

Gyula Priskin, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Moon: Coffin Texts Spells 154–160*

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This work explores seven spells from the Coffin Texts of ancient Egypt, a collection of spells which were inscribed in ink on the inside walls of large rectangular wooden coffins used for the burial of elite Egyptians during the Middle Kingdom (c. 1975–1640 BC) and published by Adriaan De Buck in seven volumes between 1935 and 1961. De Buck provided 1185 spells, and this was still the number of known spells when Raymond Faulkner (2004 [1973–1978]) translated all these texts into English in the 1970s. The entire collection is considered to be the second great wave of literary production in terms of Egyptian funerary literature, the first being the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom. Priskin has focused on just seven of these spells, which are consecutive and carry De Buck's descriptors of Spell 154 through to Spell 160. This sequence, which he collectively calls the *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Moon*, were also the subject of his PhD, and in 2016 he published a paper on the depictions of the lunar cycle in the Graeco-Roman temples of Edfu, Esna and Dendera (Priskin 2016). He argues that these seven spells give a detailed description of the naked-eye astronomy of the phenomena of the Moon, its movement, phases and the visual of eclipses both solar and lunar.

The book is structured with a dense introduction which establishes the context of the work and a second section which is focused on the spells themselves, followed by a general commentary and then a short conclusion. There is also a short index.

De Buck's edition of the Coffin Spells presents the various texts for each spell in auto-graph form (i.e. hand drawn hieroglyphs) and side-by-side in vertical columns. Priskin (p. 20) suggests that for Spells 154–160, work has tended to rely on the version on the left-most column, simply because it appears first. This is the text as provided on a coffin designated S2P, the "S" here indicating Siut, a town in Upper Egypt today known as Asyut. However, most of the other coffins listed alongside it are all from Deir el-Bersha, the burial ground for the town of Hermopolis (p. 19). Priskin suggests that this is significant because

Hermopolis (Egyptian name, *xmnw*, Eight-Town) – located on the Nile and near the border between Lower and Upper Egypt – was linked to the cult of the Moon and to Thoth, the Egyptian god of the Moon. Asyut, in contrast, tends to be the source of another form of coffin text, concerning diagonal star calendars. Hence the two areas reflect different cult ideas on funeral matters.

Based on this evidence Priskin suggests that Hermopolis was the source for the creation of the *Book of the Moon*, and that the representations of these spells as reflected in the Asyut coffins were exports. He thus instead focuses on a coffin found in the burial complex of Djehutihotep at Deir el-Bersha (designated B4LB by De Buck). This particular coffin was of an official known as Sen, who bore the title of chief physician and steward, and Priskin comments that the text in this coffin gave what he thought “best displays the lunar connotations of the composition” (p. 194).

After this initial contextualisation, Priskin considers the seven spells in the second section of his book. For each spell the complete hieroglyphs are given in numbered vertical columns, immediately followed by the transliteration and then Priskin’s translation. In reproducing the hieroglyphs Priskin has reversed their direction so that the text reads left to right. This may worry some scholars – De Buck followed the original direction, which in the case of coffin B4LB was orientated right to left. However, De Buck’s purpose was to present the different texts of the same spell comparatively, and to avoid duplication this necessitated including many breaks in the text where the reader was redirected to another column which could be several pages further along in the publication. Priskin, whose work is based on one version, has dispensed with all this flipping between columns and pages and has presented the spells from the Sen coffin in a cohesive order but still maintained loyalty to De Buck, by marking De Buck’s column shifts in his reproduced columns of hieroglyphs. This layout enables one to see clearly the complete spells from Sen’s coffin, the hieroglyphs, transliteration and translation all within a few adjacent pages, which is particularly helpful to any reader who wishes to bring their own knowledge of hieroglyphs into their critique of Priskin’s work.

This section on the spells themselves is followed by a section titled General Commentary (pp. 177–229), where Priskin discusses the detailed analysis provided on each spell in the previous section. At times there appears to be a level of duplication here with the material in the previous section. Additionally, I found myself needing to return to section two to revisit his discussion on a particular spell to then link this up to his continued discussion in the General Commentary. Apart from this structural issue this section three provides a useful overview of all seven spells. In this section Priskin describes and interprets the contents of the spells as follows:

Spell 154 (p. 177): on the origins of the lunar month and why the months are not of equal length.

Spell 155 (p. 179): on the invisibility of the Moon, which is the beginning of the Egyptian month and the time just before the first waxing crescent of a new Moon.

Spell 156 (p. 181): on the visible first lunar waxing crescent: “The feather is thrust into the shoulder, and then the Red Crown rises in the *mentjat*-bowl”. Priskin argues that

the new Moon crescent is associated with a feather in the sky, while the shoulder is the shoulder of Nut and thus a marker for the west. The Red Crown is that of the setting Sun casting a red light over the setting Moon. In this regard Priskin links the Moon to the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Spell 157 (p. 182): on the full Moon. This is the struggle between Horus and Seth, and the spell details the two ways that the light of the Moon can be damaged: the first way is when the Moon begins to wane, while the second is when there is a lunar eclipse.

Spell 158 (p. 184): a mythic description of the waning of the Moon. Each night the Moon rises but never manages to set before sunrise, and thus its light is removed by the Sun. Eventually the Moon is consumed by the Sun's light.

Spell 159 (p. 185): on the arrival of the last crescent at the eastern horizon. This is just before the period of invisibility and the spell also discusses the different "gates" on the horizon in which Re can emerge, which appears to be a reference to the shifting position of sunrise on the eastern horizon.

Spell 160 (p. 186): according to Priskin, this is a description of a solar eclipse. The relevant lines (379b–380b) are translated as follows: "Now, as if it was the time of evening, it (the snake) turns its eye against Re, and there occurs a stoppage in the crew, and a great astonishment within the journey." The spell then speaks of how Seth, as defender of the solar barque, uses magic to repel the snake's attack on the Sun.

Thus Priskin argues that these seven consecutive spells give a complete description of the new and full Moon, waxing and then waning, its times of invisibility and the phenomena of the lunar and solar eclipses. However, there is one lunar phenomenon missing from this list, and its absence challenges Priskin's argument regarding the completeness of the seven spells. This phenomenon is the varying elevation of the full Moon. A full Moon around the time of the winter solstice, for the latitude of Cairo, gains an elevation of 80° but around the time of the summer solstice it only reaches a height of 40°. To the Egyptian lunar cult sky watchers, who according to Priskin were metaphorically and poetically describing the Moon in detail, this variation would have been known and surely placed in some manner into these spells. Is this information still to be found in the texts?

Nevertheless, Priskin claims that these spells can be grouped to make up what he calls the *Book of the Moon*. He points out that there are other random spells scattered through the Coffin Texts that are linked to the Moon; for example Spells 93 and 152 speak of an entity called the "Sole One" who rises with the Moon, while Spell 1096, according to Priskin, "is the first undisputed source which links the moon with Thoth and the Eye of Horus" (p. 8). However, these additional spells are few and scattered and hence, unlike the seven spells which are the focus of this work, do not make up a narrative sequence which describes the lunar phenomena.

Priskin then completes the work with a short conclusion.

There are three issues that Priskin has had to negotiate with this work. The first is his choice of which coffin text to use as his main focus. The second, which holds for any new translation of Egyptian literature, is that there is a level of ambiguity in how certain

words or phrases are rendered into English, and this can produce very diverse meanings in the final translation. The third is that, having taken a logical but necessary speculative step with the translation, he then takes the final step which is even more abstruse, that of translating the dense metaphor-driven material into the celestial logic of the naked-eye astronomy of the Moon.

All of these three difficulties can be seen when considering Spell 155. This spell clearly refers to the Moon in several places and in his translation of the text from coffin B4LB Priskin produces the following:

Line 20: Open to me, those in the moon's invisibility.

Line 21: I have seen the gelder come out of the slaughterhouse of the Great Eye.

Line 22: I know the *bas* of the moon's invisibility.

In contrast, Faulkner (2004 [1973–1978], 133) translated this same passage using S2P, the coffin from Asyut, as follows:

Open to me, you who are in the New Moon, for I have seen the executioner who come forth from the slaughter-house of the Great One. I know the souls of the New Moon...

The differences are the mention of a gelder, someone who castrates bulls, and also the reference to the Great Eye. Priskin makes the case that "the slaughter house of the Great Eye" is a metaphor for the new Moon. He points to evidence from the Ptolemaic temples of Esna and Dendera, where the Sun and Moon are referred to as two bulls that travel the sky, and that when the Moon wanes, the "lunar animal is called sab, a steer, a castrated bull" (p. 68). The Great Eye, which is the *wedjat-eye*, is recognised as having an association with the Moon as well as the fractions of Egyptian mathematics. Thoth, the Moon god, is associated with making the eye whole and Priskin views it as having deep connections to the lunar cycle. The fractional values of the eye are $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{8}$, $\frac{1}{16}$, $\frac{1}{32}$ and $\frac{1}{64}$, and are known as the Horus-eye fractions (p. 52). When these eye components are added together, they fail to make up a unity and fall short by $\frac{1}{64}$, (p. 178). Priskin makes the case that the synodic month of 29.53059 is about $\frac{1}{64}$ short of the standard Egyptian solar month of 30 days.

Thus, Priskin's consideration of Spell 155 is heavily reliant upon metaphors for the Moon from the Ptolemaic period, some 1800 years after the time of the Coffin Texts, and a speculative but intriguing argument about the *wedjat-eye*. Indeed, in many cases Priskin turns to the Ptolemaic temples of Dendera, Esna and Edfu to find support for his understanding of the mythic language, and this chronological distance from the Coffin Text is a weakness in his arguments. However, there is no alternative: the Ptolemaic period was when the priests placed their archive libraries on the temple walls in order to preserve what they feared was about to be lost, and these temples are a primary source of what is potentially much older, archival material. But finding a reference to the Moon as a bull and then using that in understanding a text written some 1800 years earlier does require a speculative leap. Additionally, although Priskin does consider variations of the text of Spell 155 from different coffins, his choice to prioritise Coffin B4LB rather than follow Faulkner in choosing S2P is based on a particular argument that cannot be

proven. My point here is that in reaching his conclusion about the meaning of the spell, Priskin has to build a series of speculations based at times on only a shred of possible evidence. There is a sense that Priskin is determined to find lunar symbolism no matter what the metaphor. This example of Spell 155 largely reflects Priskin's methodology. I am not suggesting, however, that he is in error but rather that it illustrates the journey he has had to undertake to build his case.

Adding to the complexity of the mythological or metaphorical material that Priskin unpacks is the ancient Egyptian tendency to privilege a state of being over the uniqueness of the material object. Today we consider the Moon as the Moon through all its naked-eye astronomy phenomena, but for the Egyptians, Priskin argues that the different stages of the Moon could be viewed as different entities. For example, there is a variety of images that Priskin identifies as being associated with the Moon: these include the two crowns of Egypt (the white being the full Moon and the red being the setting at sunset); a feather (a crescent Moon in the west), or a feather in the shoulder (assumed to be that of Nut and thus referring to the west); a bald man or a man going bald (a waxing Moon becoming full); the 'One in the Red Cloth' (when the Moon is in the west at sunset); a bull and a steer (the Sun and the Moon, as well as the waxing and waning phases); an oryx (the full Moon); a black pig or sow (full Moon); Osiris with themes of rebirth; and the *wedjat-eye* (associated with Thoth and the secret cult knowledge of the irregularities of the lunar month). Given all this imagery and mythological activity, it would have been helpful if Priskin had included a glossary of Egyptian lunar imagery supported with a reference as to where there was a clear use of this image with the Moon. With such a glossary or table speculation about the imagery and its links to the Moon could be viewed for all its strengths or weakness.

Notwithstanding these issues, this work is useful for any scholar of the Egyptian language, as it revisits a central primary source of Middle Egyptian and offers, with justifications, some alternative suggestions for words. The book is also useful for any scholar interested in ancient Egyptian astronomy or mythology, as it draws together a wide collection of mythical imagery to argue for the common thread of the lunar activity and thus opens new areas for investigation. Finally, the book is a contribution to cultural astronomy, as it takes the mythical language of a sky-orientated culture and seeks to untangle the possible poetic astronomy to reveal an ancient view of the sky. It is not, though, a book for the faint-hearted or those that want a quick read.

Undoubtedly many scholars will disagree with different parts of Priskin's thinking and even his methodology, but in a sense that achieves one of the purposes of his work, which is to bring the Moon in Egyptian cosmology into a stronger academic focus. In that regard Priskin work is a success. Whether he can justify the claim to have found the *Book of the Moon* is, however, another debate.

References

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