



RESEARCH

The Field of Rushes in Egyptian Funerary Texts

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This paper explores ancient Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife, emphasizing funerary texts such as the Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, and the Book of the Dead. It discusses how these texts guided both royal and non-royal Egyptians through the afterlife, focusing on the journey to the Field of Rushes and the themes of danger, purification, and provision. The author also considers speculative parallels between Egyptian funerary traditions and the biblical Exodus, encouraging further scholarly discussion.

Introduction

Three ancient Egyptian texts, the Pyramid Texts, the Coffin Texts, and the Book of the Dead, offered spells that would guide the deceased on his journey into the afterlife. These texts, known collectively as Funerary Texts, offered spells covering an assortment of postmortem events. Present in all these texts is a place known as the Field of Rushes, or the Field of Reeds. After offering a brief overview of the Egyptian afterlife, I will examine occurrences of the Field of Rushes in the Funerary Texts, highlighting the three themes: danger, purification, and provision.

Subsequently, I will offer some speculative observations on the similarities between the Funerary Texts and Israel's crossing of the Red Sea. Given the nature of correlation and the relative silence of recent scholarship on this subject, one should assess the section on the Sea of Reeds (יַם־סוּף) not as an attempt to prove a "this for that" correspondence, but as a launching point for further discussion and research.

General Introduction to Egyptian Afterlife

"Belief in the afterlife is among the fundamental concepts of Egyptian culture" (Müller 2001, 32). Nevertheless, the specifics of this particular ideology are far from monolithic. Egyptian concepts of the afterlife developed and changed throughout the millennia. Yet certain elements remained the same, including the preservation of the body and the deceased's journey in the afterworld.

The body was the bearer of an individual's consciousness; its preservation was a major concern. Thus, mummification and the equipping of the deceased's tomb with all necessities of life are indicative of the concern for the

preservation of life beyond the grave. However, death was not just a continuation of life beyond the grave. Death separated an individual's body from his *ka*, *ba*, and *akh*.¹ Müller compares these three elements with the English word "soul." However, she admits that their specific meaning is difficult to ascertain (Müller 2001, 32). Whatever the terms' specific meaning, after death, "the body was an immobile mummy, but the 'souls' could leave it on occasion and wander around" (Müller 2001, 32). The reunification of the "soul" with the body is a feature in the Egyptian afterlife. It is different from reincarnation. Discussing Spell 110 of the Book of the Dead, Milde comments, "The Egyptians did not strive after reincarnation of the Hindu type: rebirth in another body, i.e., another person. They yearned for the resurrection of their own body because they wanted to remain the same person with the same name" (1994, 16).

The survival of the body was necessary. Because the *ka* and *ba* left the body upon death, the deceased's existence in the afterworld depended upon the reunification of these elements. The resulting entity, the *akh*, and the gods inhabited the afterlife. "All funerary spells had one single aim—to allow the deceased to become an *akh*, to avoid the potential horror of dying again, a death from which there was no return" (El Mahdy 1989, 13).

The Egyptian afterlife was a journey, a journey with many twists and turns. Funerary Texts provided formulae whereby "the dead were to go forth from the burial to secure their perfect afterlife" (Forman and Quirke 1996, 112). For the most part, this journey took place in a region called the Winding Canal (J. P. Allen 2015, 9).

This aspect of cosmology is found throughout all the Funerary Texts. Regarding the Ferryman Spells of the Coffin Texts, Harco Willems writes, "Their history goes back to the PT (Pyramid Texts), some utterances of which are devoted to the celestial reed floats of the ferry on which the deceased king travels across the Winding Waterway to an area near the Eastern horizon" (1996, 157). According to Müller, this journey is "perilous, because he needs the aid of the heavenly ferryman, who transports to Re only a king who convinces him of his power" (2001, 33). Willems observes that this journey is "situated on a trajectory from an undefined starting point to the Field of Reeds, the netherworldly land of milk and honey" (1996, 169).

This should not be confused with a Western Christian notion of a purgatory journey from death to paradise; the Egyptian view of the afterlife is more materialistic. Milde notes that "Our understanding of ancient religions may inadvertently be troubled by a Western way of thinking and a Christian way of believing" (1994, 16). Indeed, unlike the Christian notion of heaven, there are dangers in the afterlife. Shannon Burkes concurs and writes,

¹ See Appendix One: Glossary.

The Pyramid Texts, then, are not full of sunshine and roses. Some parts express assertion and confidence, but others reveal concern and anxiety about the king's possible experiences after death. There are dangers which must be avoided, journeys which must be successfully completed, and physical requirements for sustenance that must continue to be met. The spells collectively engage in an attempt to ensure that the deceased king can continue to function as if still alive and attain a kind of beatification in the sky. Death is to be thoroughly overcome. (1999, 129)

In later periods, the so-called democratizing of death and the afterlife made this journey accessible to non-royals. Yet there were differences. Willems notes, "The earlier compositions tend to present the deceased king as an overwhelming personality whose presence alone seems to stir the ferryman into action. By contrast, the ferryman spells in the Coffin Texts are in essence texts, not about the journey across the Winding Waterway, but about the test the deceased has to pass before he can gain entry into the ferry" (1996, 157).

Part of this journey and the tests that lie therein take place in, or on the way to, a region of Egyptian cosmology referred to variously as the Field of Rushes or Field of Reeds. All three Funerary Texts refer to this region.

While there is considerable development concerning the Field of Reeds in the Funerary Texts, three basic elements seem to remain: danger, purification, and provision. While purification and provision seem to be the main goals, there are images of the danger of the afterlife as well. An examination of the texts will reveal these elements in more detail.

The Field of Rushes in Egyptian Funerary Texts²

Images of Danger *vis-à-vis* the Field of Rushes

Pyramid Texts

The afterlife was not a safe place even for the king. While direct references to danger are scarce, one can surmise through the wording of several spells that the journey itself is dangerous. There are several recitations regarding safe transport through or to the Field of Reeds. For example, the recitation

² The dating of the Funerary Texts is as follows:

Pyramid Texts: Old Kingdom (5–6th Dynasties), 2494–2181 BC

Coffin Texts: Middle Kingdom (12th Dynasty), 1991–1786 BC

Book of the Dead: New Kingdom (18–19th Dynasties), 1570–1220 BC

(cf. Johnston 2008, 181)

for Emerging into the Akhet³ found in the Pyramid Texts of Unis states, “Greet his entrance into the north of the Field of Reeds. Let him cross on the Winding Canal. Let him be transported over to the eastern side of the Akhet, let him be transported over to the eastern side of the sky. His sister is Sothis, his female sibling is the Morning Star” (J. P. Allen 2015, 52). While the danger is not readily apparent, Unis’s passage on the Winding Canal is not guaranteed, for his transport to the eastern side is not a sure thing.

This uncertainty regarding the journey itself continues throughout several Pyramid Texts. Pepi must be led by Sothis through (or to) the Field of Reeds. “You ever go up with Orion in the eastern arm of sky, you ever go down with Orion in the western arm of the sky. Sothis, whose places are clean, is the third of you two: she is the one who leads you two from the Field of Reeds to the perfect paths in the sky” (J. P. Allen 2015, 112). Pepi II must be rowed by the gods. “When you go forth you shall go forth to Atum’s broadhall, go to the Marsh of Reeds, and course the great god’s places. For you are given the sky, you are given the earth, you are given the Field of Reeds [by] the two great gods who row you: Shu and Tefnut, the two great gods in Heliopolis” (263).

A potential flood may need to be avoided or navigated safely. Teti at the Gate of Akhet states: “The Nurse Lake is opened up, the Winding Canal is inundated, the Fields of Reeds fill with water, and my ferrying is ferried on them to that eastern side of the sky, to the place where the gods give me birth, and I am fully reborn there, new and rejuvenated” (J. P. Allen 2015, 82). This spell is repeated by Pepi (125). It is written in the burial chamber of Merenre, “The reed-plot fills, the Winding Canal floods, and the Nurse Canal unplugs for me, that I may cross on them to the Akhet, to the place where the gods are born, and I am born there with them” (227).

Teti’s journey ends, but not without danger. Before he reaches his goal, his body is transformed; after his journey’s end, it is made of metal. “You are a great one whose crown is sound. Provide yourself with your metal limbs, stride the sky to the Field of Reeds, make your abode in the Field of Offerings among the Imperishable Stars who follow Osiris.” According to Allen, “the gods’ bodies were thought to be made of gold, and thus immutable” (99n30).

Overall, there are references to the dangers of the netherworld. Furthermore, some references indicate that the journey is fraught with uncertainties that must be overcome by using the proper spell.

³ See Appendix One: Glossary.

Coffin Texts

According to Forman and Quirke, “the coffin seems to be the kernel of a new tradition” (1996, 67). Non-royals, as well as royals, are afforded the spells necessary for success in the afterlife’s journey. This may be due to the deteriorating economic conditions of the late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period. “In these relatively impoverished conditions, the words securing eternal life were no longer spread over the stone expanse of tomb-chapel walls, but had to be confined instead to the wooden coffin” (68).

Nonetheless, not only did the dangers of the journey remain, but they increased. Commenting upon the significance of this change, Burkes writes,

The theological significance of bodily death is subordinated to the danger of a second and final death. The first death is simply a means to the transformation to eternal life. However, while happiness and security are the goal, the reader of the Coffin Texts comes away with a powerful sense of how dangerous the post-mortem journey can be. The deceased must be prepared to fend off all kinds of unpleasant creatures and experiences. (1999, 135)

Concerning the theological significance, Forman and Quirke continue their discussion of the Coffin Texts: “The most striking difference between the mass of new texts and the old body of Pyramid Texts lies in an obsession with the dangers in the earth” (1996, 72). While the Pyramid Texts speak of a journey in the sky, the Coffin Texts are concerned with the dangers of being buried in the earth (72).

Spells 159 and 161 describe the land of the Field of Rushes as a land of giants. The crops and the dwellers therein are huge (Faulkner 1973–1978, 1, 137–140). While the goal of the deceased is the Field of Rushes, the size of the inhabitants had to be intimidating. The title of Spell 173 states, “NOT TO EAT FAECES AND NOT TO DRINK URINE IN THE REALM OF THE DEAD.” This is something to avoid regardless of culture. The deceased requests from his guides that he may eat what they eat in the Field of Rushes (Faulkner 1973–1978, 1, 147–148). Similar incantations are found in Spells 174, 184, 194, 214, 215, 216, and 1011 (1:150, 154, 160, 170–172; 3:110–111). Although the land of giants found in the Field of Rushes may be intimidating, eating feces and drinking urine is a horror to be avoided.

Spell 397 is an incantation said to bring a ferryboat in the realm of the dead. During this journey, the deceased must answer many questions on the way to the Field of Rushes. The deceased must answer each question correctly before he can resume his journey. The questions are threatening, and failure is both looming and catastrophic (Faulkner 1973–1978, 2, 24–33). The challenge continues at the portal to the Field of Rushes (Spell 404) (2:48–51). Spell 622 outlines some of the dangers associated with crossing to the Field of

Rushes. “I am protected from him who would harm me, from him who would interfere with me, for there is none who will take my meal away from me, and there are <none> who will take my supper <from me>” (2:205). Besides the potential loss of a meal, the deceased is in danger of not being able to breathe (Spell 631) (2:214).

The deceased’s existence is threatened upon entry into the Field of Rushes (Spell 827). The deceased cries out, “I wish that you would give me a god-like body” (Faulkner 1973–1978, 3, 16–17). The continued existence of the deceased is dependent upon the reuniting of his body with his *ka* and *ba*.

Book of the Dead

The theme of danger continues into the *Book of the Dead*. Spell 62 is especially interesting in that it speaks of “parted waters.” “Spell for drinking water in the god’s domain by N. He says: Opened is the deluge for Osiris; parted are the celestial waters (for) Thoth and (for) the Inundation, lord of the horizon in this (his) name (of) (Cropper of the Earth). Mayest (thou) let me have water available like the members of Seth” (T. G. Allen 1974, 55). Not only is the deceased in danger of dehydration, but Spell 63 indicates the danger of being burned up in the water (56).

There is something in the Field of Rushes preventing the deceased’s passage. “Nose of (Ptah), escaped from the embalmers who are in the Field of Rushes, from which one escapes rejoicing, (is thy name).” Now the dead person turns and faces those preventing his passage: “Hail to you, goodly persons, possessors of truth, who exist forever (for) the two periods of eternity. I penetrate to you” (T. G. Allen 1974, 81). The dangers surrounding the Nose of Ptah are rather vague. The dangers of passing by a ring of fire are not. Spell 163b states: “SPELL FOR SAILING IN THE GREAT BARK OF RE TO PASS BY THE RING OF FIRE.” In this spell, the Lake of Rushes is dangerous. “O (ye) in (your) coffins, full (indeed) of dangers is (the Lake) of Rushes; I have seen (them) there” (112).

One of the dangers is the danger of judgment. Spells 145 and 146 are spells for entering through the secret portals of the house of Osiris in the Field of Rushes. What follows in both spells is a series of responses made at the various portals of Osiris. (“Make way for me, for I know thee, I know thy name. . .”) These responses also seem to carry an idea of purity. (“But art thou pure?”) In the end, the bidder is told to “proceed” (T. G. Allen 1974, 123–137). Lack of proof of purity threatens the deceased’s journey; he must prove his purity. “I am pure with these waters wherewith Horus purified himself when he served as the ritual-priest and Son-Whom-He-Loves of (his Father Osiris)” (127).

Images of Purification *vis-à-vis* the Field of Rushes

Pyramid Texts

More prominent than images of danger are themes of purification. Regarding the Field of Rushes in the Pyramid Texts, Harold Hays writes,

(I)n the Old Kingdom the dominant immediate context of the term Field of Rushes is purification, a theme participating in a vital discourse. Purification in the Field of Rushes as well as two other themes bearing the term are further associated with passage to the sky. All of these contexts will have served to condition the term's meanings in the Old Kingdom, and prominently, since well over half of the texts concerned are associated with these things. (2004, 187)

The phrase “Someone has become clean in the Field of Reeds” occurs numerous times in the Pyramid Texts (J. P. Allen 2015, 46, 71, 72). The idea of washing is connected with the reuniting of the deceased with his *ka*. “I wash myself as the Sun appears and the Elder Ennead shines. . . I cross to the Field of Reeds with those in the Akhet rowing me and those in the Cool Waters sailing me. I become truly functional, and my arms do not go off. I become truly foremost, and my ka reaches me” (52).

The cleansing motif continues throughout the Pyramid Texts. “Pepi, you are a great one, son of a great one. You become clean in the lake of tresses and receive your throne in the field of Reeds” (J. P. Allen 2015, 122). The idea of cleansing and rebirth is found in several texts. “The Nurse Lake is opened up, [the Winding Canal] is inundated, [the Fields of Reeds fill] with water, and my father's ferrying is ferried on them to that eastern side of the sky, to the place where the gods give him birth, and he is fully reborn there, new and rejuvenated” (125, cf. 82). Similar words are found in Recitation 265 (130). According to Allen, Nurse Lake is a “body of water in the night sky, so called because of its nurturing waters” (362). In these passages, the Field of Rushes is associated with purification and cleansing. This is a necessary process whereby the deceased is made ready for the judgment to come.

The sun (or Re) plays a role in the cleansing at the Field of Reeds. “I have come clean in the Field of Reeds, I get dressed in the Field of the Beetle, and I find the Sun there. When the Sun emerges in the east, he finds me in the Akhet; when the Sun comes back to the west, he will find me there. Both ultimate places where the Sun goes, he will find me there” (J. P. Allen 2015, 131). In addition, note the text from the burial chamber of Merenre, “I have become clean in the lake of reeds, in which the Sun has become clean” (226).

Coffin Texts

While the *emphasis* shifts from purification to provision in the transition from the Pyramid Texts to the Coffin Texts (Hays 2004, 199), allusions to purification remain. Oblations are offered for the deceased in Spell 260, which continues with the deceased “clothed with life in the midst of the Field of Rushes” (Faulkner 1973–1978, 1, 199). In Spell 279, the deceased is provided with food (see below) *and* goes through a cleansing ritual. “. . . you will descend, you will bathe in the basin of the Abyss. . .” (1:210). While the deceased’s bath is not in the Field of Rushes, the Abyss appears to be proximate to the Field.

The reference to purity is plain in Spells 296 and 806. Spell 296 states, “N is pure on that great tomb-plateau; N has gotten rid of his evil, N has discarded his wrongdoing, N has cast down to earth the evils which were on his flesh.” The spell continues with the statement that “N knows the secret ways and the portals of the Field of Rushes; may N be there” (Faulkner 1973–1978, 1, 220). Although most of Spell 806 is missing, what remains may be a reference to purification in the Field of Rushes. “You bathe in the Lake of *nw*-birds, your springs of water [are in] the VII, Field [of Rushes(?). .]” (3:5).⁴

The Book of the Dead

Spell 15 seems to indicate that before the deceased can row in the Field of Rushes, he must be free from evil: “Mayest thou bless Osiris N. in the god’s domain. Mayest thou let him exist at the west free from evil, (for) thou turnest thy back on falsehood. Mayest thou make (him) a worthy one in the presence of the blessed; may he join the souls in the Sacred Land. May he row in the field of Rushes (after) being assigned with gladness” (T. G. Allen 1974, 13). Spell 86 continues the purification motif: “(I) have purified myself in this great district; I (have) done away with my uncleanness. I have blotted out (my) sins. I have cast aside the uncleanness that adhered to my flesh. Doorkeeper(s), make way for me, for I am your peer. I go forth by day, I walk on foot, having at my disposal the course of the Sunlight. I know the secret ways and the gates of the Field of Rushes” (73–74).

Images of Provision *vis-à-vis* the Field of Rushes

Pyramid Texts

The dominant theme in the Pyramid Texts concerning the Field of Rushes is purification (Hays 2004, 187). Allusions to provision are rare. The deceased is given a metal body; this provision makes him immutable (J. P. Allen 2015, 99n30). The reason for this lack of allusions to provision in the Pyramid Texts may be explained by the fact that kings buried in pyramids had ample

⁴ Granted, the “Field of Rushes” has been reconstructed by the translator.

provisions buried with them. Forman and Quirke (quoted earlier) mentioned the deteriorating economic conditions during the time of the Coffin Texts. Thus, there was a need for provision then, while in the earlier period of the Pyramid Texts, no such need existed. Granted, this is conjecture.

Coffin Texts

A significant shift in context occurred between the Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts concerning the Field of Rushes. While purification dominated the Pyramid Texts, provision dominates the Coffin Texts. Hays writes,

To summarize all of this last, one has provisioning in the field of Rushes manifest in the Middle Kingdom in the themes of having one's booth in the Field of Rushes, sitting in the Field of Rushes, having portions there, living on bread there or just having bread there, a ferryman of the Field of Rushes whose function is here to bring foodstuffs, going down to it to receive food and drink, and gods in it bestowing food and drink: by my reckoning, there are eleven texts in the Middle Kingdom with provisioning as context. (2004, 199)

Indeed, most Coffin Text spells where the Field of Rushes is mentioned also speak of the provisioning of the deceased. For example, Spell 279 states, “you come to land at the Field of Rushes, you eat cucumbers of the two mysterious mansions [. . .]” (Faulkner 1973–1978, 1, 210). Besides cucumbers, a more robust provisioning is mentioned in Spell 404. “As for anyone who knows this spell, he will go down into the Field of Rushes, and there will be given to him a *šns*-loaf, a beer-jug, a *psn*-cake and an aroua of land, with barley of seven cubits and likewise of emmer, and it is the Followers of Horus who will reap it” (2:50). Not only is the deceased provided with food and drink, he is also given land and labor to reap the land. The same type of provisioning is found in Spell 405 (2:56). The deceased in Spell 473 receives fish (2:109), while in Spell 806, he receives bread (3:5).

The ferryman, who brings the deceased across the Winding Waterway to the Field of Rushes, also ferries provisions to or for the deceased. Spell 571 lays out the duties of the ferryman in this regard. “O men, O spirits, O dead, rejoice and be glad when you see this mansion of mine, which is among the waters. O sheriff, [. . .] are brought for it and riches heaped up for it by *Fnn* the ferryman who puts ashore for me at this mansion of mine among the waters. . . so that they will bring to me fields, people, barley of Upper Egypt, emmer and herbs. . .” (Faulkner 1973–1978, 2, 173). The reason for the shift from purification to provision is unclear. The Coffin Texts reflect a concern for the provision of the deceased in the afterlife.

Book of the Dead

Images of provision continue in the Book of the Dead. The very first spell states, “As for one who knows this roll on earth or (puts it) in writing on the coffin, he goes forth by day in any form he wishes and (re-)enters (his) seat unhindered. Given him are bread and beer and a chunk of meat from the altar of Osiris. He enters in peace into the field of rushes” (T. G. Allen 1974, 6). Themes of provision continue in Spell 72: “given him are bread and beer and a chunk of meat from the altar of Osiris. He ascends to the Field of Rushes. Barley and wheat are given him there, so that he (shall be) thriving as he was on earth” (65). Spell 99 has a similar call for provision (81).

Spell 110 is a particularly important spell regarding provision in the Field of Rushes. The prescript comment states, “Beginning of the spells for the Fields of Offerings, the spells for the going forth by day, going in and out of the god’s domain, attaining the Field of Rushes, existing in the Field of Offerings, the great settlement, lady of the winds, gaining control there, becoming a blessed one there, plowing there, reaping (there), eating there, drinking there, copulating there, doing everything that is done upon earth” (T. G. Allen 1974, 87). In this spell, the speaker talks of the journey by boat. “I paddle (in) this great bark in the lake(s) of Hotep. . .” Arriving at a blessed place, “I become a blessed one therein; I eat (there)in, I drink therein. I plow therein, I reap therein, I grind therein. I copulate therein; my (magic) becomes powerful therein” (87). Variant examples follow, but all speak of a blessed existence.

The role of the ferryman continues in the spells of the Book of the Dead. Spell 99 is a spell for “BRINGING THE FERRYBOAT IN THE GOD’S DOMAIN.” It states, “O ye who bring the ferryboat over this bad sand bar, bring me the ferryboat, attach for me (my) towrope, in peace, in peace. ‘Come, come; draw near, draw near.’ I have come to see my Father Osiris” (T. G. Allen 1974, 80). Later in the Spell, it outlines the duties of the ferryman: “Mine are your offerings this day. Your offerings to me are barley and wheat; your offerings to me (are) myrrh and clothing. (Your) offerings to me (are) oxen and fowl; (your) offerings to me (are) life, soundness, and health. Your offerings to me (include the right) to go forth by day in any form in which I may wish to go forth (from) the Field of Rushes” (81). Spell 106 states, “O ferryman of the Field of Rushes, bring me these loaves (to) thy watery realm as (to) thy Father, the eldest, who has departed in the god’s ship” (85).

Conclusions Regarding the Field of Rushes in Egyptian Funerary Texts

Three significant themes stand out regarding the Field of Reeds in Egyptian Funerary Texts: danger, purification, and provision. While several scholars focus upon the themes of purification and provision, the idea of danger looms large in the journey through (or to) the Field of Rushes. While the

king's final destination is almost but not quite certain, the successful journey of a non-royal is less fail-safe. Both the king and the non-royal sought the reunification of their *ba* and *ka* with a physical body. They all sought to become *akh* in the realm of the gods. Before this could happen, the deceased had to undergo a journey, a journey that involved the Field of Reeds. While this journey was taking place, their physical remains had to be preserved, thus the importance of the mummy.

The Sea of Reeds (יָם־סוּף) in Exodus

Methodology⁵

This study does not argue for a one-to-one correspondence between the Egyptian Field of Rushes and the biblical Sea of Reeds. The Field of Rushes is an eschatological realm associated with Osiris, judgment, rebirth, and eternal life, whereas the Sea of Reeds is a historical and theological setting within Israel's salvation history.⁶ The comparison, therefore, seeks literary and cultural similarities or differences, rather than direct equivalence. Both accounts are in the same cultural environment.

The methodology follows William Hallo's contextual approach, which combines comparative and contrastive analysis to study Scripture within its ancient Near Eastern environment (Hallo 1980, 1–26, 1990, 3). This approach assumes that biblical authors shared the broader literary and cultural world of the ancient Near East while also producing distinctive theological interpretations. As John Walton argues, biblical writers sometimes echoed ancient Near Eastern motifs and, at other times, reshaped them without necessarily parodying their sources (Walton 2018, 15). The contextual approach, therefore, considers both literary relationships and wider cultural diffusion.

Because comparisons can become superficial, this study also adopts the methodological safeguards proposed by Meir Malul (1990, 13–110). Malul distinguishes between typological comparisons, which merely note similarities across cultures, and historical comparisons, which demonstrate interaction within the same cultural stream. Valid comparison requires identifying the nature of the connection, determining whether similarities are coincidental or historically meaningful, and establishing the possibility of cultural contact. Although definitive proof of dependence is rarely attainable, demonstrating the possibility of influence provides a sufficient basis for careful comparison.

⁵ This section on methodology borrows heavily from the methodology section of my unpublished dissertation where I compare ANE funerary practices and afterlife belief with the Old Testament, especially Ecclesiastes. Gresser, Robert C. 2023. "Qohelet's Theology of the Afterlife and Its Impact on Selected Second Temple Literature." PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary. ProQuest (30318996).

⁶ This sentence is the result of the helpful critique provided by one of the reviewers of this article.

A good example of the use of Malul's criteria can be found when Gordon Johnston suggests that the "Silver Treaty Tablet (CTH 91), which was sent from Hattusili III to Ramesses II and arrived in Pi-Ramesses in ca. 1259 BC," may have influenced the "Hebrew covenant inaugurated at Sinai in the mid-thirteenth century BC" (2020, 71). Johnston meets Malul's criterion, establishing the *possibility* of connection between the Mosaic covenant at Sinai and Bronze Age Hittite treaty forms. Johnston establishes the possibility of knowledge. "We need not posit anything beyond a basic cognitive awareness of the treaty concept and basic contours of the treaty put on public display and provided by a public reading" (98). The possibility of connection does not prove that CTH 91 was the decisive or only channel that provided the cultural background for the Mosaic covenant; there may be more, yet to be discovered.

Johnston shows that the assumption of a late (early first millennium) provenance for the writing of the Sinai covenant is not a given fact. One *may* conclude that there was a literary connection (the geographic and chronological gaps being narrowed) as early as the mid- to late second millennium between Hatti and Israel via Egypt. The same can be said about the possibility of correlation between Egyptian funerary texts and the Exodus account.

Comparative Analysis

Not surprisingly, little is written regarding the relationship between Egyptian mythology and the crossing of the Reed Sea. This may be because many scholars assign this part of Exodus to the Priestly account, thus dating it much later than the funerary texts. Although he is writing about the creation account in Genesis, Johnston argues,

... their work fell on deaf ears for several reasons: (a) scholars' fixation on the Mesopotamian materials, which were more widely known and accessible; (b) critical assumptions that Genesis 1 should be classified as P, dated to the exilic or postexilic period, and assigned to a Babylonian provenance; (c) failure to take seriously the biblical tradition of Hebrew origins in the land of Egypt; and (d) general lack of familiarity with the Egyptian language and literature dealing with creation. (2008, 179)⁷

Johnston maintains that there is a correlation between Genesis 1 and Egyptian Creation Myths. He points out several polemical similarities. "Genesis 1 clearly rejects the Egyptian polytheistic deification of the sky,

⁷ Johnston is commenting upon the rejection of the works of Sayce and Yahuda regarding a correlation between Genesis 1 and the Egyptian creation myths.

ground, and air. It does not, however, dramatically distance itself from Egyptian cosmic geography” (2008, 190). Johnston asserts, “The number of parallels and degree of correspondence between Genesis 1 and major Egyptian creation myths is remarkable.” However, “The stark differences in Genesis that seem intentionally polemical were ideologically driven and reflect a Yahwistic redaction of the culturally shared Egyptian prototype” (191–192). Johnston concludes, “Genesis 1 appears to be a literary polemic designed to refute ancient Near Eastern creation mythology in general and ancient Egyptian creation mythology in particular. Although several elements in this passage surely reflect a general Semitic background, the majority of parallel elements are cast against the Egyptian mythologies” (194). Understandably, one might distinguish between Genesis and the Egyptian Creation Myths on one hand, and Exodus and the Funerary Texts on the other. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Johnston primarily relied on the Funerary Texts for his observations regarding Egyptian creation lore.

In like manner, this paper will continue with a comparison between Egyptian Funerary Text references to the Field of Rushes and the Israelite crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Walter Wifall sees this link as well. He writes,

In Egyptian mythology, the lake or field of reeds was the underworld where the soul of the dead was purified before ascending into heaven. The soul was said to pass over the underworld sea of reeds, much as the historical Passover of Israel in the Reed Sea events. This mythological sea of reeds has both a geographical location in Egypt and a symbolic location in the cosmic circuit of the sun through heaven and the underworld. (1980, 327)

Wifall continues his analysis by observing, “as the geographical *yam sūp* and *Shi-Hor* and the mythological or theological lake and field of reeds and Sheol all seem to be interrelated, so also, perhaps, are the terms *Shi-Hor* and Sheol” (1980, 329). Wifall observed that there is an association between the Egyptian Field of Rushes and the *yam sūp* of the Exodus account.

While he elsewhere cautions against a robust “this for that” correlation (2005, 48), Hoffmeier sees a similarity between *sūp* and the Egyptian Funerary Text’s reference to the “lake of reeds” (1996, 204). Granting that one can see at least a *surface similarity* between the Field of Rushes and the Sea of Reeds, we can now move cautiously on a *speculative* association between the two accounts.

After their release by Pharaoh, the biblical text remarks, “But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea” (Exod 13:18, ESV). God caused the people to follow a roundabout way (hiphil of סבב) to the Sea of Reeds. Curiously, the Egyptians had to follow the “Winding Canal” on their way to the Field of Rushes. The Israelites carried with them the bones of Joseph as Yahweh led them. The similarity between

the leading of Yahweh and the leading by the ferryman of the Funerary Text may be subtle. While God is leading Israel, he is also leading the bones of Joseph to their final resting place by way of the *yam sūp*. One must ask, why are the bones of Joseph so important? Is there a polemical similarity to the importance of the physical body so endemic in the Egyptian afterlife theology? After all, the bones of Joseph survive while the bodies of the Egyptians perish.

As noted above, the Field of Rushes in the Funerary Texts was a place of danger, albeit danger with subsequent reward. The dangers of the journey were mitigated by the guidance of the ferryman and the purification of the deceased. Here, in the biblical text, God guides Israel; he also “guides” the Egyptians. He hardens Pharaoh’s heart, causing him to pursue the wandering Israelites. Yahweh hardens the hearts of the Egyptians, “so that they should go (וַיִּבְאוּ) in after them. . .” (Exod 14:17, ESV). The verb, וַיִּבְאוּ, is an imperfect with a waw, not a preterite. It is not past tense; rather, it indicates purpose or result. The textual note in the NET Bible states, “The form again is the imperfect tense with vav (ו) to express the purpose or the result of the hardening. The repetition of the verb translated ‘come’ is interesting: Moses is to divide the sea in order that the people may cross, but God will harden the Egyptians’ hearts in order that they may follow” (2001). The same waw plus imperfect occurs in 14:4 (וַיִּרְדֵּף) where God hardens Pharaoh’s heart “so that” he will pursue Israel. God leads Israel; he also leads Egypt, albeit to destruction. God, the cosmic ferryman, leads the bones of Joseph to their final resting place. As for the Egyptians, the Sea of Reeds becomes their place of destruction, the loss of their lives, and the loss of their bodies.

Before one can continue in the afterlife, the deceased’s heart is weighed. A heavy heart leads to destruction, while a light heart is acceptable. A strong, resolute heart finds acceptance in the judgment. God strengthened (piel of חזק) Pharaoh’s and the Egyptians’ hearts. Reflecting on the use of the Hebrew words, קשה, כבד, and חזק, Coover-Cox concludes, “But when the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, Pharaoh lost control. He could not maintain the appearance of being unflappable or of controlling the elements vital to Egypt, and the truth about his sinful character came out. By both the Lord’s standards and Pharaoh’s own, Pharaoh was inadequate” (2006, 307). Before the Egyptians even reached the banks of the Reed Sea, they were judged and found guilty. Their destruction was imminent. The dangers inherent in the journey to or through the Field of Rushes are realized not by Israel but by Egypt. The hardened, heavy hearts of the Egyptians sank in the Sea of Reeds.

As noted above, one of the dangers of an Egyptian afterlife was the failure of the deceased’s *ka* and *ba* to reunite with his body; thus, the importance of mummification. Joseph was presumably mummified. His bones made it across the sea. The Egyptians who died in the sea were not mummified. Presumably, they never achieved *akh*. Wifall makes a profound observation:

“Egyptian dead were at times called the drowned ones and the wicked were said to be burned by fire. . .” (1980, 328). Drowning was a particularly heinous form of death in that, if one’s body were never discovered, one could never be *akh*. Exodus clearly states that the “waters returned and covered (piel of כסה) the chariots and the chariot drivers” (Exod 14:28, ESV). כסה means to cover or conceal (Koehler et al. 1994–2000, s.v. “כסה”). Granted, the text later indicates that their bodies were lying on the seashore (14:30). While Exodus 14:30 may indicate that their bodies were “recoverable,” the poetic rendition of their destruction indicates that they “sunk in the Red Sea” (Exod 15:4, ESV). The poem continues,

The floods covered them;
they went down into the depths like a stone.

The theological implication is that the bodies of the Egyptians were not given a proper burial; thus, this particular trip over the Winding Canal to the Field of Rushes was disastrous for Pharaoh and his charioteers. Their purification in the Field of Rushes was replaced by their judgment. Rather than becoming “clean in the Field of Rushes,” they sank, never to achieve *akh*.

Peter Craigie comments upon the seeming polemical tactic of Exodus 15. “One aspect of victory songs as a *genre* in the ancient Near East is the use of *taunt*. The use of Egyptian-type phraseology in a Song celebrating Israel’s victory would be an effective sarcasm and taunt, in a rhetorical sense, of the Egyptians” (1970, 86). Craigie comes to his conclusion based on the use of certain phrases found in Exodus 15 that seem to mirror certain Egyptian common phrases. According to Craigie, this similarity is deliberate (85).

Many years ago, Yahuda came to the same conclusion. Basing his work on parallels between Egyptian and Hebrew, he concluded concerning mighty deeds (עֲשֵׂיָהּ פִּלְאָ) of Exodus 15:11:

the Pharaohs loved to speak again and again of their ‘great deeds’ both as hostile acts against their foes as well as in reference to benevolent actions on behalf of Temples, the gods, or the country. . .

It is noteworthy that not only in the Pentateuch, as the passages cited show, but almost in all the passages of the Bible (and there are very many of them) the ‘great and marvelous deeds’ of God relate exclusively to the exodus from Egypt or the theophany at Sinai. This striking circumstance is only to be explained by the fact that the going out of Egypt was represented and hailed in all times as ‘marvellous (sic) deeds’ 82–81, 1933) נפלאות.

Rather than the deeds of Pharaoh, the deeds of Yahweh are extolled throughout time.

As noted above, the postmortem trip was dangerous. The deceased used spells to overcome the danger. Yet, once reached, the Field of Rushes promised purification and provision. Unfortunately for the Egyptians, this Sea of Reeds provided universal disaster. Commenting upon Exodus 14:28 and the phrase “not one of them remained,” Yahuda concludes that this particular phrase is found in Egyptian narratives where the author wants to establish in hyperbolic fashion the demise of one’s enemies (1933, 88–89).

By the time of the Exodus (early or late date), the Book of the Dead was the standard Funerary Text.⁸ In this text, themes of provision dominate. The Egyptians were not provided for in the Sea of Reeds. Yet in what sense was Israel provided food and drink? The biblical narrative immediately continues with the story of water (Exod 15:22ff, ESV) and the manna (Exod 16:1ff, ESV), God’s provision. Spell 404 of the Coffin Texts specifies the deceased’s portion as food, drink, land, and labor to reap the land. Book of the Dead Spell 1 repeats this list. Spell 110 of the Book of the Dead lays out the provision in the Field of Rushes. These include plowing, reaping, eating, drinking, and copulating. Is this not what Israel was to do in the Promised Land, work the land, enjoy the fruits of the land, and have children, in other words, a blessed existence on the east side of the Sea of Reeds? What Egypt longed for, Israel received.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, ancient Egyptians went to great lengths to ensure their success in the afterworld. At first, this success was afforded only to the king. Later, postmortem spells were offered to non-royals. By the time of the biblical exodus, Funerary Texts were well known and readily available. The spells in the Funerary Texts covered a wide diversity of events and places supposedly taking place in the netherworld. One place, a place that evokes echoes of similarity with the biblical account of the exodus, is the Field of Rushes. Egyptians longed to reach the Field of Rushes. While there was danger in the journey, the ferryman would eventually escort the deceased to the Field, where he would receive purification and provision. One could speculate that, biblically, the Egyptians did achieve the Field of Rushes, *a.k.a.* the Sea of Reeds. Yahweh escorted the Israelites through the waters and gave them provisions on the other side. Yahweh enticed the Egyptians into the Reeds, and they died; their bodies sank. The Egyptians’ hope of an afterlife as *akh* drowns in the Sea of Reeds. A coincidence? Maybe. But a coincidence worthy of further investigation and discussion.

⁸ Pyramid Texts: Old Kingdom (5–6th Dynasties), 2494–2181 BC

Coffin Texts: Middle Kingdom (12th Dynasty), 1991–1786 BC

Book of the Dead: New Kingdom (18–19th Dynasties), 1570–1220 BC

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Appendix One: Glossary (J. P. Allen 2015, 349–368)

Akh (“effective one”). The epithet describes the spirit’s connection with the living. Pyramid Texts, known as “akhifiers,” helped the deceased become an akh. The verb denotes the process of becoming an akh.

Akhet (“Place of Becoming Akh”). The latter portion of the Duat refers to the region extending from its center—where the Sun joins Osiris at midnight—to the visible horizon, above which the Sun emerges at dawn. In the Pyramid Texts, this area is specifically linked to the antechamber of the pyramid.

Ba The nonphysical essence of a person or thing, similar to personality or soul, and the impression it leaves on others. The ba of a living individual endures beyond physical death, bearing resemblance to the contemporary understanding of the soul.

Duat The realm traversed by the Sun during nighttime. In the Pyramid Texts, Duat is linked to the burial chamber within the pyramid.

Ennead Refers to nine deities associated with the creation of the physical world.

Ka The life force that exists in humans, gods, and akhs—passed down from the creator, through kings to people, and from fathers to children; it is also found in food and drink.

Osiris (“engendering principle”). The male principle of life and fatherhood is represented in the annual flooding of waters, plant growth, and the reproductive cycles of animals and humans. According to tradition, Osiris was killed by his brother Seth and depicted as a mummy in the center of the Duat. It is said that the sun joins Osiris at night to gain the energy needed to rise again at dawn. In burial practices, the deceased’s mummy in the burial chamber is associated with Osiris, as is the deceased’s spirit in related burial chamber texts.