PROPHETS, INITIATION AND THE EGYPTIAN TEMPLE

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ABSTRACT

The daily temple liturgy from Karnak distinguishes between rituals which can be performed by a priest (wḥb) and others which must be performed by a prophet (hm-ntr). The distinction demarcates which areas of the temple may be entered by which grade of priest. The distinction between the grades of priests is made clear by records of initiation that come from the same time and place and whose phraseology interlocks with the temple liturgy. The same phraseology interlocks with certain passages in the Book of the Dead seen as relating to initiation. This enables us to reconstruct something of the temple initiation and its practical importance to every day life in the temple.

KEY WORDS

temples, initiation, priests, cults, temple ritual, wab-priest, prophet, liturgy

Portions of the daily temple liturgy exist for Karnak, Abydos, Edfu, Denderah, and Deir el Medineh. While the rituals of Karnak and Abydos have always been seen as closely related, a number of rituals appear at the beginning of the Karnak liturgies that do not appear in the Abydos liturgy. Moret thought that the absence could be explained because the rituals “s’opérait dans une autre partie du temple, et avant d’arriver aux sanctuaires.” The Edfu and Denderah rituals are streamlined versions of the ones at Karnak and Abydos. The rituals for Amenhotep I from Deir el-Medineh, on the other hand, are very different, even if some of them appear among in the rituals on the third pylon at Karnak. The interrelationships of these rituals has been dealt with elsewhere. Because the liturgies were repeated on a daily basis, they would have been one of the most familiar texts to ancient Egyptian priests, who are usually presumed to be the only literate members of Egyptian society, and thus deserve more careful attention from Egyptologists. In particular, the Karnak ritual, as the only complete ritual with an unambiguous order, rewards close study.

At the beginning of the daily temple liturgy at Karnak, during the ritual of “taking the incense burner,” the officiant says, ink wḥb iw=i wḥb.kwi “I am a priest and I am pure.” Later in the liturgy, during the ritual of “undoing the white cloth,” the officiant says ink hm-ntr in ny-sw.t wḏ wi r mḥḥ ntr “I am a prophet; it is the king who has commanded me to see the god.” Two similar assertions are repeated in the ritual for “going out to the throne,” in the first the officiant says ink hm-ntr sḥ hm-ntr m ṣḥ-pr pn “I am a prophet the son of a prophet in this temple” and in the second the officiant also says ink hm-ntr ii=ir m<↓>w ṣḥ ii=n=ir tm iry q3 ỉnn-rʿ nb-nb-ns.t-t ᵀ. The officiant says “I am a prophet, who comes to perform them. I do not come to not perform the exaltation of Amon-Ra lord of the thrones of the two lands on his great throne and the exaltation of the great ennead on their thrones.” Both the priest (wḥb) and the prophet (hm-ntr) are grades of priest but the distinctions between their various rights and duties has been inadequately explored. The translation of both terms comes from the Rosetta Stone where Egyptian title hm-ntr is translated into Greek as προφητὴς and thus is conventionally translated into English as “prophet,” while the Egyptian title wḥb is rendered ἤρευς and thus conventionally translated as
“priest.” Kees asserted that the priest served on phyle rotation and thus only served part time, while the prophet was a full time position. He also concluded, on the basis of a single papyrus reference, that the prophet was paid on average twenty times what a priest was paid. Gardiner, in his study of the problem, concluded that “all genuine priests were ipso facto members of the class of \( w^\text{rbw} \), and that out of these the prophets (\( hm\text{w-ntr} \) ‘god’s servants’) were selected” and that “the Egyptian priests were often credited with the attributes of their god, whose spokesmen (\( \pi\rho\varphi\phi\tau\tau\eta\varsigma \) they accordingly were.” A careful analysis of the context of these statements from the daily temple liturgy, however, provides insight into the functional differences between the two grades of priest, at least at Karnak.

### Priestly Grades in the Daily Temple Liturgy

Between the ritual of taking the incense burner and the ritual of undoing the white cloth is the ritual of “crossing to the holy place (\( bw\ d\text{sr} \)).” This ritual explicitly mentions a change of location, from wherever the ritual of taking the incense burner occurred to the \( bw\ d\text{sr} \), the holy place, a “sanctuary or a shrine, ... the place where the god lives” Given that the remainder of the liturgy after crossing to the holy place takes place in the sanctuary with the divine statue, the location of the latter portion of the liturgy can be determined with some confidence. Since all the references to the individual performing the ritual in the sanctuary are to his being a prophet, the sanctuary was the domain of the prophet (\( hm\text{-nt}r \) and that of the priest (\( w^\text{rb} \) somewhere outside.

If the sanctuary is the domain of the prophet, where then is the domain of the priest? If we can reconstruct the path of the priest through the temple we might be able to figure out where he started, as the text does not say where the starting point of the daily liturgy was. Since the daily liturgy is a Third Intermediate Period document, we can start with the assumption that the Ptolemaic portions of Karnak were not standing but that all of the New Kingdom places were. Following the principle of Wandrelief ist Raumfunktion, the location of scenes of the daily liturgy in the temple should give an indication of the route used. The appearance of scenes from the daily liturgy on the hypostyle hall in Karnak on the wall of the third pylon would seem to indicate that during the Third Intermediate Period the daily liturgy moved through the hypostyle hall on its way to the sanctuary. This would mean that the domain of the \( w^\text{rb} \)-priest was outside the temple or in the hypostyle hall.

At this point, we can take stock of the daily temple liturgy by means of the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Ritual</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Personnel</th>
<th>P.Berlin3055</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>( r^3\ n\ sh\ st^3 )</td>
<td>lighting a lamp</td>
<td>[outer court]</td>
<td>( w^\text{rb} )</td>
<td>1/2-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>( r^3\ n\ t^3\ shtpy )</td>
<td>taking the incense burner</td>
<td>[outer court]</td>
<td>( w^\text{rb} )</td>
<td>1/5-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>([r^3\ n]\ w^3\ h^3\ \ t^3\text{bw} \ hr\ shtpy )</td>
<td>placing the coal on the incense burner</td>
<td>[outer court]</td>
<td>( w^\text{rb} )</td>
<td>1/8-2/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>( r^3\ n\ rd\ t\ sn^3\text{trw} \ hr\ sd.t )</td>
<td>placing the incense on the fire</td>
<td>[outer court]</td>
<td>( w^\text{rb} )</td>
<td>2/2-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Authority and Authorization
The statements *ink wâ b “I am a priest”*\(^\text{32}\) and *ink *hm-ntr “I am a prophet”*\(^\text{33}\) and *ink *hm-ntr *f sr “I am a prophet the son of a prophet from this temple”*\(^\text{34}\) identify the position of the individual and his authority to act in a particular ritual. This is particularly clear in the rite of going out to the throne where the prophet says *ink *hm-ntr *f rî*î*î*î “I am a prophet, who comes to perform them.”\(^\text{35}\) The statements of authority use the first person singular independent pronoun although we might expect a different construction, one that indicates “an acquired attribute rather than a permanent ‘property’.”\(^\text{36}\)

A number of other statements of authority occur in the temple liturgy:
*ink *hm *n nh n r f “I am the living servant of Re”*\(^\text{37}\) in the ritual of “taking the incense burner”\(^\text{38}\)

*ink *hr *hry *p.t *nfr *sfy *nb *nrw $*$sfy *q3 *svty $*$s3 *m *bd “I am Horus, who is over heaven,
the beautiful one of dread, lord of awe, great of dread, lofty of feathers, chief in Abydos’ in the ritual of “crossing to the holy place”.  

\[ \text{ink bs ntr.w} \] “I am an initiate of the gods” in the ritual for “breaking the seal”.  

\[ \text{ink b3 mnh nmy hw.t-tny-ny-sw.t dd k3.w dr isfy} \] “I am the effective living soul who is in Heracleopolis, who gives offerings and who subdues evil” in the ritual labeled “another” meaning another ritual of “kissing the ground with the face down”.  

\[ \text{ink dhwy s3 ksw.k} \] “I am Thoth the protector of your bones” in the ritual of “entering the temple”.  

In some of the statements of authority, the officiant states his earthly offices that allow him to perform the ritual, in others he takes on not only the attributes of his god but his persona as well, thus becoming that god’s literal representative in the ritual.

In addition to these statements of authority, there are also statements of authorization. One such authorization statement is \[ \text{in ny-sw.t wd wi r m33 ntr} \] “it is the king who has commanded me to see the god.” which is repeated twice, once in the ritual of “undoing the white cloth,” and another time in the ritual of “seeing god.” The authority of the office of prophet alone is insufficient to allow the officiant to perform the ritual, he must be specifically authorized as well.  

So seeing the god required at least royal authorization. In other cases it could require divine authorization, such as in the autobiography of Rome-Roy: \[ \text{wdd ntr hpr } ds=st bsy ir.w=fl htr} \] “the god who created himself commanded that I be initiated into his forms immediately.”

**Initiation**

The fact that the daily temple liturgy discusses how the officiant is an initiate of the gods before mentioning the position as prophet is significant as the initiation separates the priest from the prophet. In an exceptional case, Thutmosis III discusses his ability to be \[ \text{m r3-pr=f n hpr[t]} \] \[ \text{bs=i r hm-ntr} \] “in his temple before my initiation as a prophet” because of his status as king’s son. Yet Thutmosis’s statement case clearly shows that one is initiated as a prophet and that being a prophet was expected for entry into the temple. Bakenkhons illustrates another difference between the priest and higher priesthoods when he says \[ \text{sb=i r w=f b m pr inn m s3 hr dr.t it=i . . . sms=f l sw m bw m37.t bs.kwi r it-ntr m3=1 hpr.w=f nb} \] “under my father I was instructed to be a priest in the temple of Amun. ... I followed him into the place of truth since I was initiated as a divine father so that I might see all his forms.” Thus priests are trained, while divine fathers (\text{it-ntr}) are initiated, just like prophets are initiated; some have argued that the two titles “are absolutely equivalent for each other.”

Bakenkhons and Rome-Roy specifically mention seeing the forms of god as a purpose of the initiation as does the daily temple liturgy, and several texts from the temple walls themselves. In one of these texts, at the entrance to the hypostyle hall in Medinet Habu, Montu tells the king: \[ \text{bs=i tw whm=i tw r 3h.t m3=k nb ntr.w} \] “let me initiate you, and announce you into the horizon so that you may see the lord of the gods.” On the opposite side of the wall, inside the hypostyle hall, Horus-Khentekhtay tells the king: \[ \text{bs=i tw r hw.t-tny-tny} \] \[ \text{[n it=k]} \] \[ \text{inn nb ntr.w smn=f n=k sltnty hr-tp=k} \] “let me initiate you into the great temple [of your father] Amun, lord of the gods.” Similar scenes are found in the hypostyle hall of the Temple of Khonsu, and outside the entrance to the hypostyle hall. In all cases the king faces inward toward the door and the god faces outward from the door. These scenes and inscriptions suggest that initiation was required for admission into the hypostyle
hall and for proceeding to see the god. The following chart shows the pattern that emerges:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>outside the hypostyle hall</th>
<th>inside hypostyle hall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of priesthood</td>
<td>wꜰḫ priest</td>
<td>ḫm-nTr prophet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiation status</td>
<td>uninitiated</td>
<td>initiated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rituals</td>
<td>preparatory rituals</td>
<td>sanctuary rituals/ seeing god</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The pattern can be confirmed by records of the initiations preserved in the back of the temple of Karnak.

“Year 29, first month of Shemu, day twenty-six of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, lord of the two lands, and son of Re, Sheshonq, son of Bastet, beloved of Amon, may he live forever, when the first prophet of Amonrasonter, overseer of Upper Egypt, and chief, Osorkon [son of king] Takelot, beloved of Amun, may he live forever, was in Thebes celebrating the feast of Amon, ... on this day of initiation of him of the curtain, judge, mayor, vizier, and chief of the Ma, Harsiese, ..., to the great and noble throne of Amon, which is heaven, unequalled, unattainable, and incomprehensible.”

“Year 8, first month of Shemu, day nineteen, of the son of Re, Pedubast, the day of initiation of the prophet of Amonrasonter, mayor, vizier, him of the curtain, and judge, mouth of Nekhen and prophet of [Maat ...] good example for sinners, ... Pentefonch, possessor of veneration, ... into the great and noble shrine of Amun by the first prophet of Amon and overseer of Upper Egypt, Harsiese, ... that he might see Amon in this sacred image of his which is more hidden than the gods.”

As Pentefonch’s initiation makes clear, one purpose of the initiation was to see the god, which is part of the daily temple liturgy. Seeing god also plays a role in the Book of the Dead. The opening rubric of Book of the Dead 125 says that the text is ḏḏ.wt ḫft spr ṟwḥ.t tn nt mꜰty ḫḥꜰ N ṣ ḫw.w nb ṟr..toFloat ḫw ṟrꜰ ṟw “what is said when entering the hall of the truths and purging N from every evil that he has done, so that he might see the faces of the gods.” Grieshammer and others have previously connected Book of the Dead 125, most famous for its negative confession, with initiation. The initiation element is most clearly seen in the vignette in the Papyrus of Neferwebenef, where Neferwebenef enters a shrine and emerges with shaved head and dressed in linen. Seeing god and sacred or secret things is also involved in the initiation described in the Coffin Texts:

“may the doors of heaven open for you, may the gates of the sky open for you; may your insignia be established on you, so that you may enter to the great god who is in his shrine and see Re in his true form.” Since the shrine is equated with heaven, all of this may be seen as Egyptian temple imagery.

The standard initiation sequence, as illustrated in temples, for example, on the exterior of the bark shrine at Karnak is washing, establishing regalia or insignia, and finally induction into the presence of the god in his shrine. Those steps also appear in Book of the Dead 125, where after the first declaration of innocence, the deceased discusses his purity beginning with iw=i wꜰḥ.kwi “I am pure,” the same phrase that appears after the authority declaration of the priest in the daily
temple liturgy. The donning of regalia and insignia is not described in the texts but the final rubric says that the ritual is to be performed “when he is pure and clean, after he has put on his raiment, is shod with white sandals and anointed with myrrh, and has presented a young bull, fowl, incense, bread and beer, and vegetables.” After a second declaration of innocence, the individual passes through the gateway, naming the parts of the gate while passing through to be announced to the god. Thus the general actions described in the text coincide with the general actions depicted in ceremonies depicted on temple walls explicitly described as initiations.

Objections occasionally surface to the use of the English term “initiation” to describe the activities covered by the Egyptian term bs because it seems too close to the terms used by classical writers which are seen as misleading. Perhaps, it is suggested, “induction” would be a better term. The use of the term “initiation,” however, is common in Egyptological parlance. Two Roman period texts from a temple archive in Thebes are explicitly called initiations (τελετή). The Theban initiations follow the standard initiation sequence with purification, establishing insignia, and the god appearing. These two Roman period texts would have been written by bilingual scribes who knew both Egyptian and Greek and who deliberately chose the Greek term τελετή to describe the activities known from their Egyptian texts as bs, which suffices to justify our use of the English term “initiation” not “induction” to describe the same process.

Conclusions

The titles wšt “priest” and hm-ntr “prophet” are not equivalent. In addition to previously noted differences of time on duty, and remuneration between the two priestly grades, a careful examination of the daily temple liturgy shows differences in preparation, function, sphere of activity that make the distinction between them significant. The event that makes the difference between the offices is an initiation which consists of washing, establishing insignia, and finally induction into the presence of the god. The initiation provides the prophet with the authority to do more than the priest. To the Egyptians, the most important of the differences in function between the two offices is the opportunity the prophet has to see the god.

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NOTES

1. For the Karnak versions, one for the temple of Amonasonter (P. Berlin 3055) and one for the temple of Mut (P. Berlin 3014+3053), see Rituale für den Kultus des Amon und für den Kultus der Mut, Hieratische Papyrus aus den Königlichen Museen zu Berlin 1 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1901); Alexandre Moret, Le rituel du culte divin journalier en Égypte (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1902); Ernst Kausen, “Das tägliche Tempelritual,” in Rituale und Beschworungen II, Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments. Band II: Religiöse Texte. Lieferung 3 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1988), 391-405.


12. P. Berlin 3055 1/5-6, in *Rituale für den Kultus des Amon und für den Kultus der Mut*, pl. I. Hereafter cited as P. Berlin 3055 followed by column and line numbers.


18. The expression is written $r \ ir=i=w$ which would be unique because (1) the infinitive normally follows $r$ for a purpose clause rather than the subjunctive although a parallel can be found in the Book of Breathings Made by Isis §1, in Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 52, and (2) normally one not two suffix pronouns are attached to a word. I propose that the graphically similar hieratic sign for the seated man has been written for hieratic -t because it eliminates both problems.


24. Kees, “Zur Organisation,” *MIO* 3/3:336. Thus even if a priest were working full time, he would only earn a fifth what a prophet earned.


30. PM² 2: 45-46.

31. Some disagreement exists in the extent of the daily temple liturgy. The chart uses the short version while the longer version is sometimes used in the article where it might be relevant.
32. P. Berlin 3055 1/7.
33. P. Berlin 3055 4/2, 10/3.
34. P. Berlin 3055 10/2-3.
35. P. Berlin 3055 10/3.
37. P. Berlin 3055 1/7.
38. P. Berlin 3055 1/5-6.
40. P. Berlin 3055 3/7. The citation in Kruchten, *Les annales des prêtres de Karnak*, 177 n. 7 needs to be corrected.
41. P. Berlin 3055 3/5.
42. P. Berlin 3055 6/2.
44. P. Berlin 3055 8/9.
45. P. Berlin 3055 8/5.
47. P. Berlin 3055 4/2-3, 4/6-7.
52. Louvre C 219 = KRI IV 209; Kruchten, Les annales des prêtres de Karnak, 180.


55. Urk. IV 157, correct with Kruchten, Les annales des prêtres de Karnak, 178.

56. Urk. IV 1409; Kruchten, Les annales des prêtres de Karnak, 179.


59. The Epigraphic Survey, Medinet Habu V, pl. 313.


61. The Epigraphic Survey, The Temple of Khonsu I (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1979), pls. 43, 47.


63. Karnak priestly annals, fragment 2, in Kruchten, Les annales des prêtres de Karnak, 36-37.

64. BD 125, in Charles Maystre, Les déclarations d’innocence (Livre des morts, chapitre 125) (Cairo: IFAO, 1937), 10-11.


66. Suzanne Ratié, Le Papyrus de Neferoubenef (Louvre III 93), BdE 43 (Cairo: IFAO, 1968), pl. XVII.

68. CT 492 VI 71-72 (all manuscripts from Bersheh); Assmann, *Altägyptischen Totenliturgien*, 323.


70. Moret, *Le rituel du culte divin journalier*, pl. I.


72. P. Berlin 3055 1/7.


74. BD 125 c S6-8, in Allen, *Book of the Dead*, 99-100.


78. PGM IV 783-85; XIII 4-6; 347-50.

79. PGM IV 813-24; XIII 38-40; 96-102; 383-86; 650-57.

80. PGM IV 576-728; XIII 210-11; 702-18.

81. See especially the remarks in Ritner, “Egyptian Magical Practice under the Roman Empire,” 3358-71.