



Simons, F. (2011) 'Exhibition Review: Journey through the Afterlife: The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead British Museum, London.' *Rosetta* **9**: 113-115.

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### **Exhibition Review:**

## **Journey through the Afterlife: The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead British Museum, London.**

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The Book of the Dead, while not quite what the film *The Mummy* makes it out to be, is one of the most important sources we have for understanding Egyptian religious belief. It is the culmination of a tradition stretching back to the early Old Kingdom of providing religious texts to the deceased. From the Pyramid texts of the Old Kingdom, through the Coffin texts of the Middle Kingdom, to the Books of the Dead of the New Kingdom and later, a selection of the spells and incantations considered most important for the dead were placed in their tombs in order to ensure a good afterlife. This exhibition presents several Book of the Dead papyri alongside related objects from the British Museum's collection, and other collections around the world.

The exhibition occupies the entire reading room in the middle of the main dome of the museum. It is presented in ten rooms, leading chronologically through the journey to the afterlife in an order which 'it is hoped is not inconsistent with the thought processes of the ancient Egyptians.'<sup>1</sup> In most rooms, a section from the Papyrus of Ani, one of the most famous of all Books of the Dead, is shown to explain the theme of the room. This has a strong unifying effect on the exhibition, as well as showing, by contrast with other papyri, just how different the Books of the Dead can be. Book is perhaps a misleading term to use for the text as it was never canonical - scribes selected different spells, different pictures and a different order for each 'book' – and this exhibition successfully demonstrates that inconsistency while preserving the essential unity.

Other examples of papyri feature heavily in every room, but these are augmented by a wide selection of other artefacts. For example, a set of the scales used in the famous judgement scene known as the 'Weighing of the Heart' - in which the

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor 2010: 12.

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deceased's heart is weighed against a feather representing *maat* or divine order - is displayed alongside a set of papyri depicting the scene. An example of an adze, the tool used in the 'Opening of the Mouth' scene, in which the deceased is magically reanimated to enter the afterlife, is also displayed alongside the relevant scene.

As well as this, other artefacts are displayed which have relevance to similar areas of Egyptian belief. An Oracular Amuletic Decree and a letter to the dead inscribed on a bowl are good examples. Both objects served to request protection from danger during life, just as the Book of the Dead protected the deceased from danger in the afterlife. A set of magic bricks, once used to ward off evil at the cardinal points of the tomb is also well chosen and displayed, with one brick being placed in each corner of the room, as would have been the case in their original setting.

In addition to showing how of the Book of the Dead was conceived and understood, the exhibition also demonstrates how it was physically created. A collection of scribal equipment is on display, alongside a statue of Thoth (the patron deity of scribes) and another of the scribe Pesshuper using the scribal equipment. As always, there are some accompanying Books of the Dead. One example illustrates the reuse of an account papyrus as a Book of the Dead, another shows a papyrus in which the names of the deceased have been erased, presumably as a result of the purchaser or his family defaulting on payment.

The culmination of the exhibition is the presentation of two complete Books of the Dead: the beautifully illustrated Papyrus of Hunefer and the Greenfield Papyrus - at 37 metres the longest Book of the Dead ever discovered. The chance to see a complete papyrus, almost as it originally looked, is a very rare one. For this alone, the exhibition is worth seeing, but particularly so here as many of the papyri on show are too delicate to be displayed long term. As a result, after this exhibition is over many of the exhibits will be hidden away for many years.

There are some failures in the exhibition. The layout of the rooms means that there is a bottleneck in the first few rooms, but this dissipates in later rooms. The explanatory notes on the exhibits, while often excellent are not particularly consistent. The Papyrus of Nesitanebisheru (the Greenfield Papyrus), for instance, has very little in the way of explanation considering its vast length. This means that the majority of the audience walk past it very quickly, leaving it less admired than it

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deserves to be. The fact that this is the last item in the exhibition makes this doubly unfortunate, as it leaves viewers with a last impression that does not match that of the rest of the exhibition.

On the whole, however, this is an excellent exhibition. It is well presented and maintains an incredible degree of unity throughout. A great deal of relatively diverse material is shown, all of which is incorporated very well into the overall theme. Anyone with an interest in the thought of ancient Egypt, or the history of ideas generally, should go before it is too late.

### **Bibliography**

Taylor, J. (ed.) 2010. *Journey Through the Afterlife: Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*. London. British Museum Press.