

Study on the Question of Human Nature in the "Instructions for Merikare"

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ABSTRACT

The paper is devoted to the issue of creation of man and its nature in the "Instructions for Merikare", the most important monument of ancient Egyptian didactic literature of the First Intermediate period (22-21 centuries BC). Using the example of the so-called "Hymn to the Creator" from the epilogue of "Instructions", the status of the theme of man in the cosmocentric picture of the world, characteristic of the traditional Egyptian myth, is considered.

Keywords: Culture, Memory, Worldview, Pre-philosophy, Mythology, Tradition, Multiculturalism, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece.

1. INTRODUCTION

The theme of man and his nature, which, since the time of Socrates, has been central to ancient philosophy, is much less frequently touched upon in the early philosophical and pre-philosophical thought of Greece and other Eastern Mediterranean civilizations. This is primarily due to the fact that at the initial stage of the development of Greek philosophy, the main object of attention of philosophers was always nature and the problem of finding the genetic origin of the world, its physical basis (arche). The problem of the correlation of the categories "one" and "many", the central theme of all ancient philosophy, is born precisely through the study of the origin of the world, the cosmos, and nature. In this picture of the world, man is not the center of this world, but only its component part, a microcosm, a small universe. This is why anthropocentrism is equally uncharacteristic of both early Greek philosophy and its predecessors, the mythology and pre - philosophy of the Ancient Near East. However, this does not exclude the consideration of the topic of man in its various aspects at this early stage of the development of human thought. One of the most important forms of such consideration has always been the ethical and didactic literature, which is an important component of pre-philosophy. So, in Greek pre-philosophy, we see this already in the Homeric epic

and especially in the poems of Hesiod (10-8 centuries BC). However, in the didactic literature of the Ancient Near East and, in particular, of Ancient Egypt, we can find much earlier examples of this kind of reflection, although not yet expressed as clearly.

2. POLITICAL CRISIS AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM OF COSMOGONY

The First Intermediate period (22-21 centuries BC) was a very difficult time in both the political and religious life of Egypt. The collapse of the centralized state, which was formed during the era of the Old Kingdom (28-22 centuries BC), was a heavy shock for the most diverse strata of society. At this time, the Egyptian religion was undergoing serious changes, first of all, the idea of the afterlife and the cult of Osiris. If earlier only the king, possessing a number of divine essences of his nature, such as *Ka*, *Ba*, *Ahu* and a number of others, received immortality in the afterlife, then from now on their peculiar «democratization» takes place. Numerous inscriptions on the sarcophagi of the nobles of this period indicate that their owners now also have the right to immortality in the netherworld (The Coffin Texts) [1]. Already in a number of spells of Coffin Texts we see an appeal to the theme of man; especially noticeable here is the spell 1130. This is almost the only fragment of

the Coffin Texts of cosmogonic content, where we are talking not just about the process of cosmogenesis, but also about the creation of man. Even though, unlike the Bremner-Rhind papyrus, there is no mention of the "technology" of this process, nevertheless, this fragment is directly related to the topic of anthropogenesis. The excitement that has gripped the gods who are with the Sun-God on board his sacred boat is a concern about the stability of the world order established by him on the site of the original chaos, its stability. And the answer that the Sun-God himself gives them is a kind of guarantee that the world created once will not fall under the onslaught of the forces of chaos and darkness. The main guarantee is, first of all, the thesis that the Maat, as a world order established in the past and maintained to this day by the demiurge, is stable not so much by its ontological, but by its moral characteristics.

The idea expressed in this text of the creation of all people equal in their physical and social capabilities is certainly new to the discourse of Egyptian didactic and socio-political thought, and in its appearance precisely at the turn of the First Intermediate period and the Middle Kingdom, it is necessary to see the reaction of the Egyptian "intellectual elite" to the collapse of the cultural and political model of the Old Kingdom, which became a serious shock both for ordinary Egyptians and for the royal power, whose bearers inevitably had to choose other values. In the monologue of the demiurge from the spell 1130, we can clearly distinguish two main motives: a) an indication of the "continuity" of the process of creation as the need to constantly maintain the once established world-order (*Maat*); b) the definition of the true nature of this world-order and its orientation towards man. At the same time, it is important to note that man here does not act as a self-sufficient moral value (as is the case in classical Greek philosophy), but is only an important part of the true social and world-order (*Maat*), established by the Sun-God during the creation of the universe. The idea of equality of people, expressed in the spell 1130, does not mean at all equalization of their property or social status. This is an expression of the so-called "vertical solidarity", when every Egyptian, regardless of his property or social status, is a feasible participant in the maintenance of a true world-order (*Maat*), in which the key role belongs to the king.

3. THE KING AS THE "GUARDIAN OF MAAT": "INSTRUCTIONS FOR MERIKARE"

The situation of political, social and economic instability that characterized Egyptian society around 2100 BC (by the time of the end of the First Intermediate period), together with the actual destruction of the centralized royal power, also threatened the procedure for the "creation of *Maat*", or, if you like, the possibility of the existence of *Maat* both in the ontological (sacred world-order) and in the ethical (justice) aspect. It is in this difficult political and cultural situation that the famous "Instructions for Merikare", one of the most significant monuments of Egyptian political ethics, is created. First of all, the principles of the king's struggle with violators of order (*Maat*) are changing here. From now on, the king in his struggle with the rebels (by the way, not only in the social proper, but also in the sacred and theological sense) relies primarily not on brute force techniques, but on the inspiring power of the word, on the rhetoric of his speeches:

Skilful speech is your strength, [the king's] weapon is [his] tongue, the word is stronger than any blow [2].

From now on, the word becomes not just a focus of sacred power, but a very real and effective means for maintaining *Maat*, a true world-order. The above fragment actually means a radical change in the methods of manifestation of the royal power: from now on, brute physical force is replaced by the tactics of intellectual, sacralizing influence on the enemy. In this situation, it turns out that the procedure of "creating of *Maat*" cannot be effective if it is carried out only (or mainly) at the expense of power techniques. The king rules the country and supports *Maat* not as a soldier and a policeman, but as a skilled orator, rhetorician, the wise man. It is no accident that the author of the "Instructions" repeatedly emphasizes the importance for the ruler to strive to study the spiritual heritage of previous times, the books left by his ancestors. Here, the "Instructions for Merikare" is quite consistent with the general, characteristic of the entire Egyptian spiritual culture of the Old and Middle Kingdom, the desire for a kind of "conservatism", a constant appeal to the spiritual values and cultural symbols of the past.

All the actions of the king aimed at preserving *Maat* can be divided into two large groups, each of which corresponds to its own sphere of activity.

These are, first, actions aimed at maintaining order and harmony directly on the territory of Egypt – this can include the fight against internal rebellions, the reflection of external aggressions on the part of Asian nomads, the king's concerns for the maintenance and development of the socio-political system of the state. This sphere of activity of the king for the preservation of *Maat* can be conditionally called profane, because, as we already know, the socio-political order is nothing more than a special case of the universal world order established by the demiurge at creation. It is the maintenance of *Maat* in the broad sense of the word, *Maat* as a sacred world-order that encompasses the entire universe, that the second part of the royal acts is devoted to, relating to communication with the gods and their pacification. The dual nature of these functions leaves a certain imprint on the figure of the king himself: he acts not just as the head of state, but as an intermediary between the world of people and the world of the gods, between the sacred and the profane. It is he who, relying on the justice of the universal world-order established by the gods, judges people and disposes of their destinies.

When “creating *Maat*” in the first, profane sphere,” Instructions for Merikare “focuses on such traits of the king's character as the desire for wisdom and the desire to avoid (of course, only if possible) extreme forceful measures to maintain order, in particular, calls for extremely careful use of such a “powerful tool” as the death penalty, recommending it only for the most socially dangerous violators of order; in other cases, the author of the “Instructions” strongly recommends not to resort to bloodshed, but to use milder penalties – caning or imprisonment. Much attention is paid to the need to suppress one's own emotions, since anger or mental anxiety do not help in solving important political and state tasks. And, finally, it is necessary to pay attention to such an important detail as the direct relationship of the procedure of “creation of *Maat*” with the well-being of a person in earthly life.

4. GOD AND MAN: ANTHROPOCENTRISM OF THE THEOCOSMOGONY

However, the “creation of *Maat*” in another, divine sphere is a task, perhaps even more honorable and significant. After all, we should never forget that *Maat* is primarily the result of the actions of the creator of the world, and the king,

despite the breadth of his authority, does not have the right to change this sacred order at his own discretion. Its task is only to preserve and maintain it. It is with this theme that the fragment of the “Instructions”, which occupies lines 130 to 138, is directly consistent, and is devoted to the description of the true and harmonious world order and the creator who gave it birth. This peculiar “anthropocentric” hymn to God the creator must be given here in full:

(Well) the people are provided for-the flock of God: he created the heavens and the earth for their hearts, he pushed the greed of the waters, he created for them the breath of life. They are his likenesses, which have come out of his members. He rises in the sky for the sake of their hearts. He created for them plants, livestock, birds, and fish, to satisfy them. He killed his enemies (and) he punished his children, (when) they rebelled (against him). He created the light of day for their hearts, and he rises to see them. He built his chapel beside them, and when they groan, he hears. He created for them rulers, (who gained power) more in (the egg) - leaders who help those in need. He created for them spells against the hand of fate, intended for them, because of which they do not sleep either day or night. He killed those who rebelled against him, just as a man beats his son for his brother's sake. God knows every name [3].

The emphasis on man, his creation and his nature is caused here by the need for new moral foundations of the royal power. In addition, here we see another very important idea. the creation of the world (including man as an integral part of it) is not a one-time process, an act after which the demiurge “removes himself” from the products of his own creation; on the contrary, he continues to take care of them further, thus continuing the long and very difficult process of preserving the world-order in the created universe. The image of the demiurge as a “good shepherd” (in the words of J. Assmann) of humanity was undoubtedly very relevant against the background of the numerous socio-economic, and possibly also natural, troubles and upheavals that befell Egypt at the end of the Old Kingdom era and during the First Intermediate period. Such “proto-humanistic” ideals are quite in harmony with other parts of the text of the “Instructions”, in particular, with the advice given by father to Merikare regarding the restriction of the use of such a “powerful” means as the death penalty in the fight against the rebels. This idea gets its natural continuation in the model of the “feedback” of man and the creator proposed by the text of the hymn

through the temple and religious worship, which again is intended, first of all, to ensure the closeness of the creator and his creations not only in the theological, but also in the real, physical relationship. There is no doubt that the same goal is pursued by the statement in the finale of the hymn that the demiurge “knows every name”, in other words, always and everywhere is inextricably linked with his creations.

The anthropogenesis in the form in which its model is described in the hymn to demiurge from the "Instructions of Merikare", organically passes here into the cratogenic concept. This concept differs significantly from what we have seen in the "classical" examples of the Heliopolitan solar theocosmogony, where it is actually derived from the theogony, that is, the idea of a direct genetic link between the Chorus and the Heliopolitan Nine Gods and with the solar demiurge itself. Here we are talking about another scheme of the emergence of institutions of political power – the creation of a demiurge of power “with a human face”. In the light of the fact that this text belongs to the genre of “royal instructions”, this seems to be a completely natural step: after the collapse of the Old Kingdom, the new rulers are forced to look for other value orientations, without, of course, abandoning the general framework of the traditional “coordinate system” of Egyptian political ethics, first of all, from the approval of the procedure for maintaining and preserving the *Maat* (as a true world-order, embodied in the system of laws and in the state system) as the most important function of the king.

5. MAN AS A SUBJECT OF PRE-PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

Undoubtedly, anthropocentrism, so clearly expressed in the hymn to the creator God from the epilogue of "Instructions for Merikare", became a new phenomenon for all Egyptian political and theological thought at the turn of the 21-20 centuries BC. However, as we have shown above, such an appeal to the topic of man and his nature was not caused by any fundamental changes in the theological discourse. The main reason for this is a re-evaluation of the basic principles of Egyptian political ethics, and, first of all, those related to the duties and virtues of the king. According to its position in the general system of the ancient Egyptian religious worldview, this story about the creation of the world and man is not a new direction in its development, but, as we have shown, is only a variant of the traditional

Heliopolitan solar myth about the creation of the world. The story about the place of man in the world, presented in this text, also expresses the idea of the consubstantiality of God and man, the creator and his creation, characteristic of the most ancient Egyptian theocosmogonic myths. This is quite consistent with the most important feature of the mythological worldview, in which the laws of the state and society, the basic principles of human life, are always a direct continuation of the laws of nature and the cosmos. The picture of the world for the Egyptian was not originally anthropocentric, because man has always been only one of the elements in it, albeit quite noticeable. This brings ancient Egyptian thought closer to the pre-philosophical and early philosophical tradition of archaic Greece, which was also “cosmocentric”, without singling out man as the main object of its reflections. In contrast to the numerous historical studies devoted to the “Instructions for Merikare” [4, 5, 6], we consider this text, and, in particular, the problem of man and his nature in the "Hymn to the Creator", not just as a political or didactic source, but as an important source of pre-philosophical thought of this period, which is a clear indicator of the changes that took place in the worldview of the Egyptians at this time.

6. CONCLUSION

The example of religious and political thought of Ancient Egypt shows us that the theme of man, his nature and destiny worried people long before the emergence of philosophy in the Eastern Mediterranean. The appeal to this topic in the culture, religion and ethics of Ancient Egypt had both spiritual and practical reasons: in Egyptian society, the political and didactic component of culture has always been connected with questions of religion and mythology. For an ordinary Egyptian, society and the state headed by the king have always been a kind of "province" of the universal state of the Sun-God, the creator of the world and the father of the earthly ruler. Thus, man occupies a twofold position in this world: he is both the creations of the Sun-God and a subject of his ruler, called upon to help him in the struggle against the forces of chaos and darkness that threaten the *Maat*, the sacred world-order. That is why the understanding of the theme of man, which we can find in various sources of religious and didactic literature of Ancient Egypt, is an important step on the long and complex path of the evolution of primitive myth into an emerging philosophy, which eventually led to the emergence of the

phenomenon of the so-called "Greek miracle" in the cultural area of the Eastern Mediterranean.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Vladimir V. Zhdanov.

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