

ELIZABETH WICKETT, *Seers, Saints and Sinners: The Oral Tradition of Upper Egypt*

2012. xi + 229 pp. London and New York: I.B. Tauris. Hardcover, \$76.96
ISBN: 9781780760537

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In this book Elizabeth Wickett presents five traditional Egyptian folktales from Upper Egypt, which capture the Egyptian oral narrative in performance; they are presented in Arabic transcription with English translations. In her analysis the author explores the genre of each composition, its social significance, the aesthetics of performance, and the connections with ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern tales.

The study begins with a short introduction (pp. xiii–xvi), in which the author explains that the book aims to recreate the vivacity and wit of Egyptian oral narrative in English translation through five tales recorded live in Luxor during the 1980s. They were sung and chanted by two epic poets and praise singers, ‘Awad’ullah ‘Abd al-Jalīl from Edfu and ‘Amm Rizq Būlos, “a Copt and weaver from the Coptic town of Nagada, renowned within the community for his ability to recite the stories and religious legends of the saints” (p. 75).

After the introduction the volume is divided into three main parts, first the two tales from the Egyptian Epic *sīrat banī hilāl*, the “Tales of ‘Azīza and Yūnis” (pp. 3–59) and the “Tale of Khadra al-Sharīfa and the Miraculous Conception of Abu Zayd al-Hilālī” (pp. 60–72). The second part discusses two Coptic compositions, the “Tale of St. George and the Dragon” (pp. 75–98) and the “Tale of Adam and Eve” (pp. 99–118). The third and smallest of the main parts is dedicated to the “Messianic Tales of the Miraculous” (pp. 121–31). Each tale is offered in full translation and with a short description of its performance, including some information on the reciting poet, and an analysis of its content. (A more detailed discussion of the tales and their interpretation follows below after the overview and some general remarks.)

After a brief conclusion (pp. 131–6) the book continues with a large Appendix (pp. 137–212), presenting the four main texts of Parts One and Two in transcribed Arabic and a short insight into their thematic and narrative structure. The book concludes with the notes to the chapters (pp. 213–24) and an index (pp. 225–9).

The expected audience of the book is, I suppose, manifold: the general public with an interest in folk tales of Egypt and the Middle East, scholars

with an interest in the traditions of ancient narratives, Egyptologists, Coptologists, Arabists, colleagues from Middle and Near Eastern Studies, and others. Surprisingly, the author does not use any standard Arabic transliteration system (ISO 233 or the widely used system of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft [DIN-31635]), but introduced some new characters, which might be slightly confusing for scholars who are familiar with more standardised systems of Arabic transliteration. Since it is spoken Egyptian Arabic the author transcribes, she really needed to introduce vowels, which are not usually part of the Arabic script. This is standard practice, and as explained in her key on p. xi, she uses for short vowels *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*, and for long vowels *ā*, *ē*, *ī*, *ō*, *ū*. However, for the consonants, there is some non-standard practice. For example, *ḡayn* (*ghayn*) is transcribed as a *g* with a sublinear stroke rather than standard *ḡ*, *khā'* is transcribed *ḥ* rather than *ḫ*, and *ḥā'* is given as *H* rather than *ḥ*. The emphatics *ṣād*, *ḍād*, *ṭā'*, and *ẓā'* are given as *S*, *D*, *T*, and *Z* rather than *ṣ*, *ḍ*, *ṭ*, and *ẓ*.

Further discussion of the single tales

Both the “Tales of ‘Azīza and Yūnis” and of “Khadra al-Sharīfa and the Miraculous Conception of Abu Zayd al-Hilālī” are the stories of two famous women from Egyptian folk history. The “Tale of ‘Azīza” (pp. 3–59) refers to the flamboyant daughter of the Sultan of Tunis and her attempted seduction of the young and handsome—but quite reluctant—Yūnis, the nephew of the hero Abu Zayed, both of whom are disguised as wandering dervishes in Tunis. The tale comprises erotic panegyrics, the description of Yūnis’ fear of seduction and death, and the lyric reflection on the virtue of restraint in the face of provocation.

In her analysis of this tale, which the author describes as belonging “more to the genre of erotic fantasy than romance or epic” (p. 50), the author connects parts with ancient precursors, including some from the Bible, Mesopotamia, and ancient Egypt, such as the ancient Egyptian “Tale of the Two Brothers,” which she calls “the earliest known prototype of the female seduction tale” (p. 39). The author does provide a reference for the ancient Egyptian story (see p. 214, n. 6), but not a current publication, which would have allowed the general public and others easy access, for example the standard works by Lichtheim¹

¹ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian literature II. The New Kingdom* (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 1976), 203–11.

or Simpson.² These connect it to the biblical tale of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, a similarity which has often been discussed (see the bibliographies in Lichtheim and Simpson), but not by Wickett.

The author also explains the traditions of the epic performance in Upper Egypt and thus places the "Tale of 'Azīza and Yūnis" in its Islamic context, providing a frame of ballads and poetry.

The second story recounted, the "Tale of Khadra al-Sharīfa and the Miraculous Conception of Abu Zayd al-Hilālī" (pp. 60–72), is set in the archaic ambience of seventh-century Arabia in the Najd desert, before the exodus of the Hilālī tribe to Egypt and North Africa. In addition to an ethnographic account of the marriage customs of the tribes of the Nadj desert, it comprises the stories of the marriage of Khadra al-Sharīfa to Rizq al-Hilālī and of the fabled conception of the hero, Abu Zayd, as a result of divine intervention. The reciting singer, 'Awad'ullah 'Abd al-Jalīl, began his performance in the tradition of the Sufi poets, declaring his love for the Muslim prophet Muhammad and the praise of his mother, thus setting the stage for the tale.

During her story, the heroine invokes the memories of Job, Jonah, Jacob, Elijah (Idris), Moses, and Pharaoh. A proper commentary on these connections is desired, but the author merely described them as "earlier prophets from the Judaeo-Christian history" (p. 70), giving no details about the reasons why especially those might have been called upon. Generally speaking, the author keeps her notes and comments to the bare minimum, perhaps with a more general audience in mind.

The third story discussed is the Coptic "Tale of St. George [Mārī Jirjis in Egypt] and the Dragon." The reciting poet, the Copt 'Amm Rizq Būlos, anchored the tale in the annals of Coptic ecclesiastical history by first describing the martyrdoms of early Christian saints under the Roman emperor Diocletian. He also describes the ritual exorcism that is witnessed in the annual festival (*mūlid*) of St. George, which takes place at the monastery of al-Dimuqrāt in Upper Egypt. A tradition has evolved in which the sick and mentally ill from the region come to sleep in the monastic church throughout this *mūlid* in the hope of being cured. The author adds a sentence to the ancient Egyptian and

² W. K. Simpson, *The literature of ancient Egypt: An anthology of stories, instructions, stelae, autobiographies, and poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 80–90.

Graeco-Roman pilgrimage tradition known as incubation, an important point, but she does not refer to any further details or publications.³

The story of St. George and the dragon is quite complex, and normally placed in Libya. It certainly goes back to Near Eastern prototypes, not Egyptian. The tale presented here is set in Beirut, where a large snake or dragon blocks the river with its presence. The river is described “like the river of Egypt,” and the snake is called Satan, dragon, serpent, “the accursed one,” or “he who opposes religions” (p. 83). As the author points out (p. 83), the tale is formulated as a conflict between Christianity and atheism, good versus evil. Every year, the snake blocks the water with its tongue, terrifying the populace, shrieking and demanding from the dried-up river beds a “bride”, who would appease him until next year.

The author discusses the motif of offering a virgin during a feast celebrated in Cairo in pre-Islamic times, which continued until the Arab conquest in the seventh century AD when this practice was proscribed. The custom to offer dolls or clay effigies representing the “bride” continued as a “marriage” of the earthen bride with the inundation (pp. 83–4). The author connects these traditions with the “Osiris bed,” a figure in the shape of the mummified Osiris. In the Osirian Festival of Khoiak this mould was filled with soil and sown with seed, the sprouting plants implying life after death. Osiris is thus associated with the idea of fertility, especially with water and vegetation. Wickett states that “at some point, this ancient Egyptian tradition of the Osirian bed was transformed from a symbolic rite into a brutal ritual, with gruesome consequences for the young victims” (p. 84). This seems a trivial connection of different mythological sources, since the Osiris bed represents rather the cycle of growing and harvest, which is of course connected with the Nile inundation. The Osiris figurines were not sacrificed like these dolls, but rather placed in a necropolis. A further possible connection of Osiris and the Nile, though not stated by the author, is the variant to the story of Seth smiting Osiris in the tradition according to which Osiris was drowned, so that death by drowning was considered a blessed one.

The author certainly raises some important points and also alludes in this context to the “mystical consummation” of the god Amun and the queen, attested in the “birth room” in Luxor temple (p. 85). No specific references or

³ See for example K. Szpakowska, *Behind closed eyes: Dreams and nightmares in Ancient Egypt* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2003), 142–7; G. H. Renberg, ‘Incubation at Saqqâra’, in T. Gagos (ed.), *Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth International Congress of Papyrology, Ann Arbor, July 29–August 4, 2007*, American Studies in Papyrology, Special Edition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2010), 649–62, with further references to dreams and prophecies.

any deeper insights are offered, so that the analysis remains rather superficial and far too general. This is combined with some factual inaccuracies, such as labeling Ptolemy as “the name of the Greco-Roman emperor” who ruled, according to Wickett (p. 85), from 323–283 BC. No such emperor existed. Ptolemy I Soter became king of Egypt only in 305 BC, though he did govern Egypt as a satrap after Alexander’s death in 323, first for Philipp Arrhidaios, then for Alexander IV. After Octavian had conquered Egypt in 30 BC, and after he had assumed the title of Augustus in 27 BC, Egypt was indeed ruled by Roman emperors. Generally speaking, the author is not very precise when referring to periods or dates, for example when she mentions Herodotus: “during the Ptolemaic period, as Herodotus observed, hippopotami were kept as sacred beasts” (p. 86). Herodotus lived long before the Ptolemaic Period and visited Egypt in the fifth century BC. An exact reference for the Herodotean quote and perhaps an explanation of the context would have been very useful.

Wickett has researched the background mostly with some insight, but is often inaccurate when referring to the ancient Egyptian mythology and deities. For example, she repeatedly calls Seth the evil brother of Horus (for example, twice on p. 87), ignoring the fact that he was Osiris’s brother, thus Horus’s uncle. She is also unaware of his dual nature, both as a god of chaos and as a protector god, both for the sun god Ra and especially in the Southern Oasis [Dakhlah and Khargah], to which she refers: in the temple of Hibis, Seth is not clad in a Roman kilt, but in a typical Egyptian divine one (p. 89 with fig. 5). In the caption to her figure 5 (p. ix), the author states that it derives from the Hibis temple in the Kharga oasis, “built by Darius (521–486 BC), Nectanebo (358–340) and other Ptolemies”.⁴ One wonders whether she counts Nectanebo as a Ptolemaic ruler?

The fourth tale discussed, that of Adam and Eve (pp. 99–118), is well known from Genesis, but has been adapted to “a rather light-hearted Egyptian variant” (p. 107), which advocates different morality and different gender role

⁴ The temple was started by Psamtek II (Twenty-sixth Dynasty), who ruled at the beginning of the sixth century BC; Darius I actually had very little to do with it, and certainly did not build it, though his name replaced some of the earlier cartouches, and under his reign a building inscription was added which does claim that he had built the temple. See most recently A. B. Lloyd, ‘Darius I in Egypt: Suez and Hibis’, in C. Tuplin (ed.), *Persian responses: Political and cultural interaction with(in) the Achaemenid empire* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2007), 99–115. See also J. Willeitner, *Die ägyptischen Oasen. Städte, Tempel und Gäber in der libyschen Wüste* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 2003), 27–36, where he summarises the building history and its main features, including some useful figures and references to further publications, for example to E. Cruz-Uribe, the editor of *The Hibis Temple Project*.

models (pp. 116–7). Adam is created from earth and spittle, which seems to echo Khnum and the ancient Egyptian creation myth. The author makes important points, one of them being that the modern tale of Adam and Eve is interconnected with ancient Egyptian creation myths and Gnostic texts, but she does not take into account or discuss the interconnections between the ancient Near East and Egypt, which led to parallels and similar motifs in the so-called Wisdom literature.⁵

The fifth section comprises the “Messianic Tales of the Miraculous” (pp. 121–31), first the praise poem of the heroine Maimuna, a slave girl and *muslimah*, who almost became a martyr because of her love for the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The second composition is the “Tale of Theodore, the Warrior Saint,” and his encounters with Diocletian. It is a distinguished example of an Egyptian religious legend, inspired by historical records, an overtly Christian tale of conversion, betrayal, and revenge.

To conclude, Elizabeth Wickett presents a unique record of a disappearing and little-known tradition of Upper Egyptian folk genres and their performance, which would otherwise remain, at least partly, unnoticed. Some of the stories discussed here have never been published in English (or in any other western language) and are thus accessible for the first time. The book does therefore have great merits. The author recreates the Upper Egyptian ambiance and lets us as audience partake in the recitation of very heterogeneous tales. She also offers some insight into the ancient traditions and influences, but remains mostly descriptive or gives inaccurate details. The references she provides are meager and often outdated. Nonetheless, the book is pleasant to read and offers a perspective that is quite exceptional.

⁵ See for example M. Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian wisdom literature in the international context: A study of Demotic instructions*. Orbis biblicus et orientalis 52 (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1983). Important works on the ancient Egyptian narratives, for example by John Tait and Kim Ryholt, are not mentioned, such as J. Tait, ‘Demotic literature: forms and genres’. In A. Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature: History and forms* (Leiden; New York; Köln: E. J. Brill, 1996), 175–87. Id., ‘Egyptian fiction in Demotic and Greek’, in J. R. Morgan and R. Stoneman (eds.), *Greek fiction: The Greek novel in context* (London: Routledge, 1994), 203–22.—K. Ryholt, ‘A Demotic narrative in Berlin and Brooklyn concerning the Assyrian invasion of Egypt (Pap. Berlin P. 15682 + Pap. Brooklyn 47.218.21-B)’, in V. M. Lepper (ed.), *Forschung in der Papyrussammlung: eine Festgabe für das Neue Museum* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012), 337–53.