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Family, Pharaonic Egypt

LISA SABBAHY

Getting married and having children in ancient Egypt was clearly the societal norm. Ideally, the ancient Egyptians expected marriage to be monogamous and lifelong, although divorce certainly existed and did not seem to affect remarriage. A recent study based on literary and artistic evidence concluded “affection and love were an integral part of the ideals of marriage in ancient Egypt” (Gee 2008: 103).

Ancient Egyptian wisdom literature guided up-and-coming young men on how to have a successful life, including advice on marriage. The late Old Kingdom (ca. 2450–2175 BCE) Instructions of Ptah-hotep tells a man to prosper, establish a house, and love his wife, “gladdening her heart as long as you live.” The New Kingdom (1539–1075) Instructions of Ani mentions twice that a man should take a wife and have children when he is young. It also explains how to have a happy home life, telling the man not to “control your wife in her house” and that a man should “desist from strife at home.”

However, marriage, and also divorce, in ancient Egypt are not clearly understood. There is very little written evidence, particularly about marriage, and the evidence that there is tends to be Late Period or Ptolemaic in date (ca. 664 to 30 BCE), and may not reflect earlier practice or tradition. Ancient Egyptian marriage was not an institution sanctioned by the state or religion, and it did not demand a ceremony carried out by any special official. There is slight evidence for an oath being taken at the time of both marriage and divorce, and more evidence for contracts involving personal and communal property.

Marriage seems to have been a matter of the woman publicly moving in with the man, with the understanding that theirs was a long-term relationship, and that their children would inherit their property. Divorce in ancient Egypt was similarly straightforward, in the

sense that the woman moved out of the man’s house, and the marriage ended. There are judicial documents about divorce, however, because it required division of communal property.

The ancient Egyptian word for marriage is an expression that translates as “establish a house,” something that a man was expected to do, or “enter into a household,” both phrases stressing the establishment of a home and family (for a discussion of terminology, see Eyre 1984: 100–1; Toivari-Viitala 2001: 70–95). A man’s family was always depicted with him in his tomb, and funerary spells were used to assure a man’s reuniting with his family in the afterlife, for example, Coffin Text 131, which is a spell for “Giving a man’s family to him in the realm of the dead”.

Children were important in order to take care of their parents when they were old. The elderly woman Naunakhte, at the New Kingdom village of Deir el-Medina on the Theban west bank, disinherits four of her eight children in her will because they are not bothering to take care of her. She carefully states that although they may inherit property from their father, they may not inherit any of her own property (Cerny 1945: 29–53). Children had the responsibility to bury parents as well, and those who did not share in burying their parents forfeited their part of the inheritance. It was important for the children to inherit family property in order to keep it within the family bloodline, and in particular, for the eldest son to inherit his father’s job, as well as any titles and wealth that were associated with it. “From the Old Kingdom on it had been typical for jobs to stay ‘in the family’ with sons or nephews taking over job and titles from the earlier generation” (Johnson 1998: 1419).

The term used for divorce was “throw out,” something done by the man, or “go away,” which referred to action by the woman. From the evidence we have from the workmen’s village at DEIR EL-MEDINA, the husband, not the wife, almost always asked for a divorce. The reasons are not always stated, but they seem similar to

the reasons for divorce nowadays: the husband wanted to marry another woman, the woman was being abusive, constant quarreling, and adultery (Toivari-Viitala 2001: 90–3). Not being able to have children did not seem to be a reason for divorce, as adoption was fairly simple. One papyrus from the reign of King Rameses XI (ca. 1104–1075), at the end of the New Kingdom, preserves an adoption document in which a husband adopted his childless wife so that she would inherit all of their property. Then, in a second document, added eighteen years later, the wife, then widowed, wrote a will in which she adopted the three children of their female slave, apparently fathered by her late husband, and made them her heirs, leaving them all of her property (Eyre 1992: 207–22). In this way, the wife was protected financially when the husband died, but in the end, all the property reverted to his children by another woman.

It seems that some type of public statement involving an oath had to be spoken by the divorcing husband, who also had to proclaim a division of the communal property. “I swore concerning her in the court of the temple, and I made 2/3 to 1/3 of everything I had made together with her” (McDowell 1990: 35; see the discussion in Gee 2001). This seems to be the standard division of property made in a divorce. If a woman was divorced for adultery, she lost her third of the communal property, but retained any of the personal property that she had brought into the marriage.

In the Late and Ptolemaic Periods, so-called annuity contracts were written, either at the time of the marriage or later, guaranteeing the wife her husband’s financial support during their marriage, inheritance for her children from him, and her share of their property in case he ever divorced her. These documents can contain a clause called the “woman’s gift,” in which, for example, silver is given or promised to the wife, and this amount, plus a fine, was hers if her husband divorced her. There are also documents of this type in which the husband states: “Take for yourself a husband;

I will not be able to stand before you in any place into which you go to make for yourself a husband” (Smith 1995: 54). This supplied the woman with proof that she was divorced and free to remarry.

A discussion of royal marriage in ancient Egypt has not been included in the above, because entirely different factors were at work since the king was divine. The king was HORUS, falcon god, son of OSIRIS and his sister Isis (*see* ISIS, PHARAONIC EGYPT), one of the divine pairs descended from the sun-god Re (*see* QUEENS, PHARAONIC EGYPT). A king often married his sister or half-sister, following this divine marriage pattern. Royal brother–sister marriages are found throughout the Middle Kingdom (ca. 1975–1640) and into the New Kingdom. The ancient Egyptian king could also have any number of wives, perhaps to insure a successor to the throne. In Pharaonic times, non-royal men did not practice polygamy, nor marry their sisters, although sister marriage is known in the Ptolemaic Period (305–30) (*see* BROTHER–SISTER MARRIAGE).

SEE ALSO: Gender, Pharaonic Egypt; Law, Pharaonic Egypt.

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