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RETELLING

The Coffin Texts

Spells for the dead of Middle Kingdom Egypt

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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Chapter 1: Introduction: The Book Inside the Coffin

Open a wooden coffin from ancient Egypt - one made about four thousand years ago, in the troubled centuries after the pyramid age - and you may find that the inside is covered, edge to edge, with writing. Dense columns of small, cursive hieroglyphs run along the walls, across the floor, under the lid, every surface crowded with spells. The people buried in these coffins did not want decoration. They wanted equipment. Each spell was a tool the dead would need on the far side of the grave, and the coffin itself was the toolbox.

These writings are what scholars call the Coffin Texts. The name is modern and plain, chosen simply because most of the spells were found on coffins, though they also appear on tomb walls, stelae, mummy masks, canopic chests, and a few papyri. The Egyptians themselves had no single title for the collection, because it was never a single book. Nearly 1,200 individual spells are known - numbered CT 1 through CT 1185 by the Dutch scholar Adriaan de Buck, who spent decades transcribing them - and no surviving coffin contains them all. Each one carries its own selection, chosen by region, by workshop, and by what the family could afford. A typical coffin holds fewer than two hundred spells.

The Coffin Texts belong to a particular moment in Egyptian history. The Old Kingdom, the age of the great pyramids, had collapsed around 2181 BC, and royal power shattered into pieces. During the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom that followed (roughly 2181-1650 BC), provincial governors and wealthy officials began to claim for themselves something that had belonged only to the king: a glorious, guaranteed afterlife.

Before this, the great funerary spells were the Pyramid Texts, carved on the walls of royal pyramids at Saqqara, beginning with the pyramid of King Unas around 2350 BC. Those spells lifted the king up to the sky to join the sun and the stars, and only a king could use them - they were cut into royal stone, and stone does not move. But when central power broke apart, the spells moved too, from immovable pyramids to portable wooden coffins. The whole apparatus of resurrection now belonged to whoever lay in the box. Historians call this the "democratisation of the afterlife" - some scholars find the phrase too strong, since a few non-royal spells existed even earlier, but the enormous expansion of access is beyond doubt. Tellingly, the royal pyramids of the Middle Kingdom are generally bare of inscriptions: the richest funerary literature of the age belongs not to kings but to governors, officials, and their families.

The Coffin Texts stand exactly in the middle of Egypt's long tradition of books for the dead. About 400 of their spells are reworked Pyramid Text utterances, carried forward and edited for new owners. And looking ahead, roughly a third of the chapters of the later Book of the

Dead - the famous illustrated papyrus scrolls of the New Kingdom - grow directly out of Coffin Text spells. The Coffin Texts are the bridge between the two.

They also changed what the afterlife meant. The Pyramid Texts had sent the king upward, to the sun and the stars. The Coffin Texts turn downward, to Osiris, god of the dead, and to the Duat, the shadowy underworld he rules. Every justified dead person now becomes "an Osiris" - the spells address their owner directly as "the Osiris N," with the person's own name written in. New ideas appear for the first time: a judgement of the dead before Osiris and his council, spells for taking the shapes of gods and animals, reunion with one's family beyond the grave, and the first mention of the chaos serpent Apophis, the sun god's enemy.

Most of the known coffins come from Middle Egypt. The richest single source is the cemetery of Deir el-Bersha, where the governors of the Hare nome were buried in coffins whose floors carry the astonishing painted map called the Book of Two Ways. Other finds come from Asyut, Meir, Beni Hasan, Thebes, el-Lisht, Dahshur, Gebelein, and the governors' tombs at Qubbet el-Hawa overlooking Aswan - about a hundred inscribed coffins in all.

Each spell begins with the words djed-medw - "recitation," words to be spoken aloud. These are not stories to be read silently. They are utterances, weapons of the voice, meant to be spoken by the dead or for the dead, always in the first person. What follows is a retelling of that long speech, arranged as the soul's own journey: from the coffin, through darkness and danger, past gates and guardians, to judgement, and at last to the fields of paradise.

Chapter 2: Death and Burial: The Resurrection Machine

The Egyptians did not think of the coffin as a container for a corpse. They thought of it as a machine for resurrection - a device packed with everything the dead needed to wake, to rise, and to live again.

The Coffin Texts open with spells for what they call "going forth by day": the freedom of the soul to leave the tomb, to move through the world, to join the sun on its daily crossing. The part of the person that travels is the ba, often translated as "soul" - the mobile, flying self that can slip out of the burial chamber and return to the mummy at night. Spell after spell repeats the wish: to go forth by day, to come and go at will, to assume any form, to never be shut in. The very phrase "going forth by day" was later adopted as the title of the Book of the Dead. It was already the heartbeat of the Coffin Texts, carried in the rubrics of spells like CT 94, CT 152, CT 335, and CT 404.

But the opening spells also admit, frankly, what the dead are afraid of. The Duat is not a peaceful place, and death is not necessarily final - which is exactly the problem. There is a worse thing than death: the second death, the true annihilation in the underworld from which

there is no return. The earliest spells are shields against it. They ward off serpents and demons. They protect the dead from decapitation, from having the heart torn out, from losing the name that anchors a person's existence. They forbid the two ultimate humiliations of the anti-world: being forced to eat excrement and drink urine, and being made to walk upside down. The spells exist to say, of every reversal the Duat can threaten: not to me.

Behind all of this stands Osiris. In the Coffin Texts the dead do not merely hope to meet him - they become him. From the first spell onward the owner of the coffin is addressed as "the Osiris N," sharing the god's identity, his death, and his rising. Osiris was murdered and dismembered, yet his body was reassembled and he was made ruler of the dead. To be an Osiris is to trust that the same pattern holds for you: what has been taken apart will be put back together; what has died will live.

So the coffin and its texts work together as one machine. The spells knit the body back into wholeness, guard the heart and the name, feed and clothe the dead, open the tomb door for the ba, and hold off the second death. On the floors of the coffins of Deir el-Bersha, a painted map of the underworld waits beneath the body, while across the lid above stretches the sky goddess Nut, arching over the sleeper like the heaven she is. The dead rest between earth's map and sky's embrace, equipped on every side. It only remains for them to speak.

Chapter 3: The Breath of Life: The Hymns of Shu

Among the longest and most remarkable cycles in the Coffin Texts is a group of spells now called the Shu texts (CT 75-83), in which the dead person speaks as Shu, the god of air and breath. The choice is deeply logical. Breath is the first sign of life and the last thing the dead lose; to live again, you must breathe again. So the dead claim identity with the very first air that ever was.

The story the spells tell goes back to creation itself. Before anything existed, the creator god Atum was alone in the dark waters of Nun, the nothing-before-the-world. The first thing he brought forth was Shu - air - and with him his sister Tefnut, moisture. Speaking as Shu, the dead describe their birth from the creator's own body:

"He has given birth to me from his nose; I came forth from his nostrils." (CT 80B)

"My clothing is the breath of life which issued after me from the mouth of Atum." (CT 75)

Breath and life are the same word here, wrapped around each other. Shu declares, "my life is what is in their nostrils" (CT 80) - the life of every creature is the air passing through its nose, and that air is him. To identify with Shu is to make yourself the breath in everyone's lungs, including your own mummy's.

The most famous of these spells, CT 76, preserves a famous creation tale. After Atum sent forth his two children, they were lost in the darkness, and he sent his Eye - the goddess of his seeing, blazing like the sun - to search for them:

"I am Shu, father of the gods, and Atum once sent his Sole Eye seeking me and my sister Tefnut. I made light of the darkness for it, and it found me as an immortal."

Shu lit the darkness so that the Eye could find them - and when the wandering Eye returned to Atum, it wept. From the tears of that Eye, CT 80 tells us, humankind came forth. Humanity is born from the god's weeping, just as the gods were born from his sweat. And CT 80 gives Shu his second great deed: it was he who lifted Nut, the sky, away from Geb, the earth, separating them so that the world could have an inside - a space with air in it, where life could exist. Every creature that breathes lives in the space Shu made. He says of himself, with the authority of the first-born: "I make my father live."

These spells were not only for the dead. A note attached to CT 81 hints that the Shu hymns were recited by the living as well - prayers for breath and vitality on this side of the grave that were then carried to the other. And buried in CT 80B is a first in Egyptian literature: the earliest mention of the fight against Apophis, the monstrous serpent of chaos who would later threaten the sun god's nightly voyage. Even here, in the hymn to breath, the war against annihilation has already begun. Centuries later, the Shu texts would grow into the "Books of Breathing" placed in the coffins of Greek- and Roman-era Egypt. The idea never died: to live is to breathe, and to breathe is to share in the first air the creator ever made.

Chapter 4: Taking New Forms: Spells of Transformation

To be dead, in these texts, is not to be fixed. It is to be fluid. A whole family of Coffin Text spells exists to let the dead change shape at will - their rubrics announce "Becoming a falcon," "Becoming a swallow," and the spell then performs the change in words. The Egyptians called these transformations *hprw*, "manifestations": the forms a being can take. A god has many manifestations, and a justified dead person, being now divine, has them too.

Most of the forms are birds, and the reason is practical: birds fly. To leave the tomb, to cross the sky, to escape anything that chases you, wings are the best equipment. The favourite shape of all is the falcon, the bird of Horus, lord of the sky. CT 285 keeps it simple and exultant:

"Becoming a falcon. I am a great falcon who came into being in the egg; I fly up and I land as a falcon."

But the falcon is not only a creature of freedom - it is also a creature of force. CT 149 is a spell of attack, the dead as a raptor falling on an enemy:

"I have appeared as a great falcon. I have grasped him with my claws... my lips are against him as a gleaming knife, my claws as the arrows of Sekhmet... I fly up, I alight on his spine."

Other spells develop the falcon further: CT 286 makes the dead "Horus the heir," while CT 312 sends the divine falcon down to the halls of Osiris as a messenger bearing good news. The same bird can be an escape, a weapon, an heir, or a herald.

The swallow offers a different power. CT 283 addresses the dead directly into the new shape:

"O this Osiris N, you are a swallow, you are a swallow... father of the migratory bird, daughter of Re."

The swallow comes and goes with the seasons, always returning - a perfect emblem for the soul that must go forth by day and come back safely. Yet CT 687 insists the dead shall not sleep like the swallow, for sleep is a figure of death: even a helpful animal must be handled with care. The goose, the great cackler, appears too: "I have flown up as a swallow, I have cackled as a goose" (CT 287). There are spells for becoming a heron and a vulture as well.

Not every form has feathers. The dead can become the air and the wind - breath itself again - or fire, or the morning star that heralds the sun. They can take the shapes of gods: the crocodile-god Sobek, the child Ihy son of Hathor, the jackal Anubis (CT 546), the moon-god Khonsu (CT 311). They can become a scribe of Re or a scribe of Osiris, working in the divine chancery. Strangest and most touching, there are spells for becoming a weaned child (CT 290-291) - a child past the dangerous years of infancy, safe at its mother's side, certain to be fed and carried. In the underworld as in life, sometimes the safest thing to be is small and loved.

Readers who know the later Book of the Dead may miss two famous transformations here: the lotus and the phoenix, the benu-bird of rebirth. Those belong to the later papyri, not to the coffins; in the Middle Kingdom they had not yet entered the dead's wardrobe of forms. The Coffin Text dead fly as falcons and swallows, burn as fire, breathe as wind. That was already more than enough.

Chapter 5: "I Am": The Spells of Self-Identification

Transformation is only one way the dead arm themselves with divinity. Another family of spells is built on two small words of enormous power: ink - "I am." The dead do not ask to resemble the gods. They announce that they are the gods, speaking the identity aloud so that it becomes true. In Egyptian thought, a thing spoken with authority is a thing done.

The supreme example is CT 261, "Becoming Heka." Heka is magic itself, personified as a god - the creative force the creator used to make the world, older than the world. The dead claim to be that force, present before anything else existed:

"I am he whom the Sole Lord made before two things had come into being in this land, when he sent out the sole one of his eye, when he existed alone... To me belonged everything before you had come into being, gods. Go down, you who have come afterwards. I am Heka."

Notice the breathtaking move at the end: the speaker dismisses the gods themselves as latecomers. A dead governor of Middle Egypt, lying in his painted box, claims seniority over the entire pantheon - and by speaking the claim he makes it hold.

Other spells work the same way with other powers. CT 316 identifies the dead with the terrible Eye of Horus:

"I am the all-seeing Eye of Horus, whose appearance strikes terror, Lady of Slaughter."

The Eye is the sun-goddess in her fury, the fire that guards the god-king; to be her is to be untouchable. Elsewhere the dead become Hu, authoritative utterance - the power of speech that makes commands reality (CT 325) - and Sia, perception, the divine intelligence that understands all things. And in one quietly extraordinary line, CT 957, the dead say simply: "I am Maat." Maat is right order, truth, justice, the grain-level balance of the universe. To say "I am Maat" is to say: I myself am the standard by which things are weighed. That claim will matter very much when the dead come to judgement.

Running beneath all the "I am" spells is a law of Egyptian magic: to know a name is to hold power over what is named. It works in both directions. The dead wield the names of gods, demons, gates, ferrymen, and boats as passes and weapons - whole stretches of the Coffin Texts are recitations of exactly the right names. But the powerful also guard their own names. The dead king of the Cannibal Hymn is "a lord of wisdom whose mother knows not his name" - even his mother cannot be used to reach him. A name spoken is a handle on the soul. The coffin dead go into the Duat shouting the names of everything that might stop them, and revealing their own to no one they do not choose.

Chapter 6: The Journey of the Sun: Horus, Isis, and the Solar Barque

The daily voyage of the sun god Ra across the sky is the heartbeat of the Egyptian universe, and the deepest wish of the Coffin Text dead is to sail with him - to have a seat in the solar barque, the crew of gods around them, moving forever with the light. The longest and most beautiful treatment of this wish is CT 148, which is also the corpus's fullest account of how Horus was conceived and born.

The spell opens with Isis speaking. She is pregnant with the seed of the murdered Osiris, and she declares it aloud, shaping her unborn son's destiny with her voice: he shall be foremost of

the Ennead, the company of the gods; he shall be the heir of Geb, lord of the earth. Atum himself acknowledges the pregnancy and guarantees the child's protection. But here is a striking detail: while he is still in the womb, the child is not yet called Horus. He is called only "Falcon" - even "in the egg," as the spell puts it, as if the god were already the bird he will become. The name Horus is given at birth, and with it a charge and a promise from his mother:

"O Falcon, my son Horus, dwell in this land of your father Osiris... I ask that you shall be always in the suite of Re of the horizon, in the prow of the primeval bark for ever and ever."

Isis secures for her son a permanent place in the solar barque - "leader of eternity" at the prow of the primeval boat. And the dead, reciting this spell, climb aboard with him. One version of CT 148 carries the rubric "Making manifestation as a falcon," tying the whole spell back to the transformation texts: to be the falcon-child of Isis is to be protected as Horus was protected and enthroned as Horus was enthroned. Elsewhere the same hope appears in brief, bright flashes - CT 239 has the dead land at the Island of Fire together with "those who are in the bark," the sun god's own company.

The story of Horus cannot be told without Seth, his uncle and enemy. The Coffin Texts never narrate their great contest from beginning to end - Egypt would not write that connected story down until the New Kingdom tale The Contendings of Horus and Seth - but the coffins preserve the essential fragments, and they are vivid. CT 157 tells how Seth turned himself into a black pig and struck at Horus's eye; the young god cried out and fainted, and Ra ordered him put to bed until he was healed. That is why, the spell explains, "the pig is detestable to Horus." CT 310 recalls the day when a god "judged between Horus and Seth" - the case of Horus against Seth. And CT 312 brings the resolution, carried by the falcon-messenger swooping down to Osiris in the underworld:

"I have smitten Seth for you, I have slain his confederacy... Let your heart jubilate, for you triumph over Seth, and your son Horus has been placed on your throne."

The heart of Seth is cut out; the heir sits on his father's seat; the wrong is righted. CT 315 completes the circle from the other side: Osiris himself speaks, welcoming the vindicated dead into the Netherworld. Every dead person reciting these spells is rehearsing the same legal and cosmic victory. They died, as Osiris died. They will be avenged and vindicated, as Osiris was. And their heir - their cause, their name - will be established forever, as Horus was.

Chapter 7: The Book of Two Ways: A Map of the Underworld

On the floor of certain coffins from Deir el-Bersha lies something that has no rival in the ancient world: a map of the land of the dead, drawn and painted for the person lying directly

on top of it. Scholars call it the Book of Two Ways, though its own ancient gloss (in CT 1034) suggests the title "Guide to the Ways of Rostau." It is the earliest known map of the underworld - and one of the earliest maps of anything, anywhere. Its spells (CT 1029-1185) form the last great block of de Buck's edition; the coffins that carry it date to the 11th and early 12th Dynasties, and it was used for only a few generations at el-Bersha - just one copy is known from anywhere else, the tomb of Khesu the Elder at Kom el-Hisn in the western Delta. A lost masterpiece of one small cemetery, preserved because a few families wanted the best possible guide for their dead.

The journey it charts begins, surprisingly, at sunrise, in the eastern horizon - later underworld books would start at sunset, but the Book of Two Ways launches the dead with the morning light. First, though, there is a boat to catch, and a boatman to convince. The ferryman spells (CT 395-396) show the dead hailing Mahaf, the ferryman of the solar barque, as he poles:

"O Mahaf, awaken Aken for me, as you are endowed with life. See, I have come."

It is not so simple. The ferryman refuses to carry just anyone. He interrogates the traveller, and the dead must prove themselves by naming - naming Mahaf himself, naming Aken, the boat, and then, part by part, every plank, rope, sail, and oar of the ferry. This is name-power at its most practical: knowledge is the passport. Only the traveller who has mastered the names steps aboard.

Then the map proper unfolds, and its central feature gives the book its name: two zigzagging routes across the underworld, an upper path drawn in blue - a way of water - and a lower path drawn dark - a way of land. Between them runs a barrier drawn as a red band: the Lake of Fire of the Knife-Wielders (CT 1166), a region of flame that can destroy the unwary but also revive the justified - fire in the Duat is never only punishment. The paths wind past walls of flame and stone, through stretches of utter darkness, around the "fiery court" that surrounds the sun. CT 1072 warns how easily the traveller can be lost:

"The paths here are in confusion, every one of them is opposed to its fellow. It is those who know them who will find their paths... which is on both water and on land."

And there are the gates. Dozens of them, each barred by a guardian demon armed with knives or staffs, and each guardian opens only for the traveller who speaks his name. The coffins preserve those names, and they are worth hearing, because this is what the dead had to memorise: "the sad-voiced one," "dog-face," "scowler," "she of the knife," "Hippopotamus-face, bellowing of power," and the magnificent, dreadful "He who eats his fathers, he who eats his mothers, who drives off Seth when he is angry" (CT 1076). The stakes of failing the names are spelled out in CT 1035:

"I have passed the roads of Rostau, which are on water and on land... As for any man who knows this spell... he is a sacred god in the following of Thoth... But as for he who does not know how to pass on these roads, he is taken by a stroke of death."

The two ways converge, at last, at two goals. One is the Field of Offerings (Sekhet-Hetep), where the dead sit down and feast with Osiris (CT 1046-1049, 1159-1162). The other is Rostau - in the living world the ancient name of the Giza necropolis, but here repurposed as the name of Osiris's own realm: a hall divided by flaming walls, at the "boundary of the sky," locked in darkness, where the body of the god of the dead lies. The map promises that "any person who looks upon it will never die." The long version of the book goes further still: an audience with Thoth, the mansion of Re, self-justification before the sun god, two regions with seven named gates each (their keepers include the charming "He who lives on maggots"), and finally union with Osiris and Thoth in the presence of Ra. The dead who master this book are promised the best of both worlds at once (CT 1031):

"I shall sail rightly in my bark, I am lord of eternity in the crossing of the sky... As for any person who knows this spell, he will be like Re in the eastern sky, like Osiris in the netherworld. He will go down to the circle of fire, without the flame touching him ever."

Like Re in the sky, like Osiris below - the whole afterlife, solar and Osirian together, held in one spell. That is what the map on the coffin floor was for.

Chapter 8: The Judgement: Standing Before Osiris

Somewhere along the roads of the Duat, the traveller must stop and answer for their life. The idea that the dead are judged - that how you lived determines how you will exist forever - enters the Egyptian tradition in the Coffin Texts. It is one of the most consequential ideas these coffins carry.

Its great vehicle is CT 335, the longest and most theologically dense spell in the corpus. Centuries later it would be recopied and enlarged as chapter 17 of the Book of the Dead, but its core is Middle Kingdom work. The spell is a catechism - a series of questions and answers about the gods and the creation, in which the dead demonstrate that they understand the deepest mysteries. The speaker identifies with the creator at the very beginning of things:

"I am Atum when he was alone in Nun; I am Re at his first appearing."

What makes CT 335 unique is what follows each statement: glosses - explanations and alternative interpretations, little commentaries on what the sacred words mean. This is the earliest systematic theological commentary in Egyptian writing, scribes arguing on the coffin itself. The afterlife, it turns out, has an intellectual entrance exam as well as a moral one.

Embedded within the catechism is an early judgement scene. The dead arrive at the hall of Osiris and face interrogation by the god and his council. They must declare their purity and demonstrate their knowledge before they are admitted. Those who pass receive the title that follows the Egyptian dead through all the centuries: *maa-kheru*, "true of voice" - justified, vindicated, the verdict spoken and accepted. The phrase means that your voice has been proven true when you spoke your defence. In a culture where speech makes reality, to be "true of voice" is to have your words - and so your life - confirmed by the highest court there is.

The Coffin Texts do not yet show us the full courtroom that later ages would paint. The New Kingdom Book of the Dead, in its famous chapter 125, will give us the complete drama: the Negative Confession - "I have not stolen, I have not killed, I have not lied" - recited before forty-two judges; the heart weighed on a balance against the feather of Maat; the monster Ammit crouched beside the scales, waiting to devour the failed. All of that is still in the future. But the seed is here, in the coffins: the interrogation before Osiris in CT 335, the declarations of purity, the scattered allusions to the balance, and the moral reasoning of CT 1130, where the sun god says he did not command people to do wrong - "it is their hearts which disobey what I have said." Once it is the heart that obeys or disobeys, the weighing of the heart is only a matter of time. The judgement hall of the Book of the Dead was built on a Middle Kingdom foundation.

Chapter 9: The Field of Reeds: The Afterlife Won

What is it all for? After the resurrection, the breath, the transformations, the names, the gates, and the judgement - what does winning look like?

The Coffin Texts answer with a picture of disarming simplicity: Egypt, perfected. The paradise of these spells is the Field of Reeds - *Sekhet-Aaru* - and the Field of Offerings, a mirror of the Nile valley with its canals, its farms, its flood and harvest, only better. The spells of this family (CT 464-468) describe ploughing, sowing, reaping, and feasting in a land where the crops never fail and the grain is beyond anything a Delta farmer ever dreamed:

Grain grows there seven cubits tall (CT 464) - more than three and a half metres of barley and emmer, harvest enough for eternity.

CT 404's rubric promises that whoever knows the spell "goes down to the field of rushes" and receives there loaves, beer, and an estate of seven cubits of land in barley and emmer. The dead feast with Osiris himself, as the travellers of the Book of Two Ways do at the Field of Offerings. And in one of the Coffin Texts' most human innovations, the dead are reunited with their families. The Pyramid Texts had sent the lonely king to the stars; the coffin dead expect

to find their fathers, mothers, wives, and children waiting. Eternity is not solitary glory but a household restored.

Even paradise, though, has a catch - and the Egyptians faced it with characteristic practicality. The fields of the Field of Reeds must be worked, and the dead might be called up for labour duty in the hereafter, just as peasants were conscripted for the king's projects in life. The answer was the shabti: a small mummiform figurine placed in the tomb as a substitute worker. CT 472, "Spell for causing a shabti to do work for his master in the realm of the dead," is the ancestor of Book of the Dead chapter 6, the famous spell that commands the little figure to work in its master's place. Magic does not abolish work; it delegates it.

One more spell belongs in this chapter, because it shows the other face of the victorious dead - not the feasting farmer but the terrifying power. CT 573 is the Middle Kingdom heir of the Old Kingdom "Cannibal Hymn," the most shocking text ever carved for an Egyptian king. In the original, composed for King Unas, the sky darkens and trembles as the dead king ascends as a god "who lives on his fathers and feeds on his mothers... a lord of wisdom whose mother knows not his name." The gods themselves are butchered for his table:

"It is Unas who eats their magic, who swallows their akhs. Their big ones are for his morning meal, their middle ones for his evening meal, their little ones for his night meal, their old men and old women are for his fuel... He has eaten the Red Crown, he has swallowed the Green One... For he has swallowed the knowledge of every god."

The demons Khons and Shezmu slaughter and cook the gods; the king consumes them and absorbs their power, their magic, their akhs - their effective spirits - becoming "the great power that overpowers the powers... older than the oldest." The hymn vanished from the tradition after the Old Kingdom, but in the Middle Kingdom it resurfaced, reworked as CT 573 on the coffins of Mehti at Asyut, Sat-hathor-hetep at el-Bersha, and Iker at Gebelein. What was once a royal boast now serves officials of Middle Egypt. It is best read as the dead do read it: not as a menu but as a display - the ultimate assertion that the speaker cannot be overpowered, because they have already consumed everything that could threaten them. In the Duat, the safest soul is the one nothing dares attack.

Chapter 10: Epilogue: The Four Good Deeds of the Sun God

The Coffin Texts did not end with the Middle Kingdom; they flowed forward. When the New Kingdom dawned and funerary texts moved from coffin walls to illustrated papyrus scrolls, the old spells moved with them. CT 335 became Book of the Dead chapter 17, CT 472 became chapter 6. The swallow spell, the judgement scene, the Field of Reeds, the ferryman and his interrogation - all were recopied, re-edited, and repainted for a thousand more years of Egyptian dead. Roughly a third of the Book of the Dead has Coffin Text ancestors. The painted

scrolls of the New Kingdom, so different to look at, speak in large part with a Middle Kingdom voice.

It is fitting, then, to let the Coffin Texts close in their own words. The long version of the Book of Two Ways ends with CT 1130, and CT 1130 ends with a speech by the sun god himself - a creator's own account of what he did for the world, his four good deeds:

"I made the four winds, that every man might breathe in his time...

I made the great inundation, that the humble might benefit by it like the great...

I made every man like his fellow; and I did not command that they do wrong. It is their hearts which disobey what I have said...

I have created the gods from my sweat, and the people from the tears of my eye."

Four thousand years ago, in a cemetery above the Nile, someone chose to end the map of the underworld with that speech. Breath for every person. Floodwater for the humble as for the great. Every human being made like every other. Freedom to do wrong - and responsibility for it, laid squarely on the human heart. And humanity itself born from the tears of god.

The people who lay down in those inscribed coffins at Deir el-Bersha and Asyut and Thebes were afraid of the dark, of demons, of the second death, of being forgotten. They answered that fear the Egyptian way: with breath, with names, with wings, with a map, with a verdict of "true of voice," and at the end of every road, with grain seven cubits tall and the faces of their families. The words are still there, column after column, on the inside of the coffins - the resurrection machine, waiting to be read.

Source note

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