The Ancient Egyptians' "Religious World": The Foundation of Egyptian Law

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to indicate the importance of religion in ancient Egypt and to indicate that this was the foundation for ancient Egyptian law. In order to understand ancient Egyptian law, it is important to understand the role of religion as background to its development. Religion played an important role in the ancient Egyptians' understanding of their world, specifically the belief in *maat*. Religion, and specifically *maat*, influenced everything they did. Their whole life and the way they operated as a society was based on the principles of *maat*, since living in accordance with *maat* would ensure eternal life, life after death. It was essentially *maat* which made law necessary in ancient Egypt.

Keywords: ancient Egypt; ancient Egyptian law; ancient Egyptian religion; *maat*

Introduction

This article attempts to determine if religion was or can be regarded as the foundation for law in ancient Egypt.[1] The method used to address this question was an analysis of aspects of ancient Egyptian religion and law. Religion played an important role in the ancient Egyptians' understanding of their world, specifically the belief in *maat*.[2]

Wacks (2006, xiv) correctly observed: "A society cannot be properly understood without a coherent conception of its law. In this regard, the social, moral, and cultural foundations of the law are of importance." The ancient Egyptians are better understood

1 This article is based on Chapter 2 of my PhD thesis (Van Blerk 2018, 18–33).

2 The belief in *maat* refers to the concept of *maat*, which is discussed in the article, and not to the goddess Maat.

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if we understand their laws in general against the backdrop of their world, which was dominated by religion.

As Assmann (2002, 13–14) argues, the most fundamental and all-encompassing construction of meaning is the cultural construction of time since this provides the framework for any account of history and for any understanding of the shape and course taken by history. Indeed, as Thomas Mann (quoted in Assmann 2002, 27) rightly observes, "[d]eep is the well of the past." This is particularly true of ancient Egypt with its exceptionally long history.

It is fundamentally important to take cognisance of the role of religion and the social context of the ancient Egyptians' world, since law appears to have been inextricably linked to religion. The ancient Egyptian culture seems to have emerged, fully formed, towards the middle of the fourth millennium B.C.E. and, after almost forty centuries, eventually disappeared at the end of the fourth century A.D. (Grimal 2000, 17; see also Addendum A of this article for a timeline). Ancient Egypt had become consolidated by the early third millennium B.C.E., with the pharaoh heading a centralised state with developed administration (Allam 2007, 263). Menes, the first pharaoh, united Upper and Lower Egypt circa 3200 B.C.E. He was succeeded by thirty dynasties of kings who reigned until circa 341 B.C.E. (Ellickson and Thorland 1995, 333). Theodorides (1971, 292) observes that if Egypt went through "tribal" and "gentilic" stages at all, it certainly had passed through them by the time of the historical era at the beginning of the third millennium B.C.E. A very strong civil organisation developed in ancient Egypt (Theodorides 1971, 292).

The Role and Function of Religion in Understanding the Egyptian World

In order to ascertain if religion was or can be regarded as the foundation for law in ancient Egypt, one must understand the role and function of religion within the Egyptian world. It is necessary to examine and explain the special importance of religion in the ancient Egyptians' world as this will explain the subsequent need for law.

Law has existed for as long as organised human society has existed, but its origins are lost in the mists of prehistory (Westbrook 2003b, 1). In many instances the emergence of truly legal concepts was derived from religion, although over time law emerged separately from religion (Allam 2007, 265).

To understand law in ancient Egyptian society, it is important to remember that the ideology of ancient Egyptian society was a totality shaped and determined by religion. Religion was present in every aspect of the Egyptians' life; it was embedded in society, rather than being a separate category (Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 273). In order to

understand the ancient Egyptians, it is necessary to comprehend their beliefs and practices (Shafer 1991, 3).

Every aspect of the Egyptians' world was seen as being governed by a divine power which established and maintained order (Allam 2007, 263). Their beliefs and practices assisted the ancient Egyptians to understand and respond to events in their lives (Gahlin 2007, 339). The ancient Egyptians wanted to make sense of the world around them (Shafer 1991, 4). It was religion, and the cult actions deriving from those beliefs, which held ancient Egyptian society together and allowed it to flourish (Teeter 2011, 11). This would influence every aspect of their lives. Bleeker (1967, 1) observes that one must learn to think like an Egyptian in order to penetrate the religion of ancient Egypt. Ancient Egyptian religion was essentially based upon nature according to Mancini (2004, 17–18). The ancient Egyptians looked to nature and the universe for guidance regarding law (Bleeker 1967, 6).

The very function of religion is a means of binding together a community in the same way that a language establishes a common core of communication between individual human beings (Quirke 1992, 7). The distinctive characteristic of religion as a binding force is that it concerns creation and most often also a creator or creators (Quirke 1992, 7–8). This is especially true in the case of ancient Egypt. The essence of Egyptian religion was the "power in heaven," the sun-god, although in Egypt's formative phase the word "sun" does not refer to a god (Quirke 1992, 21–22). The ancient Egyptians had an overriding appreciation for daylight and found it in the soaring falcon, the metaphor for majesty, Horus[3] (Quirke 1992, 21). The word *ra* moves from the meaning of "sun" to Ra, the sun-god, somewhat later, during the period between Saqqara and the smooth-sloping sides of the pyramid under Sneferu, inaugurating a system of relating man to creation (Quirke 1992, 22). In this religion, the sun would hold a central position in Egyptian history for three thousand years until the late Roman period (Quirke 1992, 22).

In modern society many[4] people find life's meaning outside religion and view religion as incidental or even tangential to life, but very few ancient Egyptians had this view (Shafer 1991, 3). The ancient Egyptians recited myths, preferred concreteness, and believed that the world needs to be maintained (Shafer 1991, 3). Religion unmistakably shaped ancient Egyptian culture (Shafer 1991, 3).

In the Egyptians' mind, there were three kinds of inhabitants of the universe: the gods, the living, and the dead (Taylor 2001, 15). Although the origins of the principal gods

3 The correct name is Heru, "the distant one," but the Greeks gave the name Horus and it is important to note that the first kings took the falcon as the royal supreme title (Quirke 1992, 21).

4 The tendency in the modern world is to critique many old established ideas about religion by many people, especially people in the "Western world."

are explained, there is no coherent account of the creation of humanity, but it was recognised that humans were complex beings who could experience immortality in various forms (Taylor 2001, 15). The ancient Egyptians compiled and recorded many theologies detailing the creation of their universe and the origin of the gods and humankind (Silverman 1991, 9).

The Egyptians' beliefs and practices assisted them in understanding and responding to events in their lives (Gahlin 2007, 339). It was a way to make sense of the world around them. The king fulfilled an important role on earth under the protective wings of Horus, the falcon in heaven (Quirke 1992, 21–22). For the ancient Egyptians the king was the representative of the sun-god on earth (Quirke 1992, 36).

The foundations of Egyptian society were established during the Archaic Period, but it was only during the Old Kingdom that ancient Egypt developed into a highly organised and centralised theocratic society (David 2002, 77). One could argue that there was no "secular" realm because all aspects of society and culture were intertwined with religion (Teeter 2011, 4). This is an important observation to keep in mind when studying ancient Egypt. Temples dominated the landscape, with tomb chapels on the outskirts of towns a reminder of religion, for religion and religious institutions underpinned Egyptian society (Teeter 2011, 4). Religion and life were so interwoven in ancient Egypt that it would have been impossible to be agnostic (Brewer and Teeter 1999, 84). Religion, therefore, formed the very foundation of their daily lives and determined their outlook on life.

Even though Egyptian society flourished and developed over a period of 3 000 years, bringing with it new explanations for physical phenomena, this did not displace old ones (Teeter 2011, 4). A variety of explanations for a single phenomenon could simultaneously hold true for the ancient Egyptians, for they had a layered understanding for the different parts, which was to them a series of complementary explanations (Teeter 2011, 4). Just like us today, the ancient Egyptians could not live in a world that they could not understand and thus they were driven to establish meaning (Shafer 1991, 4). They would find meaning and understanding in symbols and objects from their world.

Observed Reality in the Ancient Egyptians' Understanding of Their World

Writing itself was a consequence of religion (Teeter 2011, 4). The ancient Egyptian language and its hieroglyphic script were referred to as *medjet netcher*, "words of the god," for it was believed that writing was given to mankind by the god Thoth (Teeter 2011, 4). For the ancient Egyptians writing had a religious potency, and to write was to call that thing or person into existence; for instance, a prayer written on a tomb wall, asking that the deceased be provided with food and drink, actually made the foodstuffs

eternally available (Teeter 2011, 4–5). The very first function of writing was for religious purposes and it would initially appear on the monumental buildings of the Old Kingdom.

The development of the ancient Egyptians' civilisation resulted in them recording and documenting their beliefs in collections of spells (Silverman 1991, 9). Decorations were associated with the texts on tomb walls, coffins and temples (Silverman 1991, 9). Artefacts and papyri provide additional information (Silverman 1991, 9).

Although the ancient Egyptians functioned in a non-secular world, it is astonishing to see how similar their basic moral principles and the patterns of their lives are to those of our current, more secular time (Teeter 2011, 7–8). Despite the above-mentioned similarities, the ancient Egyptians had an approach to understanding the world around them that was fundamentally different from ours as their world view was based on concrete principles which they could see around them, characterising them as the most rational of people, because their response to their world was based on their observed reality (Teeter 2011, 9). For us today reality is formed and informed by a variety of scientific ideas, while the Egyptians explained all natural phenomena in concrete terms and in this process they avoided speculative thought (Teeter 2011, 9).

David (2002, 58) suggests that the ancient Egyptians believed the gods were present on earth in the form of some physical manifestations, such as the king, statues, animals, etc. These manifestations provided the ancient Egyptians with a tangible divine presence and could be visualised and approached through rituals at the particular god's temple or shrine (David 2002, 58).

The ancient Egyptians' reliance on observable and familiar patterns of daily life to explain the unknown comforted them, for everything was related to recognisable experiences of life (Teeter 2011, 9). This reliance on physical explanations for natural processes was a fundamental and persistent feature of ancient Egyptian culture, a rational response to the intellectual and social context of their time (Teeter 2011, 9–10). Silverman (1991, 17) observes that the recognition of some supreme force was a first step to distinguish between an ancient Egyptian and the world in which the individual lived.

"State religion" in ancient Egypt was concerned with the maintenance of the divine order, and this entailed ensuring that life was conducted in accordance with *maat*, preventing chaos (Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 273). "Private religion" was outside the framework of the state or organised religion, but little evidence has survived prior to the New Kingdom (Gahlin 2007, 325).

Egyptian religion consisted of a wide range of beliefs and practices, and they lived with and participated in this diversity. There was no single term for "religion" whilst

"religious" beliefs were essential and unquestioned presuppositions underlying the concept of life (Baines 1991, 123).

Myths played an important role in ancient Egypt.[5] As Gahlin (2007, 296) asserts, myths were constructed with the purpose of providing explanations for the fundamentals of human existence. According to Pinch (2004, 13) myths were the products of ancient Egypt's most original minds and its deepest thinkers. These ancient Egyptian myths articulate the core values of one of the oldest and longest lasting civilisations (Pinch 2004, 13). Myths help people to explore their mental world, to resolve crises and to endure the contradictions of life (Pinch 2004, 13). Myth is also a most valuable source of information; for example, some stories relate how deities have to argue their case before a divine tribunal, indicating the importance of the concept of justice for the ancient Egyptians (Pinch 2004, 13).

The Egyptians had a variety of myths incorporating diverse creation myths as an explanation for the origin of the gods, which then created humankind (Teeter 2011, 12). Apart from myths, religion includes aspects of rituals, theology, and morality. It is important to remember that the diverse explanations for almost every natural event were understood to be equally valid and could be simultaneously true (Teeter 2011, 12). The Egyptians' holistic view led to the treatment of prayer, magic, and science, for instance, as realistic and comparable alternatives (Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 273). Each component had the same aim: to suppress evil and maintain the harmony of the universe (Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 273).

This uncomplicated level of knowledge and understanding, as limited as it was, appears to have been adequate to satisfy the ancient Egyptians' intellectual curiosity (Teeter 2011, 12). The ease with which they could explain the concrete world around them might explain why they did not develop a tradition of more analytical thinking, a fact that hampered their scientific progress (Teeter 2011, 12). It would be the Greeks, who had a different world outlook, who would begin questioning the world in theoretical terms (Teeter 2011, 12). The Egyptians favoured allegorical rather than empirical thought, while the Greeks would debate one theory against another to reach a new, single synthesis, which was a process completely alien to the Egyptians (Teeter 2011, 12–3).

The Value of Tradition and Precedent for the Ancient Egyptians

The longevity of Egyptian culture is noteworthy. Despite their lack of enquiry about the world around them they held the same world view for approximately 3 000 years, a fact which made their society one of the most conservative and unchanging in the history of

5 Religion is used here as the broader term and mythology as one component of religion.

mankind (Teeter 2011, 13). Teeter (2011, 13) makes the important point that a major feature of the Egyptian mind was their reverence for the past, which had an enormous impact on their culture and thus on religion, for the modification or discarding of early forms was not seen as progress but rather as corruption of a state of perfection. To recall their past through physical imitations of its patterns was believed to have been an important element in preserving continuity and therefore the preservation of an orderly society. The aim in emulating the past was to create a safe and comforting environment since new situations and objects were potentially threatening (Teeter 2011, 13). This would explain the remarkable faithful retention of the earliest manifestations of their culture, like the king's crowns and dress as well as architecture and art styles (Teeter 2011, 13). All these features emerged during the Old Kingdom and this would continue to provide the framework for Egyptian culture for 3 000 years (Teeter 2011, 13). This understanding of ancient Egyptian civilisation as conservative and reluctant to change is important, as it will assist us to form an understanding of their law.

According to Teeter (2011, 14) the ancient Egyptians' world view should not be regarded as flawed or short-sighted, for their civilisation lasted for thousands of years. The vast number of statues, temples, and wall paintings produced by the ancient Egyptians are among the most recognisable and admired products of the world's present-day or past cultures (Teeter 2011, 14).

The temple and priesthood ensured that the universe remained stable (Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 273). Daily offerings to the gods kept forces of chaos at bay and neglect of the gods or blasphemy against them led to punishment (Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 273). From Deir el-Medina, for example, many stelae describe how offences against the cobra-goddess, Meret-seger, led to blindness and how, after penitence, the god cured the wrongdoer (Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 274). In ancient Egypt the gods required food, drink, clothing, and rituals to sustain them as the protectors of mankind against the forces of chaos (Brewer and Teeter 1999, 85).

The Importance of *Maat*

According to Brewer and Teeter (1999, 93), the formative principles behind Egyptian religion, cosmology, and gods were not logical, but symbolic. Brewer and Teeter (1999, 93) observe that the metaphors employed to explain the universe and the gods attempted to reduce cosmic (the unknowable) phenomena to an earthly scale. From ancient Egyptian religion, a concept arose which was central to the understanding and appreciation of the social order with its inherent rules; this foundational concept was called *maat*, which referred to morality and ethics, and the entire order of society was bound up with this doctrine (Allam 2007, 263). *Maat* is one of the earliest abstract terms preserved in human speech (Van Blerk 2006, 1). *Maat* could not be changed or interfered with (Assmann 1989, 75–76). The continued existence of the world and

people depended largely on fulfilment of natural cycles,[6] with the ideal order of familiar things continuing forever (Taylor 2001, 12). *Maat* had a religious, moral and ethical connection as it was the guiding principle for all aspects of life, representing the values that all people sought (Versteeg 2002, 21).

This concept of *maat* would be represented by the goddess Maat. The goddess Maat was presented as a woman wearing an ostrich feather (representing truth) on her head (Gahlin 2001, 86). This feather of the goddess Maat would become the representation of the concept of *maat* at the judgement of the dead. Grimal submits about the goddess:

> Maat occupies a unique place in the Egyptian pantheon; she is not so much a goddess as an abstract entity. She represents the equilibrium, which the universe has reached through the process of creation, enabling it to conform to its true nature. As such, she is moderator of all things, from justice to the integration of a dead man's soul into the universal order at the time of the final judgement. (Grimal 2000, 47)

In mythology, she was the daughter of Ra, the sun god, and the personification of physical and moral laws, order, and truth (Van Blerk 2006, 5). The feather became an ideogram for Maat (Van Blerk 2006, 5). According to Goebs (2007, 276) the concept of *maat* is attested as early as the mid-Second Dynasty. Maat therefore became the divinity to whom everyone was answerable for his or her actions (Allam 2007, 263).

Life was to be conducted in accordance with *maat* (Gahlin 2001, 86). *Maat* governed human affairs, serving as a yardstick representing their values, their relationships with one another, and their own perception of reality (Allen 2004, 116). The concept of *maat* was associated with morality and ethics and the entire order of society, preventing chaos by balancing opposing forces (Allam 2007, 263).

As Bleeker (1967, 6–7) observes, one can, without hesitation, accept that *maat* constituted the fundamental idea of ancient Egyptian religion. The concept of *maat* embraced what we would call justice, although it had a broader meaning, signifying the divine order of the cosmos as established at creation (Ockinga 2007, 252). *Maat* was realised when justice was done and equality accomplished (Assmann 1989, 60).

Assmann (1990, 17) is of the view that the concept of *maat* links human action and the cosmic order. It is difficult, if not impossible, to give a proper translation of this concept as it stands and falls with the ancient Egyptians' worldview. The concept of *maat* was central to Egyptian thought (Assmann 1990, 17). Parkinson (1991, 31) is of the opinion that the Egyptians perceived the universe in terms of a dualism between order (*maat*) and disorder. A balanced universe (*maat*) was established by the creator god as part of

6 These cycles would be things like the rising and setting of the sun, motions of the stars, rising and setting of the moon, annual inundation of the Nile, growth and death of plants (Taylor 2001, 12).

the world's "natural order," and imbalance in the world came not through the existence of some evil force, but from human behaviour. The opposite of *maat* was *jzft*, which meant wrongdoing, injustice, disorder, falsehood, and antisocial behaviour (Allen 2004, 116). *Maat* was created and placed in the cosmos to bring order (Assmann 1989, 62).

As early as the pyramid age we witness the earliest examples of higher aspects of an evolutionary process, the emergence of a sense of moral responsibility as it was assuming an increasing mandatory power over human conduct (Breasted 1934, 123). This development was moving towards the assertion of the notion of conscience as an influential social force (Breasted 1934, 123).

Breasted (1934, 116–17) suggests that the family was the primary influence in the rise and development of moral ideas. As early as the pyramid age, it was recognised that the individual's claim to worthy character might be based on his spirit and his conduct in his relations with his parents and siblings (Breasted 1934, 117). Moral impulses have therefore grown from the influences that operated in family relationships (Breasted 1934, 121). Although the range of good conduct may at first have been confined to the family, in the pyramid age it had already started to expand to become a wider community matter (Breasted 1934, 123). Man would be judged for his wrongs and injustices on earth at death by a judgement before the supreme judge in a court of justice (Breasted 1934, 125). According to Breasted (1934, 130) there is much emphasis on common sense and the use of the mind, which is usually called the "heart." People behaved according to norms accepted by society, enshrined in the concept of *maat* (Ockinga 2007, 255).

The concept of *maat* and the importance of living a just life was central to the beliefs about the judgement of the dead, where the deceased's heart () was weighed in the balance scales against *maat*, symbolised by the feather () of the goddess Maat (Oakes and Gahlin 2004, 463). It is likely that the notion of the judgement of the dead became applicable around 1800 B.C.E. and onwards; before then, the Coffin Texts were in use, with the old view of an afterlife without judgement of the dead (Quirke 1992, 162). Before the Coffin Texts, the Pyramid Texts, which represent the earliest funerary texts, also ensured an afterlife without judgement (Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 263).

Death was the most strongly ritualised of life's stages (Baines 1991, 144). The ancient Egyptians were not interested in death itself, but rather in the afterlife, which was a fundamental aspect of ancient Egyptian religion (Taylor 2001, 12). It would appear that, from the dawn of Egypt's history, as early as predynastic times, the ancient Egyptians already cherished the hope of eternal life, an earth-like existence after death (Oakes and Gahlin 2004, 21). This is clear from the preparations which accompanied their burials (Oakes and Gahlin 2004, 390), for they stocked their burial chambers and tomb chapels with the bounty of this world. Death was merely a doorway or passage to another existence (Quirk 1992, 141; Oakes and Gahlin 2004, 21). It was important for the

ancient Egyptians to do everything in life according to *maat*, and to keep in mind the eventual judgement at death since that would determine whether they would go to the afterlife. Ultimately, it is this belief in the afterlife that determined every aspect of the ancient Egyptians' daily life. The notion of *maat* would represent the continuity and transformation of the person to the afterlife, effectively also representing immortality (Assmann 1990, 122). Living a life according to *maat* was essential in order to attain eternal life.

Maat was used in a physical and moral sense and came to mean "right, true, truth, real, genuine, upright, righteous, just, steadfast" (Budge 1969, 417). All these different conceptions were represented in Egyptian speech by the single word *maat* (Breasted 1934, 142).

Implementing *Maat*: The "Birth" of Law

The state derived its authority and stability from the concept of *maat* (Van Blerk 2006, 2). It was the king's task to defend *maat*, thereby maintaining and restoring order (Allam 2007, 263). The king's primary duty was to uphold the order of creation which had been established on the primeval mound at the time of creation (Tobin 1987, 115). Kingship in Egypt represented the effective power of *maat* (Tobin 1987, 115). The king, as son of the Sun-god, was entrusted with the task of upholding *maat* (Bleeker 1967, 7). The pharaoh's duty was to defend *maat* in order to maintain and restore order, which he did by issuing appropriate laws (Allam 2007, 263).

From the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant, for instance, one notes that metaphors from religion and myth have strayed into the legal sphere (Van Blerk 2006, 54). According to Shupak (1992, 16) the judge is compared to a pair of scales and its various parts, for instance, and also to a sailor sailing on the lake of truth (*maat*). Throughout the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant, the peasant devotes long passages to instructions to judges on how and how not to carry out *maat* (Van Blerk 2006, 57).

The biographies of officials and royal inscriptions relating historical events were written to demonstrate the pharaoh's role in creating and preserving *maat*, demonstrating the pharaoh's success in materialising order and harmony of *maat* (Allen 2004, 298–99). The ancient Egyptians believed that only the pharaoh knew the requirements of the *maat* principle and that his laws were identical to the will of the creator god, which was why the pharaoh could maintain law and order, reflecting the world in harmony (Helck and Otto 1980, 1115). The pharaoh had the task of defending *maat* and was therefore called upon to maintain and restore order, for which purpose he or she issued appropriate laws (Allam 2007, 263). Law was therefore tied up with a religious world view and represented the rules regulating the behaviour of members of society (Allam 2007, 264).

Examples of laws which survived all begin with a reference to the pharaoh: "the pharaoh has said," "the pharaoh has commanded," etc. (Edgerton 1947, 154). Jasnow (2003, 294) affirms, by emphasising their close relationship with *maat*, that the pharaoh issued legal edicts regulating the status and behaviour of individuals, like the Nauri Decree. The continued legitimacy of the pharaoh depended on his fulfilling the mandate assigned to him by the gods, the most important element of which, from a legal perspective, was the duty to be just and to uphold justice (Westbrook 2003b:26).

The following example is given by Lorton (1986, 57) from the dedicatory inscription of Ramesses II at Abydos: "the beloved of Maat, he lives through (her) by means of his laws." Lorton (1986, 57) refers also for example to Ptahotep 84–90:

> If you are a leader, commanding matters for the multitude, seek for yourself every occasion of excellence so that your administration will be without fault. *Maat* is great, lasting and affective. It has not been disturbed since the time of him who made it (for) the one who transgress the laws is punished.

Fundamentally, the reason for the emergence of law was to ensure that *maat* was established. *Maat* was thus the direct link between law and religion in ancient Egypt. Therefore, official legislation was comprised of laws, which the king issued as needed, and not of divinely revealed statutes as in Judaism or Islam (Allam 2007, 263). Law emerged as a mechanism to maintain *maat* on earth, with the king playing an important part by "making" law, ensuring that *maat* was thus maintained on earth (Van Blerk 2010, 597). The king, as a king god, was the supreme judge and law giver (Helck and Otto 1980, 1110).

Law was therefore tied up with a religious world view and represented the rules regulating the behaviour of members of society (Allam 2007, 264). The king upheld the law and was theoretically the sole legislator, but he was also subject to the law (David 2002, 288). The king had to live his life according to the principles of *maat* and he had to maintain *maat* in society (Van Blerk 2006, 18). The king had thus to "rule by *maat*" (Goebs 2007, 276). The king's duty was to make sure that *maat* was attained on earth and in order to do so the king had to make law. The word for law was *hp* (and the plural *hpw*) (Kruchten 2001, 277). The word *hp* is also later translated to include "regulations" and "statutes" (Lesko 1994, 82). It was essentially *maat* that necessitated the need for law. The king was the link between law and *maat* (religion).

The king represented a source of law, since the ancient Egyptians regarded the king as a god and so his word had the force of law (Versteeg 2002, 5) and he was the primary source of law (Westbrook 2003c, 26). The king's duty to make laws is summarised in texts by the phrase "putting *maat* in place of injustice" and, on temple walls, by images of the king presenting the symbol of *maat* to the gods (Allen 2004, 117). This scene of the presentation of *maat* first appears as an iconographic device in the time of Thutmose

III, where her effigy was presented to the gods by the king as sustenance (Teeter 1997, 83).

The ancient Egyptians believed only the king knew the requirements of the *maat* principle and that his laws were identical to the will of the creator god, which was why the king could maintain law and order and these laws and ruling of the king reflected the world in harmony (Helck and Otto 1980, 1115). The king had the duty towards the gods and the people to maintain *maat* by promulgating law (Van Blerk 2006, 18). The vizier was the king's delegate and the high-priest of Maat as well as head of the courts of justice (David 2002, 288).

The law stood above all humans and was personified by the goddess Maat, with the concept of *maat* representing truth, justice, righteousness, the correct order and balance of the universe (David 2002, 288). Egyptian law was essentially based on the concept of *maat*, with the idea of order as the *Grundlage* of the world, upon which the legal system was based in turn (Helck and Otto 1980, 1110–11). The ancient Egyptians saw no difference between human and divine justice (Van Blerk 2010, 584). Maat represented a sense of moral responsibility (Van Blerk 2010, 585).

Not only the king but also all instruments of the state—the judiciary and bureaucracy—took the notion of *maat* as their ruling principle, it being the goal and duty of their activities. *Maat* therefore embodied just administration, and in the process maintained order (Allam 2007, 263). Law was therefore tied up with a religious world view which represents the rules regulating the behaviour of members of society (Allam 2007, 264). Because *maat* governed all human activity and established an ethical framework for every deed, it symbolised an ideal order towards which each person had to strive (Allam 2007, 264). The pharaoh was expected to uphold the order in accordance with divine law (Morschauser 1995, 102). This is expressed in the wisdom text of the late First Intermediate period/early Middle Kingdom addressed to Merikare: "make sure your position in the Afterlife by being righteous, by enacting maat, upon which human hearts rely" (Morschauser 1995, 102).

It was the king's responsibility to maintain *maat* and this the king did by promulgating laws (*hpw*) (Van Blerk 2006, 18). If the law (*hp*) was obeyed, one would be following the principle of *maat* (Bedell 1985, 12).

The ancient Egyptians believed that the existence of *maat* would ensure the continued existence of the world as it had done since the beginning of time (Allen 2004, 115) and they lived in the unshakeable faith that *maat* was, despite periods of chaos, injustice, and immorality, absolute and eternal in nature (Bleeker 1967, 8).

It was by living according to the principles of *maat* that the ancient Egyptians confirmed that they understood the principles and values of *maat* (Helck and Otto 1980, 1112–13),

which had religious, ethical, and moral connotations and became the focal point of the ancient Egyptian legal system (Bedell 1985, 12).

According to Assmann (2002, 132) justice is what holds the world together, and it does so by connecting consequences to deeds. According to Assmann, this is the essence of what makes it "connective." Justice links human action to human destiny (Assmann 2002, 132). Connective justice does however not only link consequences to deeds but also the individual to people around him (Assmann 2002, 133). The Egyptians had a specific view of connective justice dependent on *maat*, which will be briefly set out here as explained by Assmann (2002, 133–35).

Justice is achieved by systematic maintenance. Justice refers to a life in harmony with the connective structures that make community with fellows and gods possible. The idea of connective justice that binds individuals into a community and their actions into the meaningful ensemble of history is central to Egyptian civilisation throughout its entire span (Assmann 2002, 135). This understanding of the ancient Egyptians' view that human action and human destiny are linked is an indication of the fundamental and important role that religion played in the ancient Egyptians' very existence. This fundamental link between human action and human destiny would form the basis of everything. The purpose of law was to realise *maat* on earth (Van Blerk 2006, 88). The ancient Egyptians' whole life was governed by *maat* and law was *maat* in action (Van Blerk 2010, 597).

Conclusion

The ancient Egyptian world was dominated by religion and they made sense of the world around them by viewing everything through the eyes of their religious beliefs. Religion was the way in which they could make sense of things around them. The beliefs and rituals accompanying religion brought security, stability and continuity. Religion was interwoven with every aspect of their lives.

Of particular importance was the ancient Egyptians' belief in *maat*, the bigger order of things. This belief in *maat* represented order, balance, justice, and truth. This dominated every aspect of their daily lives; everything they did was to be in accordance with *maat*. This was necessary in order to keep the balance of order, truth, and justice in the cosmos and on earth. For them human action and human destiny were inextricably linked.

This belief in *maat* influenced and structured their idea of law. It is through *maat* that the religious origin of ancient Egyptian law is perceived. The belief in this bigger order of things on earth was a way of life which influenced every aspect of their lives, including the law. The belief and rituals accompanying religion brought security, stability, and continuity, and formed the basis for the development of ancient Egyptian

law. Law emerged/developed out of religion, and specifically out of the notion of *maat*. The purpose of law was to maintain *maat* on earth.

This article indicates the importance of religion as the central aspect of Egyptian life, especially the concept of *maat*. In reflecting on religion and the concept of *maat*, it appears that this necessitated law. It therefore appears that law was "born" out of religion, and more specifically out of the concept of *maat* in order to have balance, truth, and justice on earth. This effectively means that law developed out of religion in ancient Egypt with the purpose to serve *maat*, to make sure that *maat* was maintained on earth, thus ensuring balance, truth, and justice—effectively stability.

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ADDENDUM A

TIMELINE

(Source: Wilkinson 2016, xxxi–xxxiii)

PERIOD/DATES (B.C.E.)/ DYNASTY/KING	**DEVELOPMENTS IN EGYPT**
Early Dynastic Period, 2950–2575	
First Dynasty, 2950–2750	
Second Dynasty, 2750–2650	
Third Dynasty, 2650–2575	Step Pyramids at Saqqara
Old Kingdom, 2575–2125	
Fourth Dynasty, 2575–2450	Great Pyramid at Giza
Fifth Dynasty, 2450–2325 (nine kings, ending with Unas, 2350–2325)	Pyramid Texts
Sixth Dynasty, 2325–2175 (five kings, ending with Pepi II, 2260–2175	Harkhuf's expeditions
Eighth Dynasty, 2175–2125	
First Intermediate Period, 2125–2010	Civil war
Ninth/Tenth Dynasty, 2125–1975	
Eleventh Dynasty (1st part), 2080–2010 (three kings, including Intef II, 2070–2020)	

Middle Kingdom, 2010–1630	
Eleventh Dynasty (2nd part), 2010–1938 (three kings, ending with Mentuhotep IV, 1948–1938)	
Twelfth Dynasty, 1938–1755 (eight kings, including: Amenemhat I, 1938–1908 Senusret I, 1918–1875 Senusret III, 1836–1818)	Golden age of literature
Thirteenth Dynasty, 1755–1630	
Second Intermediate Period, 1630–1539	Civil war
Fourteenth Dynasty, c.1630	
Fifteenth Dynasty 1630–1520	Hyksos invasion
Sixteenth Dynasty, 1630–1565	
Seventeenth Dynasty, 1570–1539 (several kings, ending with Kamose, 1541–1539)	
New Kingdom, 1539–1069	
Eighteenth Dynasty, 1539–1292 (fifteen kings, including: Ahmose, 1539–1514 Thutmose I, 1493–1481 Thutmose III, 1479–1425 Hatshepsut, 1473–1458 Amenhotep III, 1390–1353 Akhenaten, 1353–1336 Tutankhamun, 1332–1322 Horemheb, 1319–1292)	Reunification Battle of Megiddo Amarna revolution

Ramesside Period, 1292–1069	
Nineteenth Dynasty, 1292–1190	
Twentieth Dynasty, 1190–1069 (ten kings, including Ramesses V, 1150–1145 Ramesses XI, 1099–1069	
Third Intermediate Period, 1069–664	
Twenty-first Dynasty, 1069–945 Twenty-second Dynasty, 945–715 Twenty-third Dynasty, 838–720 Twenty-fourth Dynasty, 740–715 Twenty-fifth Dynasty, 728–657 (five kings, starting with Piankhi, 747–716)	Political division Kushite conquest
Late Period, 664–332	
Twenty-sixth Dynasty, 664–525 (six kings, starting with Psamtek I, 664–610)	
Twenty-seventh Dynasty (First Persian Period), 525–404 (five kings, including Darius I, 522–486)	Persian conquest
Twenty-eighth Dynasty, 404–399	
Twenty-ninth Dynasty, 399–380	
Thirtieth Dynasty, 380–343	
Thirty-first Dynasty (Second Persian Period), 343–332	
Macedonian Dynasty, 332–309	
Alexander the Great, 332–323	
Ptolemaic Period, 309–30	Death of Cleopatra