2005: 19-23). In accordance with this conceptual framework, untoward political events in Egyptian history, such as rebellions (as in several *Königsnovellen*), the Hyksos dominion, or the defunct reforms of the Amarna Period, were also portrayed in subsequent royal inscriptions as aberrant outbreaks of chaotic behavior (see, e.g., Loprieno 2003: 47).

The correct human response to this state of affairs was to demonstrate conduct in accordance with the ideal of *maat*, one component of which was loyalty to the Egyptian state. In earlier periods, such behavior was assumed to lead to success in this life (as stressed, for example, in the Middle Egyptian Loyalist Teaching; text: Posener 1976; translation: Parkinson 1997: 239-240), and to being judged righteous after death. The concept of a posthumous moral judgment, attested most famously in Book of the Dead

spell 125, forms another implicit theodicean argument: regardless of suffering in this life, good conduct would be rewarded by the gods in the next. Coffin Text Spell 1130 underlines this by listing, as one of the creator god's "good deeds" for humanity, the fact that he promoted piety by making them mindful of death (CT VII, 464d).

The comparatively peripheral role of literary discourse in Egyptian civilization enabled it to explore these theodicean themes in a freer and sometimes more critical fashion than was possible in mythological discourse. Literary texts were also free to concentrate on perceived moral injustices in everyday experience, rather than the abstracted principles of cosmic order and disorder. Middle Egyptian poetry provides the most explicit examples (Parkinson 2002: 130-138), such as the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant (Parkinson 2012), which explores issues of social justice that implicitly raise theodicean questions (Parkinson 2002: 173; Blumenthal 2004: 11-14). Another Middle Egyptian poem, the Teaching for Merikara (text: Quack 1992; translation: Parkinson 1997: 212-234), culminates in a hymn to the creator god that asserts his care for suffering humanity ("when they weep, he is listening": Merikara E135), yet also portrays the creator as a stern father "slaying his son for the sake of his brother" (Merikara E137-138). Suffering, even if it seems inexplicably harsh to humanity, thus serves a higher divine purpose, becoming the creator's tool for chastising his errant creations' behavior (Assmann 2000: 106-108; 2001: 174; but see alternative interpretations referenced in Parkinson 2002: 131).

The most direct critique of this view of the creator god occurs in another Middle Egyptian poem, the Dialogue of Ipuwer and the Lord of All (Enmarch 2005, 2008; Rosell 2015: 136-149), where a human sage accuses the creator god of being too distant from human affairs, and of not distinguishing the meek from the fierce. The implication is that it is the fault of the creator if the creation is deficient. An underlying question is whether human beings are condemned by fate to behave chaotically and receive punishment (as implied in

Merikara), or whether they have free will (see Otto 1951, 1966; Fecht 1972: 128-130), a theme more directly addressed in later periods (on destiny and free will see, e.g., Baines 1994: 40-45; Vernus 1995: 122-132). Although Ipuwer focuses on problematic aspects of normative ideology, it does not ultimately undermine that ideology but instead forms a plea for closer and more discriminating divine (and royal) intervention in the world, to ensure that justice really is done.

Direct challenges to divine justice appear less frequently from the New Kingdom onwards. The 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty solar hymns emphasize instead the all-encompassing benevolence of the creator god, while the theology of Amarna ascribed evil to the nightly absence of the god Aten (expressed most extensively in the Great Hymn to the Aten, for which see Sandman 1938: 93-96 and Lorton 1993; see also Rutkauskas 2023). One feature of the major changes in Egyptian religious decorum in the post-Amarna Period was the greater emphasis on the personal relationship between non-royal individuals and the gods. The existence of evil and suffering was not denied, but individual Egyptians increasingly placed their faith in a specific divine patron and protector, who would prevent anything bad happening specifically to them (as in the biography of Simut-Kyky: text: Negm 1997: pls. 44-63; translation: Froot 2007). Human afflictions, in this life and the next, were a divine punishment for bad behavior, requiring contrition and forgiveness (see, e.g., Galán 1999). There is also a greater emphasis on divine intervention, rather than loyalty to the king, as the only guarantee of success (Assmann 2005: 93-112). Perhaps inevitable consequences of these developments include an increasing emphasis on the inscrutable nature of divine action and will (Brunner 1988: 103-120) and a recognition that good conduct will not necessarily lead to earthly success (as opposed to in the afterlife). This tendency develops over time, occurring for example in the Teaching of Amenemope (text: Laisney 2007; English translation: Lichtheim 1976: 146-163), and is expressed most pervasively in the Demotic Wisdom Book (of which the main manuscript is Papyrus Insinger: text: Lexa 1926 and Volten

1941; English translation: Lichtheim 1980: 184-217; German translation: Thissen 1991: 280-319; see also von Lieven 2018: 177).

Elsewhere in Demotic literature, however, there are still assertions that earthly wrongdoing never ultimately redounds to the sinner's benefit: in the Myth of the Sun's Eye, one reads "Nothing on earth happens except what god ordains in the horizon. He who does a good deed will have it return to him—and a bad deed likewise" (Quack 2015: 390). The Demotic Chronicle (text: Spiegelberg 1914; translation: Felber 2002: 75-90; see also Assmann 2002: 378, note 10) also reasserts the connection between human action and divine retribution in its reading of the history of Dynasties 28-30: pious kings live out their time and are succeeded by their sons, while impious kings are usurped or have their reigns cut short. This text also illustrates the decline in status of royalty, who are treated simply as individuals being judged by the gods for their adherence, no longer to *maat* (cosmic order), but to the *hep*, the law as a body of rules and guidelines laid down in writing (for one of the earliest references to a *hep* of kingship, see Merikara E138). Foreign domination in the first millennium BCE was possibly a factor in the development of prophetic texts, such as the Oracle of the Lamb (see Zauzich 1983; Thissen

2002: 115-119), that predict future calamity followed by the restoration of a golden age of indigenous Egyptian culture (Assmann 2002: 382, note 23). This reading of the texts as evidence for Egyptian anti-foreign sentiments has, however, found limited acceptance, and some of these texts may alternatively be understood as attempts by Egyptian writers to come to terms with a rapidly changing international context, in which traditional Egyptian royal and cosmic ideology needed reformulating (see, e.g., Felber 2002: 106-110; Thissen 2002: 134-136; Blasius and Schipper 2002: 294-298). However these predictions are interpreted, the deferral of the advent of cosmic justice to an unspecified future date nevertheless constitutes another implicit theodicy (Loprieno 2003: 55) that may be compared in thematic terms with the apocalyptic literature widespread throughout the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean—just as similar comparisons can be made between other Egyptian written genres (such as instructions) and classical literature (Lichtheim 1983). Though it therefore seems plausible, it is not currently possible to conclusively demonstrate a closer link between the Egyptian theodicean tradition and those of contemporary and subsequent cultures (however, see Frankfurter 1993: 176-194).

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Twenty-first century discussions of theodicy and the problem of evil in Egyptology have included von Lieven (2018), Ritner (2017), Borrego Gallardo (2016), Quack (2015), Rosell (2015: 136-149), Meltzer (2011), Kemboly (2010), Enmarch (2008: 55-59), Rizzo (2005), Allen (2004), and Frandsen (2000). For a detailed study of the concept of *isfet*, see Parys (2024), and for the Amarna Period approach to evil, see Rutkauskas (2023). Useful cross-cultural comparisons of Egyptian and other Near Eastern theodicean traditions can be found in Loprieno (2003) and Sitzler (1995). The "reproach to god" (*Vorwurf an Gott*) theme in Middle Egyptian literature was first discussed in detail by Otto (1951, 1966), followed by Fecht's in-depth discussion (1972) of that theme in one specific text, the Dialogue of Ipuwer and the Lord of All. The theme has also been explored in other Middle Egyptian poems (see, e.g., Blumenthal 2004). Contributions have included Parkinson (2002: 130-138), Enmarch (2008: 180-196, 211-216), Morenz (2010), and Rosell (2015: 141-150). See also Lorton (1993) for a comparison of Middle Egyptian poetic theodicies and Amarna Period theology. The standard edition of Book of the Heavenly Cow by Hornung (1997) discusses the theodicean sections of that text, while the sixth edition (2005) of his now classic study on Egyptian conceptions of god also touches on theodicy (most recent English translation: Hornung 1982). Assmann published a large number of important works on Egyptian political theology (e.g., 1994, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2005), including the concept of *maat* (2006).

A number of contributions on prophetic and apocalyptic literature from the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, much of which have theodicean overtones, can be found in Blasius and Schipper's edited volume (2002).

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