

Coptic Culture - Ancient Egyptian Literature, Part V

Contributed by Ed Rizkalla
Monday, 22 September 2008

by Ed Rizkalla The tale of "Sinuhe" provides a rich vein to mine in studying ancient Egyptian literature. William K. Simpson, a contemporary professor of Egyptology, notes (1) the tale of "Sinuhe" is considered as "teachings in the guise of narratives," "Sinuhe as (a) model for the man of the times, (and) expressions of the cultural values." In this article, the writer, with the grace of Christ the Lord, will continue to review this ancient Egyptian literary work. For the convenience of the reader, a brief reiteration of the tale of "Sinuhe" and relevant excerpts thereof are presented here below:

"Sinuhe" was a courtier, serving princess Nefru, in the royal court of king Amenemhat I, the founder of the Middle Kingdom 12th dynasty. Princess Nefru was king Amenemhat's daughter and the wife of his son and successor Senusert I a.k.a. Sesostri I. The king sent his son Senusert on a military expedition against the Tjemeh and Tjehenu, two Libyan tribes. While Senusert was on that military campaign, his father died, and the court sent him a secret message. Senusert rushed back to the capital secretly. Sinuhe, however, overheard a discussion by some potential adversaries to Senusert. He feared for his life and fled to western Asia. On his flight, Sinuhe almost died in the desert, but was saved by "Ammunenshi", a tribal chieftain at "Upper Retenu". Ammunenshi was aware of Sinuhe's abilities, so he offered him to stay with him and marry his daughter. Sinuhe accepted the offer. As time passed by, Sinuhe became successful, powerful and wealthy. A chieftain who coveted Sinuhe's wealth challenged him for a duel. Sinuhe fought the challenger and prevailed against him. As Sinuhe grew older, he longed to return back to the "black land", Egypt. He wrote king Senusert, who responded back, and encouraged him to return back to Egypt. The following are excerpts from king Senusert's letter to Sinuhe (2): "Horus: Living in Births; the Two Ladies: living in births; the King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Kheperkare; the son of Re, Senusert, who lives forever. Royal decree to the attendant Sinuhe: "This matter-it carried away your heart. It was not in my heart against you. This your heaven (Queen Nefru) in the palace lives and prospers to this day. Her head is adorned with kingship of the land; her children are in the palace. You will store riches which they give you; you will live in their bounty. Come back to Egypt! See the residence in which you lived!" Sinuhe returned back to Egypt and was welcomed at the royal court. The following are excerpts from the narrative of Sinuhe's reception at court, including a poem recited by the royal daughters: "Then the royal daughters were brought in, and his majesty said to the queen: Here is Sinuhe come as an Asiatic, a product of the nomads! She uttered a very great cry, and the royal daughters shrieked all together. They said to his majesty: Is it really he, O king, our lord? Said his majesty: It is really he! Now having brought them their necklaces, rattles, and sistra, they held them out to his majesty. Your hands upon the radiance, eternal king, Jewels of heaven's mistress! The Gold (goddess Hathor) gives life to your nostrils, The Lady of Stars enfolds you! Southern crown fared north, north crown south, Joined, united by your majesty's word. While the Cobra (goddess Wadjet) decks your brow, You deliver the poor from harm. Peace to you from Re, Lord of Lands! Hail to you and the Mistress of All! Slacken your bow, lay down your arrow, Give breath to him who gasps for breath! Give us our good gift on this good day, Grant us the son of north wind (*), Bowman born in Egypt! He made the flight in fear of you, He left the land in dread of you! A face that sees you shall not pale, Eyes that see you shall not fear! His majesty said: He shall not fear, he shall not dread! He shall be a Companion among the nobles. He shall be among the courtiers. Proceed to the robing-room to wait on him! After his reception at the royal court, Sinuhe was given a house and a garden befitting a courtier and ultimately plans were made for a proper Egyptian burial and an appropriate tomb for him." The two excerpts presented above, provide a vivid picture for the ancient Egyptians' norms, values, and cultural traits regarding women and family. One might have expected that a powerful monarch such as Senusert I, with virtually unlimited authority, did not need to show consideration to his wife and/or seek her views or that of their daughters. The king, however, in his letter to Sinuhe, shows consideration for both his wife and children. Furthermore, as he receives Sinuhe at the royal court, he seeks his wife's and daughters' views and participation. More importantly, the nobles, courtiers, people present at the royal court, and future readers of the tale of Sinuhe find the king's attitude and behavior to be both proper and normal. The tale of Sinuhe was in fact among the most popular ancient literary works, used for the instruction of students. Moving forward from the 12th dynasty time circa 1990-1785 B.C. to the Mamlukes' time circa the 14th-15th century A.D., and though Egypt has lost its independence and experienced many drastic changes, the late medieval age historian, al-Maqrizi, comments (3), about Coptic men of his time, that they - very much like king Senusert I in the tale of Sinuhe- tend to seek their wives' views and participation. Al-Maqrizi and other Arabic writers, perhaps by virtue of their Arabic background and deficiency of knowledge of their time, found the behavior of the Coptic men of their time incomprehensible, if not-from their Arabic cultural perspective-outright odd. In a previous article of this series, the writer noted that the tale of "Sinuhe" helps shed light on some Coptic cultural attributes, namely 1) the respect for education, knowledge, and love of wisdom, 2) taking initiative and a "can-do" approach to life, and 3) flexibility, adaptability and innovation. In the present article, the writer hopes to have to shed more light on some more Coptic cultural attributes namely 4) respect for the family as an institution established and blessed by God bonding a man and a woman, which forms the corner stone of a civilized society, and 5) the equality of men and women.

The peace of the Lord be with you all. Irene Passe. *** (*)

"Sinuhe" is a play on the word "Si-nuhe" or the "son of the sycamore". References: (1) The Literature of Ancient Egypt, An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry, edited by William Kelly Simpson, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2003. (2) Ancient Egyptian Literature, The Old and Middle Kingdoms, by Meriam Lichtheim, with a new foreword by Antonio Loprieno,

volume I, University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, CA, 2006.(3) Book of Al-khitat by Al-Maqrizi, printed by Ithaca University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1959. Acknowledgement: The writer would like to acknowledge and thank the staff of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, for their assistance with research for background material for this article. *** Ed Rizkalla is a management consultant and a freelance writer. He is the founder of Pharos on the Potomac Group (POPG), a non-profit organization at Annandale, VA.
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