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# What Is The Egyptian Book of the Dead?

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Date Published:

8/24/2018

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*What is the meaning of this fascinating work from the ancient Egyptian tradition, which is alternatively translated as "The Book of Emerging Forth Into the Light" or "The Book of Becoming Light"?*

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While Freemasonry is known for secrecy, it's no secret that we trace the origins of our rituals and teachings to the ancient mystery schools of Egypt; many masonic writers, such as Manly P. Hall, have publicly stated this. While there is disagreement among academic historians about the true origins of the Order, Freemasons do tend to believe in this ancient source of the mystic teachings, and we can also be relatively certain that the esoteric wisdom traditions which are the antecedents to

speculative masonry, such as Hermeticism and Alchemy, are connected to the ancient Egyptian mystery schools.

This means that, in my opinion, anytime we look at something from Egypt, we should try to look at it masonically; that is, we should try to interpret the inner meaning of it, to see the truth behind the symbols.

One of the most fascinating writings we have from the ancient Egyptian traditions is known as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Alternatively translated as *The Book of Emerging Forth Into the Light*, or *The Book of Becoming Light*, this book of “spells” is thought to have been written by many priests over a period of perhaps 1,000 years, as a guide for death, to be read aloud to the dying. There are different versions, with different combinations of spells, and 192 total spells are known, from all versions.

While having a guidebook to read to a dying person to lead them through the afterlife is an interesting concept in itself, what may be more profound is to examine the book and what it might tell us about life, and perhaps even the masonic life.

It may help here to have some context of the Egyptian conception of life, the universe, and magic. To the ancient Egyptians, magic permeated the world, and words in themselves were inherently magical.

Consequently, to the Egyptians, there was little difference between written/spoken words and magic. All writings were essentially magical. Likewise, knowing the name of something was thought to give power over it. There was not such a stark line, in Egyptian thought, between the ordinary world we experience with our senses, and the invisible worlds of spirit. All the layers of existence were thought to overlap, and interweave.

The story of the *Book of the Dead* is that of a soul passing through death, into eternal life. To do so, he must pass through the underworld, or Duat, and overcome various supernatural creatures by charming them with magic incantations, in a sort of trial of initiation into the

afterlife. At the end of the trial, if the soul hadn't first been consumed by one of the creatures, or destroyed by Osiris's minions, then he would be weighed by Osiris against the Goddess of Truth and Justice, Maat. In other words, the soul was a candidate and had to pass tests and trials in order to prove him/herself worthy to live among the immortals.

Much of this should sound familiar to any Freemason, and it seems clear that there is an element of this Egyptian ritual in those which are preserved in Freemasonry, at least in their essence. Clearly there is an allusion to death and immortality in both, but how does this "model" of initiation, so-to-speak, relate to what Masonry teaches us about life?

Essentially, life is a series of initiations, or one large initiation with phases, if you will. We are perpetually confronted with situations which challenge our integrity, our determination, our wisdom, and our compassion. Virtue is not magically granted from the sky, it is honed, it is earned, it is built from the ground up. Becoming the best man or woman that we can be is hard work, and requires sacrifice and difficulty. Particularly when we choose to follow the path of the initiate, life has a way of throwing even more trials our way, because karmically (many believe), we have chosen an accelerated path, by seeking initiation.

Throughout life, much like the soul entering the Egyptian underworld, we are faced with various situations, most of which are actually in our minds. Of course, the outer circumstances must serve as props, but the real monsters to be charmed and pacified are within us, they are the baser aspects of our own nature, and a large part of masonry is indeed overcoming these creatures within us. There may even be something to be said about the Egyptian concept of using the magic of words to charm these creatures, especially considering the insights of NLP, hypnosis, and similar methodologies, but that's a

subject for another post. More symbolically, we can view the magic of the spoken word as the creative and expressive capacity within us.

Does this also pertain literally to the afterlife? As someone who takes an interest in Near Death Experiences (NDEs), in my opinion, it is reasonable to think so. Based on what we have learned from NDE research, it does indeed seem that we may sometimes have to pass through a realm of astral darkness, which depending on our own state of mind may contain monstrous beings or obstacles, before arriving at the Light. When people get to the light, they almost invariably go through their entire life in a flash of holographic memory, where they experience everything they ever did, and also how it affected other people. Essentially, this is a weighing of the scales, a measurement of our life's actions against justice, or what was right. In this way, I believe that there is an element of literal truth in the *Egyptian Book of Coming Forth Into the Light*.

The subtler truth, however, is even more interesting to me. Because, in a way, it is grander. Even if this process is literally what we experience when we die (approximately), what about when we are born again? Is the goal of the reincarnation process that our soul will one day weigh perfectly against the scales of justice, to avoid rebirth into the physical, i.e. to have no karma? If we take a Vedantic perspective, the answer would be yes. In that context, even multiple lives, much like the many experiences we have in one life, are really just phases of a larger initiation, into something even greater. Is there any end to this initiatory process?

I suppose it's possible, but for my money, I would say probably not. I think the process of creation/initiation goes on indefinitely, infinitely, forever. We are always becoming something more, whether slowly or quickly. Essentially, this is the process of evolution. By choosing Freemasonry, we've simply opted for the catalyzed reaction – the accelerated evolution. As such, we must

face each catalyst that comes our way with steadfastness, equanimity, willpower, compassion, and the magic of creativity, intuition, and divine communion, if we wish to be worthy of being freed from, or perhaps more accurately, to complete the initiation of the life/death cycle.

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