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Civilization and Nature: A Reading of Ancient Texts

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The Code of Hammurabi was a comprehensive set of 282 laws enacted by the Babylonian ruler Hammurabi (r. 1792–1750 BCE), which included provisions for contract, criminal, family, transactional and even military law; The Book of Exodus tells how Yahweh led the Israelites out of Egypt through the prophet Moses; the Egyptian Book of the Dead was a New Kingdom funerary text used from 1550 BCE to 50 BCE. These texts appear markedly different: a law code, a religious narrative, and a book of spells to help the dead in the afterlife. Yet all three texts reveal the close relationship between these societies and the natural environments in which they lived. Insofar as themes of water, land, and fauna are present in these various texts, this paper aims to determine the extent to which the Code of Hammurabi, Exodus, and the Book of the Dead differ in their depictions of nature.

Egypt and Babylon developed around rivers: the Nile, and Tigris and Euphrates rivers respectively. It is unsurprising that all three texts reveal the same reasons why – rivers facilitated a host of human activities. Rivers supported basic needs, as seen in Exodus. The Egyptians could get drinking water from the Nile, or take baths in it like the pharaoh's daughter.¹ They could also fish in the river as long as they did not use fish as bait, a practice forbidden by the Book of the

¹ Exod. 7:24, 2:5 (New International Version).

Dead.² Rivers also facilitated transport. As suggested by the Book of the Dead, being without a boat was seen as a deprivation to be alleviated by acts of charity, just as one might clothe the naked.³ Having a boat was commercially advantageous. In Babylon, long-boats and row-boats could be hired, possibly to ferry cargo such as grain, wool, oil, and dates.⁴ The texts portrayed the rivers as being essential to the daily life of the people, and the economic life of the civilization.

It is perhaps this proximity to rivers that led Egypt and Babylon to become cautious of water. They were undoubtedly conscious that it should be managed carefully. The Code of Hammurabi was concerned with how fields could be inundated by floods caused by human carelessness in allowing dikes to break or canals to open: “If a seignior was too lazy to make [the dike of] his field strong and did not make his dike strong and a break has opened up in his dike and he has accordingly let the water ravage the farmland, the seignior in whose dike the break was opened shall make good the grain that he let get destroyed....If a seignior, upon opening his canal for irrigation, became so lazy that he has let the water ravage a field adjoining his, he shall measure out grain on the basis of those adjoining his.”⁵ The Book of the Dead similarly called attention to how water could be polluted, and how its flow could be unlawfully held back or diverted into a canal.⁶ Both texts thus portrayed the influence of human action on natural bodies of water.

² Ibid., 7:21 and “The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead,” *Course Reader for History 1A: Introduction to Western Civilization* (UCLA, 2016), 49.

³ Ibid., 52.

⁴ Hammurabi, “The Code of Hammurabi,” trans. Theophile J. Meek, in James Bennett Pritchard, ed. *The Ancient Near East, Vol I, An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 167, 164.

⁵ Ibid., 145.

⁶ “The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead,” 50-51.

However, such natural bodies of water could simultaneously take on non-human and divine properties. The three texts show different ways that this could be done. In the Book of the Dead, the supernatural landscape of the netherworld was marked by the pools of *maat*, the south, and of Maaty, and Osiris's floor, which was a stream of water.⁷ The magic of water in this case was portrayed as an inherent condition. However, the other two texts show that the extraordinary feats performed by nature were caused by direct divine intervention. The Code of Hammurabi attributes floods to Adad just as it did to humans.⁸ The Euphrates was a deity seen as a supernatural arbiter of innocence or guilt: those accused of sorcery or adultery may have had to submit to the water ordeal by throwing themselves into the river.⁹ In a slightly different way, Exodus also shows how nature had received its powers through divine intervention. While the Nile was not a deity like the Euphrates, it could be influenced by the Hebrew God. God transmuted the Nile into blood, split the sea, and turned the bitter water at Marah sweet.¹⁰ As such, Exodus and Hammurabi's code explore the interactions between whole societies and their gods in the present life. This may explain why gods are seen to influence nature more actively and tangibly. Since the Book of the Dead situates a dead person in the netherworld of his gods, it may be less relevant to discuss the role of the divine in the influencing water bodies in the present life.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that Hammurabi's code was unique among the three texts in portraying the river as a convenient means of executing the death penalty. While there were many offenses that demanded capital punishment, it appears that death by drowning was

⁷ Ibid, 52-53.

⁸ Hammurabi, "The Code of Hammurabi," 144.

⁹ Ibid., 139, 152.

¹⁰ Exod. 7:7-21 (New International Version); 14:21-29; and 15:23-25.

reserved exclusively for crimes that involved women. Women were thrown into the water for failing to uphold the duties of a good wife. A woman could die for being caught with another man, for entering into the house of another seignor should her husband be taken captive, or for being a “gadabout who neglected her house and humiliated her husband.”¹¹ Women wine sellers could also be drowned for making the value of their drinks less than the value of grain.¹² Yet, there was only one offense that could land a man in the river. Seignors were punished if they had intercourse with the brides of their sons, if the sons had already had intercourse with their brides.¹³ Such was a link between the river and the virtue or purity of women in the Code of Hammurabi. The river as a means of execution was irrelevant as a concept for the other two texts. The Book of the Dead dealt with those who were already deceased and not how they came to be so. Exodus was more about divine punishment rather than that meted out by men. Egypt and Babylon were defined by their land as much as they were by their waters. Land was needed to support plant agriculture. Hammurabi’s laws clue us into the growth of grains and sesame in Babylonian fields, and dates in orchards.¹⁴ Exodus reveals that flax, barley, wheat, and spelt were grown in Egyptian fields, and fruit on trees.¹⁵ Parallels in animal agriculture are also seen in the texts. Land was important in pasturing livestock. These include the cattle and sheep mentioned in Hammurabi’s code, and the cattle of the Book of the Dead.¹⁶ Since both civilizations were situated near each other in the Fertile Crescent, it is perhaps expected that texts on them illustrate similar agricultural patterns.

¹¹ Hammurabi, “The Code of Hammurabi,” 152-154.

¹² *Ibid.*, 149.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 145, 147.

¹⁵ “The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead”, 52-53.

¹⁶ Hammurabi, “The Code of Hammurabi,” 166; and “The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead,” 49.

Thus far, the Code of Hammurabi, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and Exodus have similar portrayals of water and the land. However, their depictions of animals vary drastically.

Hammurabi's Code situates the role of animals in a commercial context. Oxen, goats, and asses are used to thresh grain, and oxen hired to pull wagons.¹⁷ Given that Hammurabi's Babylon was an agricultural economy, a portrayal of animals as beasts of burden is predictable.

In the other texts, animals are consistently seen in relation to religion. After all, the Egyptian Book of the Dead and Exodus are texts that are religious in nature. Nevertheless, their depictions of animals are so divergent that they suggest the Hebrews would have considered the Egyptians blasphemous idolaters based on their view of animals alone.

In the world of the living, the Egyptians are shown to have sacred animals. The Book of the Dead mentions birds from the preserves of the gods, and cattle on the property of the gods which may be sacred.¹⁸ In the afterlife, these animals were also related to religious ritual. The dead were to make offerings of oxen and birds—a ritual to be represented on a painted tile which could not be made from earth which had been stepped upon by a pig or other animal.¹⁹ The supernatural landscape had animals as well, like Osiris's walls of cobras.²⁰ But most prominently, gods were manifested as animals themselves. Except for the Ox-of-God Seb, gods were seen as threatening beasts, like the double Lion God, the serpent Amenti, the Crocodile God, and the Cobra Goddess.²¹ The danger posed by such animals to living Egyptians may have

¹⁷ Hammurabi, "The Code of Hammurabi," 166.

¹⁸ "The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead," 50.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 54.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 53.

²¹ *Ibid*, 50-53.

led them to believe that there were animal-like gods to be equally feared and revered in the netherworld.

To the Hebrews, however, animals were only seen as one of many expressions of god's omnipotence. God could demonstrate his ability to work miracles by changing Moses's staff to a snake and back.²² God could also punish the cruel pharaoh by sending forth plagues of frogs, gnats, and flies.²³ It would have been apostasy to worship animals like the Egyptians did, as shown in the massacre of those who worshipped Aaron's golden calf.²⁴ This dissimilarity in animal portrayals between Exodus and the Book of the Dead may be linked to how the Hebrews practiced an increasingly monotheistic religion, while the Egyptians practiced a polytheistic faith.

Although they were referred to in different ways, the same animals were included in the texts. There were domesticated animals such as cows: the wagon-pulling oxen of the Code of Hammurabi, the sacred cattle, sacrificial cows, and Ox-of-God Seb in the Book of the Dead, and Aaron's golden calf in Exodus. So too were there wild animals such as snakes: Osiris's walls of cobras, the serpent Amenti, and the Cobra Goddess in the Book of the Dead, and the transformation of Moses's staff in Exodus. Located within the Fertile Crescent, the Babylonian, Egyptian, and Hebrew cultures probably came into contact with the same animals. That they shared the same landscape likely explains how the themes of water and in particular land manifested themselves in similar ways in the three works. Rivers, fields, pastures, and orchards

²² Exod. 4:3-4 (New International Version).

²³ Ibid. 8:3-24.

²⁴ Ibid. 32:28.

provided food and water crucial to the survival of humans. Rivers would also facilitate transport, and by extension, the commerce that would lead to the growth of civilizations.

It is precisely the growth of civilization that differentiated Babylonian, Egyptian, and Hebrew views on nature. The growth of civilizations was constituted by social constructs such as law and religion. Rivers which heretofore had been seen merely in relation to sustenance and trade became linked in Babylon to the law with Hammurabi's death penalty and to religion with the Euphrates. In polytheistic Egypt, rivers would be linked to a pantheon of gods, some of whom were animal-like in appearance. For the monotheistic Hebrews, rivers could be subjected to the omnipotence of a single God who could send forth animals as plagues. The rise of religion also explains how the portrayal of animals came to be differentiated in the text. While the Code of Hammurabi reflected the commercial use of animals, the Book of the Dead and Exodus reveal their inclusion into religious beliefs and practices. Thus, these civilizations which had come into contact with nature incorporated elements of it into their societies. In different ways, they included rivers and animals into their law and religion. Such differences are reflected in the exemplary texts of each. The Code of Hammurabi, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and Exodus portrayed the same natural features of water, land, and animals. However, they differed in the powers they chose to ascribe to these natural features.

About the author

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