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THE REIGN OF RAMESSES III
– UNDER THE INFLUENCE
OF PERSONAL RELIGION

Abstract: The phenomenon of “Personal Religion” influenced Egyptian culture for a long time and left behind an impressive heritage of literature, which shows the development of a historical-social change. The reign of Ramesses III is marked by these special religious-cultural changes and influenced the royal self-presentation of the Egyptian pharaoh and his contact with the divine world. The royal image of Ramesses III demonstrates new aspects in the relation between the king and the deities, which emphasized the effect of a special religious conception. It changed the internal structures of the Egyptian empire under the influence of “Personal Religion” and served as a special of royal legitimation.

Keywords: Ramses III; Personal Religion; royal self-presentation; special religious conception; legitimation

Introduction

Ramesses III, the second king of the 20th Dynasty and the last great ruler of Ancient Egypt (Kitchen 2012, 1) has been presented in history as a significant Pharaoh and successful warlord, which still today determines the official image of him. He stands in the tradition of a number of important rulers, such as Thutmose III, who made Egypt to a major power. Ramesses III strove to obtain this political position for Egypt, which was under serious threat from important historical and political changes in the Ancient Near East during his reign (Grandet 1993, 161-164). The Ramesside age has been considered as a time of several changes in the political, intellectual

and religious world, influencing all parts of the Egyptian society, from the common people up to the Pharaoh. This historical period contains many testimonies for the impact of the religious phenomenon of Personal Religion in Egypt's religious literature, as well as in the royal literature. A famous example is the *Poem of Ramesses II*. This text contains an extraordinary call for help from Ramesses II to the god Amun-Re, as the king fought against the Hittites at the battlefield of Kadesh (1274 BC). His last-minute rescue by his soldiers was a sign of the divine support of Amun-Re (Assmann 1990, 262).

Ramesses III was the last significant pharaoh in Egyptian history and the cultural heritage of his reign presents a time of historical cultural changes in Egyptian society, and also an intellectual vitality, especially in the religious space. The pharaoh is famous for his successful wars against the Sea People and the Libyans. The image of the great warrior-king is, immortalized up to the present in the monumental battle reliefs in his temples such as Medinet Habu or Karnak (O'Connor 2012, 241-242). The pictures show the invincible king and the inscriptions tell of the warlike power of Ramesses III using highly metaphorical language with very aggressive images (Liesegang 2008, 79-80). This presentation of Ramesses III as the great warrior and victorious king was for a long time the dominant image in history and science (Pls. 1-2). It overshadowed another side of Ramesses III, one which stands in complete contrast to the picture of the warrior-king, showing Ramesses III as a highly religious sovereign, who performed many religious and official tasks, honouring the gods and especially the god Amun-Re. The great Papyrus Harris I presents a list of the enormous donations and gifts of Ramesses III to the temple of Amun-Re and to the temples of many other deities. It shows an impressive picture of the religious activities and generosity of this sovereign, who expressed his loyal relation and gratitude to the gods through his piety.

The texts of Ramesses III contain motifs of Personal Religion and emphasize the absolute power of Amun-Re. The god orders the world and the fate of the people according to his will. In the long tradition of the royal self-presentation of the Egyptian kings it was always an essential point that the Pharaoh, as the living son and representative of the gods on earth, appears in a very serious and religious attitude. The inscriptions of Ramesses III show a dimension of religious presence which is extraordinary in the royal literature of Ancient Egypt. The time and the reign of Ramesses III have been the subject of numerous scientific studies, many of them dealing with historical or cultural aspects of this period. This article focusses on

the religious engagement of Ramesses III in the cultic world of Ancient Egypt rather than on his military activities and his image as warrior-king.

Discussion

Personal Religion is one of the most interesting and influential historical-religious developments in Ancient Egypt. It is based on a long tradition with roots in the area of religious belief, cult, practice and mental ideas of proper conduct according to the divine orders, and the teachings of the Old and Middle Kingdom provide examples (Breasted 1912, 344-70; Goelet 2012, 347-350). This religious phenomenon presents an extraordinary concept of the personal relationship between the individual and the divinity, regardless of the status or the power of the person. The evolution of Personal Religion, especially in the time of the New Kingdom, shows a highly interesting process from a specific religious aspect to a great new religious concept, which had a great impact on all of Egyptian society. The sources for the development of this new dimension and its different spiritual appearances lay in the time of the early 18th dynasty, where a new imagination about contact between the god and the people starts to change the cultic life and the roles of the religious participants (Assmann 1987, 47-55).

The idea to do things in a good and right way and to act after the will of the divinity (Assmann 2005, 93-122) is connected with a special image of the divinity. It shows the god as a generous father who cares about the people as his own children, or as a shepherd taking care of his flock. The image of the good shepherd is described, for example, in the famous teaching of Merikare (Breasted 1912, 346). The god is presented as a generous creator of all things in nature and the cosmic world, and he cares for his people in a very positive and personal way. The picture of the good shepherd or herdsman is one of the most essential motifs in the conception of Personal Religion, emphasized by the famous words, spoken by the god in the same teaching text: 'Serve god, that he may do the like for you, with offerings for replenishing the altars and with carving, it is that which will show forth your name, and god is aware of whoever serves him. Provide for men, the cattle of god, for he made heaven and earth at their desire.' (Faulkner 1973, 180-192). This idea of a merciful god who cares about the people, which appeared in the texts of the Middle Kingdom, was resumed in the literature of the New Kingdom. It influenced the imagination of the relations among the gods, especially between the god Amun-Re and the people.

The Papyrus Boulaq 17 (P. Kairo CG 58038), dated to the time of the reign of Amenhotep II (Luiselli 2004), is the earliest written testimony for the idea of a creator-god, who is distinguished by his uniqueness as the 'One and Only' source of life. The idea of a sole god as the creator of all things, who guides the fate of the world, is an essential aspect of the phenomenon of Personal Religion. The god does not appear in only one special form, because one of his most important characteristics is his secret and hidden nature. Thus, the media of light, air and the Nile are some of his methods to reveal an aspect of his nature to the populace, the divine and the human world (Assmann 2005, 159). The relation is characterized by direct and open contact between the divinity and the worshipper. This special constellation does not need another person as a third mediator, one who once constructed the spiritual exchange between the divine and the human world. The gods, mostly Amun-Re, the most powerful god of the Egyptian pantheon in the beginning of the New Kingdom, possess an open ear for the prayers of the common people and act as impartial judges, incorruptible and fair.

'Amun-Re, the first, who was King,
the god of earliest, the vizir of the poor!
He does not take bribes from the guilty,
he does not speak to the witness,
he does not look at him who promises,
Amun judges the country with his fingers,
he speaks to the heart,
he judges the guilty,
he assigned him to the East,
the righteous to the West.' (Lichtheim 1980, 111)

This special kind of personal trust, relationship and close proximity between the populace and the deities was independent of any religious support or control by the priests as representatives and cultic messengers of the king. The situation that the Egyptian Pharaoh was the chief-priest and the most important mediator between the divine world and his subjects changed. A common person could play this special role of the spiritual messenger or mediator, acting as a speaker of the gods. A statue of Amenhotep, Son of Hapu, the famous official of Amenhotep III has an inscription with which he invites the people to tell him their affairs for presenting them to the gods.

'You people of Karnak, who wanted to see Amun, come to me!
I sign your petitions. I am the reporter of this god.' (Morenz 1992, 102).

This inscription is an excellent example of the loss of royal might and status of the Egyptian sovereign as the most important mediator. The Pharaoh had to now share his function with every private citizen. In the New Kingdom and especially in the 18th and 19th Dynasties, the image of the Pharaoh as the absolute sovereign and highest priest and mediator between the gods and the people slowly changed into the idea of a more human and vulnerable person. And it is more important to note that the common people no longer needed the king as religious mediator for contact with the gods. As the hidden god became approachable for the common man, the exclusive position of the king as significant contact between the divine and the human world was lost.

The time of the early 18th Dynasty is significant for its numerous cultic practices, regulating the spiritual exchange between men and deities, and a very special form of manifestation of the divine element in the contact of the divinity with the Egyptian king. The use of omnia, dreams and mainly oracles were favourite methods of presenting of the divinity, and his intentions concerning the relationship with the king symbolized a new kind of divine manifestation (Baines 1987, 94-97). The reports about the oracles of Amun-Re for Thutmose III and Hatshepsut are excellent examples of the demonstration of the divine will. The oracles served as tools for the legitimization and election of the Egyptian sovereigns reflecting the divine desire of the deities (Assmann 1987, 50-51).

The early 19th Dynasty saw the beginning of many changes in politics, religion and culture. Numerous testimonies to the impact of the Personal Religion in the literature of Ancient Egypt emerged in the Ramesside era. The royal literature was also influenced by these changes and a very famous example is known as the *Poem of Ramesses II*. This Pharaoh of the 19th Dynasty was in many ways a great role-model (Kitchen 2012, 3-4) as his successor Ramesses III copied his style in his royal self-presentation in literature, art and architecture (Kitchen 2012, 18-20).

The Poem is a part of a historical inscription about the battle of Kadesh between Ramesses II and the Hittite king Muwatalli II in 1274 BC. After this military confrontation Ramesses II ordered a description of the battle in a monumental iconographic program in five temples in Egypt, reporting his victory over the Hittite army (Liesegang 2017, 69-75). The Poem is integrated in these inscriptions, where Ramesses II tells about his courageous battle against the mighty enemy. In a moment of greatest danger on the battlefield the Egyptian pharaoh offered a prayer to the god Amun-Re

and called for salvation, reminding Amun-Re that a father does not ignore his son (Assmann 1983a, 160).

The sudden arrival of his troops, the Na'arin (Rainey 1965, 21), saved the life of the pharaoh. This was a sign that Amun-Re had heard his call and answered promptly with this military support. This exposes one of the great facets of Personal Religion, namely that of the god as a generous and merciful one who cares about his people (Assmann 1983b, 175-231). Ramesses II expresses his knowledge of Amun-Re's mercy and power, emphasizing it with the use of the word '*gmj*', a special expression for the unique experience of realizing and understanding the might and the activity of the divinity. The meaning of 'find (*gmj*)' is here to understand as a deep gathering of a very special situation.

'I found Amun more useful than millions of infantries, than thousands of chariots and then a ten thousand of brothers and children untitled with one heart. There is no work of many men but Amun is more useful of them.' (Gardiner 1960, 10).

The open and direct presentation of the Egyptian pharaoh in the moment of highest peril, searching for divine help in a situation of fear and loneliness, is a very special admission for an official royal text, and a great demonstration of numerous motifs of Personal Religion. The Poem of Ramesses II can be regarded as an excellent piece of Egyptian literature and as a unique example of personal religion in a royal inscription.

J. Assmann calls Ramesses III the little-known theologian on the throne of the Pharaohs (Assmann 2005, 88) and he should be recognized too as a sovereign with great religious ambitions, and not exclusively as a king who obtained the might of the Egyptian empire through military success, political engagement and royal power. Assmann finds remarkable proof for the great religious efforts of Ramesses III and also a special literary heritage in the tradition of royal texts in a hymn, the first hymn of a King since the reign of Akhenaten (Assmann 2005, 63), where Ramesses spoke the language of Personal Religion to the divinity. His words are an appreciation of the greatness of god. But it is more important to note that the text contains several aspects of the symbolic language of Personal Religion.

'Mighty are You, as Lord of the gods,
as the Ram mysterious of faces, greatly renowned.
"Hidden of Name", whose image is concealed,
whose nature is unknown since the beginning (1st occasion)
you appearing from the Deep (Nun),

you rising with sunbeams,
 so that You give light to every eye that was in darkness.’
 (Kitchen 2008, 187)
 ‘Your complexion is the sunlight and your warmth is vital heat (?),
 all noble precious stones mingle (with/in) your body.
 Your limbs are breath to every nostril,
 people breathe by you, to live,
 the taste of you is the Nile-flood,
 people are anointed with [your] radiance,
 beneficial are you [...], Lord/all [...], [...] love.’
 (Kitchen 2008, 187-188)

This part of this special religious text of Ramesses III, which is installed in the Amun-Temple of Ramesses III in Karnak (Kitchen 2008, 185), bears some expressions which are typical of the image of Personal Religion. The Pharaoh speaks directly and openly to the divinity and emphasizes an important aspect of Amun-Re, namely his hidden nature. The picture of the hidden and secret deity is a characteristic idea of a god of Personal Religion, supplemented by the media of light, water and air as more aspects of the divinity.

The inscriptions of many Pharaohs were characterized for ages by religious ideas and only served to present the Pharaoh as the son of the gods, moreover the chief-priest and for a long time the most important mediator between the deities and the people. Ancient Egyptian literature includes numerous texts where the Egyptian kings spoke about their close relationship with the gods and especially with Amun-Re, the king of the gods. They support their activities by constructing temples in honour of the divinity, bringing sacrifices and great donations for the gods and their temples, emphasizing their special position as living son of Amun-Re and selected sovereign of Egypt. Several predecessors of Ramesses III used an exquisite and intensive religious language for demonstrating their nearness to Amun-Re, one excellent example being the aforementioned *Poem of Ramesses II*.

The royal literature of Ramesses III, however, increases these motifs in a special way. The Great Harris Papyrus I presents many lists of benefactions for the gods and series of speeches of Ramesses III to the gods (Haring 1997, 156-161). They also belong too to the royal literature of the reign of Ramesses III, who created in his inscriptions the image of a pious king, who submits himself to the will and the decisions of the gods.

‘I am your son. I came forth from you; you assigned me to be King while I was (yet) in the egg, while no other hand was with me except your(s). I rely on your mighty utterance, and I am filled with your counsels, in performing for you with loving heart.’ (Kitchen 2008, 202).

Ramesses III shows himself as the selected son of Amun-Re who had been king since his formation in the womb. This is a well-known topic of royal self-presentation, known as *Königsnovelle*, and was an important aspect for the self-presentation of every Egyptian sovereign and even a part of the royal legitimation (Hermann 1938). This is important because Ramesses III and his royal family were in an extremely uncertain political position as a new dynasty, which was founded by Pharaoh Setnakhte, the father of Ramesses III (Grandet 1993, 40-45).

The rise of the 20th Dynasty is connected with a total absence of historical evidence about Setnakhte and his background and has been described in the few written sources of his reign as the rise of a new glorious sovereign, after an intriguing transitional period in Egypt (Kitchen 2012, 1-3). Ramesses III needed the support of important groups in Egyptian society, and particularly that of the priests of Amun-Re, to prove and support his royal might. He gave many donations and gifts to the temples and received the support of the priesthood of Amun-Re, which increases the official might and will of Amun-Re on the decisions and acts of the Pharaoh. And the main point here is the statement that the Pharaoh relies on the decisions and the will of the god. He strives to perform the god’s expectations with a ‘loving heart’, which is also an expression of Personal Religion, showing intense feelings and gratitude of the worshipper for the divinity. The idea of highest gratitude and luck to submit under the divine will is an aspect of Personal Religion, which can be found in the prayers of the common people and the inscriptions of Ramesses III (Assmann 1990, 262).

For a long time, the Egyptian Pharaoh was an active and powerful ruler who handled matters by his own decisions, but now the will of the gods dominates the course of history. The king recognizes the god as the Lord of conduct and submits himself to the divine will.

‘You set a lifespan, You fix Destiny,
Fate and Fortune are governed by Your decree.
There is no god who is your equal,
but Your alone are the Maker, of whatever exists.’
(Assmann 1975, 414-415).

The inscriptions of the time of Ramesses III are best-known for their historical reports and descriptions of his wars. The texts of his reign tell about his wars against the Sea People and describe his powerful appearance as a warrior king in the tradition of Thutmose III or Sety I. The temples show in monumental images the Pharaoh smiting the enemies and bringing sacrifices to the gods in the classical tradition of the royal self-presentation of an Egyptian pharaoh (Pls. 1-2). It is important to note, however, that the warlike texts use a very poetic and metaphorical language, which include the idea of text and image in one imagination. Ramesses III appears as a fiery star, a powerful bull, or a dangerous crocodile, and the inscriptions create an image of a mighty and invincible king (Liesegang 2008,79). The royal inscriptions of Ramesses III also possess a unique characteristic of intense impressions and a wish to show the Pharaoh in an extraordinary manifestation. The war inscriptions serve the tradition of royal propaganda and emphasize the image of the powerful sovereign and warrior-king (Liesegang 2012, 200-207).

The religious texts of Ramesses III show a very religious king, who acts in a pious and modest way for his divine father Amun-Re, at all times aware of the privilege of being the son of the god Amun-Re and the Pharaoh of Egypt. The relationship of Ramesses III and Amun-Re obviously stands under the sign of the religious phenomenon of Personal Religion and the texts show the might and the grace of the divine ruler and his royal son, Ramesses. All decisions come now from Amun-Re, and Ramesses III is inspired by the wish to serve the god and to submit himself under the divine will of Amun-Re.

Conclusions

Ramesses III was the last significant Pharaoh in Egyptian history and the cultural heritage of his reign presents a time of historical changes in Egyptian society, especially in the political and religious spheres. The inscriptions of Ramesses III contain motifs of Personal Religion and emphasize the absolute power of Amun-Re. The god orders the world and the fate of the people according to his will (Assmann 1990, 262). In the long tradition of the royal self-presentation in Ancient Egypt it was an essential part of the ideological program, that the Pharaoh appears in the cultic world in a serious attitude as the living son and representative of the gods.

The texts of the time of Ramesses III present a new dimension of intensive religious presence of the sovereign, which is extraordinary in the history of the royal literature of Ancient Egypt. The activities of the Pharaoh in the political and cultic world of the Ramesside age were influenced by the development of new ideas in the Egyptian society, which constructed a new model of relationship between the people and the deities. The position and the actions by the king are more and more dependent on the divine will of the gods, who often spoke through oracles. This media of divine communication made the role of the priests and the divine cults more powerful and the role of the king less mighty. The pharaoh, who was in the royal ideology of Ancient Egypt the son of the gods and their highest priest on earth, during the Ramesside era lost a great part of his might. The idea of Personal Religion includes direct contact between the gods and the worshippers, who longer needed a mediator. The Pharaoh was still the son of the god, but now by praying to the gods he was on the same level as the common people. He was, however, still seen as the son of the gods and not as a common human. The king depends more and more on the support of the priests to hold his official cultic image and position.

To understand the actions of Ramesses III it is important to look at the history of his royal family. Ramesses III was the son of Sethnakhte, the founder of the 20th Dynasty (Kitchen 2012, 2-3). No detailed information exists about the family and personal background of Setnakhte. The famous stela of Elephantine is one of the few historical sources about this king, who has been described as the saviour of Egypt following a period of political chaos. Sethnakhte and his successors claimed their legitimacy on the basis of the reconstruction of the Egyptian empire after a time of chaos and corruption (Grandet 1993, 40-45). This aspect was similar to the legitimization of the Pharaohs of the famous 19th Dynasty, who were the political role-models for the kings of the 20th Dynasty. Ramesses III copied, for example, the royal iconographic program from Ramesses II (Kitchen 2012, 2-4). The Vezir Hori, who served until the 11th year during the reign of Ramesses III, was the grandson of Khaemwaset, a son of Ramesses II (Helck 1980, 1). The attempt to connect the newly founded 20th Dynasty with the 19th reveals the pressure the new kings were under to confirm their legitimacy as rulers and official successors of the famous Ramesside dynasty. The dependence on the support of the priests and the military was maybe even a cause of great religious deeds, especially to secure donations to the cults and temples. This was followed by the wealth and the might of the religious class

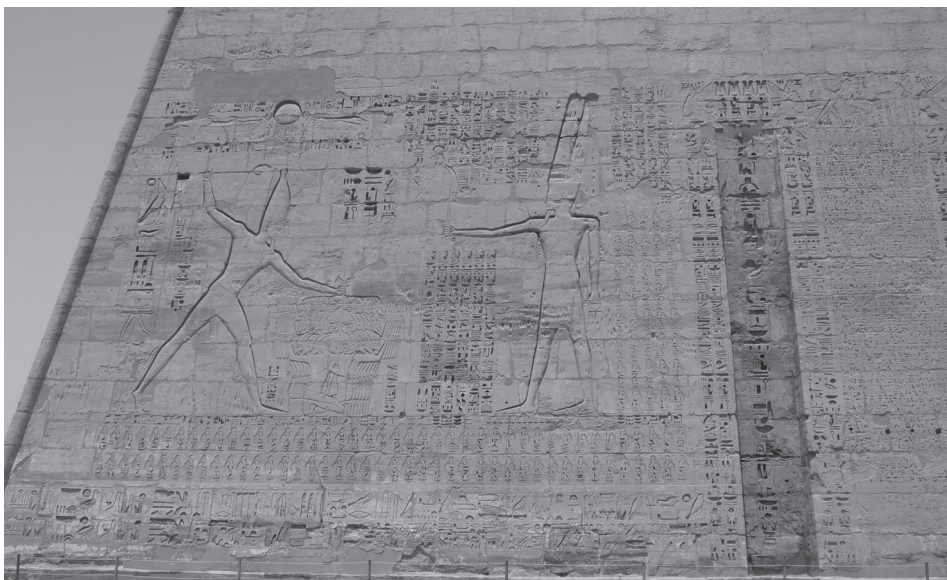
and caused economic imbalances, which influenced the situation of the royal court and the Egyptian society in the 20th Dynasty (Eyre 2012, 139). Gifts to the temples and the religious presentation of Ramesses III were surely the serious expression of a deeply religious impression and nearness to the deities. But they were also a sign of gratitude for the legitimization of Ramesses III through Amun-Re and the support of the priesthood to recognize the reign of his dynasty.

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Pl. 1: 1 – Ramesses III smiting the enemies in front of Amun-Re, Temple of Medinet Habu, First Pylon. Photo by the author

Pl. 1: 2 – Ramesses III taking part in festivals for the gods, Temple of Medinet Habu, Courtyard. Photo by the author



Pl. 2 – Ramesses III presenting captives in front of Amun-Re, Temple of Medinet Habu, Portico of Courtyard. Photo by the author