The Literature of Ancient Egypt

An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, and Poetry

New Edition

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The Tale of the Two Brothers

This story is based upon a myth that concerned two gods of the Cynopolis or Seventeenth Nome of Middle Egypt (see J. Yoyotte, Revue d'Égyptologie 9 (1952): 157-59; J. Vandier, Le Papyrus Jumilhac [Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, n.d.] pp. 45-46, 105-06; Gardiner, Ancient Egyptian Onomastica, 2:103*-06*, and his The Wilbour Papyrus [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948], 2:50-51) and may reflect an ancient conflict between two neighboring towns that became unified just as the two divine protagonists are reconciled. The elder brother, Anubis, is well known to us, mainly through his role as god of the dead and embalming, but the hero of the tale, Bata or Bes, is less often encountered in the documentation surviving from ancient Egypt. Bata seems originally to have been a pastoral god, whose cult image was in the form of a mumiform ram (the Old Kingdom evidence is discussed by Peter Seibert in Die Charakteristik [Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1967], Pt. 1, pp. 59-67 and by Peter Kaplon in Chronique d'Egypte 44 (1969): 27-59, and 45 (1970): 240-43), but sources later than the Old Kingdom indicate that Bata was primarily a bull, one of the forms he adopts in the story. In a number of Old Kingdom tomb chapels Bata appears as the subject of a peasant's song, while from the late period the Papyrus Jumilhac provides a version of the myth in which Bata is identified with Seth, and Anubis is the hero.

Egyptian religious texts, such as the Pyramid Texts, contain many mythological allusions, but the absence of a running mythological account is striking. One form in which mythic concepts were transmitted as an expression of the Egyptian faith was the popular story which might be told by a raconteur in the marketplace. It is obvious that The Tale of the Two Brothers is not an "official" version of the myth as transmitted through the ages; its vernacular language and such a matter as Bata's appointment to be Viceroy of Kush betray the adaptation of the myth to a changing world. Through the mythically based short story, the commoner in ancient

Egypt was able to participate in a form of religious education. It would be wrong to view knowledge about the gods as the prerogative of a select class of priests; the public may have been far more knowledgeable in religious affairs than has often been maintained. For bibliographical references to this story, see Lefebvre, Romans et contes, pp. 140-42; Erman, The Ancient Egyptians, p. xxxii; F. Jési, in N.egyptus 42 (1962): 276-96. See now E. Blumenthal, in ZAS 99 (1972): 11-17; Jan Assmann, in ZAS 104 (1977): 1-25; B. Sledzianowski, in GM 4 (1973): 35-40.

1.1 Once upon a time there were two brothers, so the story goes, having the same mother and the same father. Anubis was the name of the elder, and Bata was the name of the younger. Now as for Anubis, he [possessed] a house and had a wife, [and] his younger brother was (associated) with him after the manner of a son, so that it was he (that is, the elder brother) who made clothes for him while he (that is, the younger brother) followed behind his cattle to the fields, since it was he who had to plow. It was he who reaped for him, and it was [he] who did for him every chore that was in the fields. Indeed, his younger brother [was] a perfect man: there was none like him in [the] entire land, for a god's virility was in him.

After many days following this, [his] younger brother

1.5 [was tending] his cattle according to his daily habit, and he would [leave work] for his house every evening laden

1. This and similar expressions marking the passage of time occur throughout the story as conventionalized formulas that are not always to be taken literally. See Westendorf, in ZAS 79 (1924): 65-68. In fact, this paragraph and the following one are not really part of the narrative proper but serve to provide the necessary background for the action of the story that begins following the statement about the increase in the size of the herd. See E. F. Wente, in JNES 21 (1962): 308-09.
[with] every vegetable of the fields, [with] milk, with wood, and [with] every [good produce of] the field; he would place them before his [elder brother] while he was sitting with his wife, and he would drink and eat, and [he would leave to spend the night in] his stable among his cattle [daily].

After dawn and the next day had come about, [he prepared foods] which were cooked, and he would place them before his elder brother, [and he would] give him bread for the fields, and he would drive his cattle to let them graze in the fields while he followed behind his cattle. [And th]ey [would] tell him: The herbage of such and such a place is good. And he would listen to all that they said and take them to the place with good herbage which they were desiring. The cattle that were in his charge became so exceedingly fine that they multiplied their offspring exceedingly.

At plowing time his [elder] brother told him: Have a team [of oxen] made ready for us for plowing, for the soil has emerged so that it is just right for tilling. Also, you are to come to the field with seed because we shall begin to cultivate tomorrow. So he said to him. Then his /younger brother made all preparations that his elder brother had told him to [make]. And after dawn [and the next] day had come about, they went to the field carrying their [seed] and began [to] plow with [their hearts] exceedingly pleased about their project as [they] began to work.

2. In ancient Egypt the sowing of the seed for cereal crops was performed simultaneously with the plowing of the soil. Hence the word skl can mean “plow,” “till,” or “cultivate.” See T. G. H. James, The Hekanakhte Papers and Other Early Middle Kingdom Documents (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1965), p. 18.

3.1 After many [days] following this, while they were in the field, they needed seed. He sent his younger brother, saying: You shall go and fetch us seed from town. His younger brother found the wife of his elder brother seated plaiting her (hair). He told her: Get up and give me seed so that I may hurry off to the field, because it is for me that my elder brother is waiting. Don't cause a delay. Then she said to him: Go, open the magazine and fetch for yourself what you want. Don't make me leave my hairdressing unfinished.

Then the youth entered his stable and fetched a large vessel, since it was his desire to take out a lot of seed. He loaded himself with barley and emmer and came out carrying it. Then she said to him: How much is it that is on your shoulder? And he told her: It is three sacks of emmer and two sacks of barley, totaling five, that are on my shoulder. So he said to her. Then she [spoke with] him, saying: There is [great] virility in you, for I have been observing your exertions daily. For it was her desire to know him through sexual intimacy. She got up, seized hold of him, and told him: Come, let's spend for ourselves an hour sleeping (together). Such will be to your advantage, for I will make you fine clothes.

Then the youth became like an Upper Egyptian panther in [harsh] rage over the wicked proposition that she had made to him, and she became exceedingly fearful. He argued with her, saying: Now look, you are (associated) with me after the manner of a mother, and your husband

3. As the text stands, the translation should be, “His younger brother found the wife of his elder brother while one was sitting plaiting her (hair).” On the passage and its implications, see J. J. Janssen, Commodity Prices from the Ramessid Period (Leiden, 1975): 157, and Ph. Derchain, in SAK 2 (1975): 55-59. point, a probable emendation of the text is: h₃₃ hmr.₃w  ḫfr nb₃u₃₃.

4. Reading perhaps m ḫnt.₃n ḫfr.
is (associated) with me after the manner of a father, for the one who is older than I is who has brought me up. What means this great offense which you have said to me? Don't say it to me again. But I shall tell it to no one, for I will not let it escape my mouth to anybody. He picked up his load and went off to the field. Then he reached his elder brother, and they began to work at their project.

Afterward, at evening time, his elder brother left work for his house, while his younger brother was (still) tending his cattle and would load himself with all produce of the field and bring back his cattle before him to let them spend the night in their stable, which was in town. The wife of his elder brother was fearful of the proposition which she had made. She then fetched grease and fat and feigningly became like one who has been assaulted with the intention of telling her husband: It's your younger brother who has assaulted me. Her husband left work in the evening according to his daily habit. He reached his house and found his wife lying (down), feigning (to be) sick, so that she did not pour water upon his hand(s) according to his custom, nor had she prepared lighting for his arrival, so that his house was in darkness as she lay vomiting. Her husband said to her: Who has quarreled with you? Said she to him: No one has quarreled with me except your younger brother. When he returned to take out seed for you, he found me sitting alone and said to me, "Come, let's spend an hour sleeping (together). You shall put on your wig." So he said to me, but I refused to obey him. "Isn't it so that I am your mother, and that your brother is (associated) with you after the manner of a father?" So I said to him. And he became afraid and assaulted me to prevent me from making a disclosure to you. Now if you let him live, I'll take my life. See, as soon as he returns, 'don't . . . him', because I denounce this wicked proposition which he would have carried out yesterday.

Then his elder brother became like an Upper Egyptian panther, and he had his spear sharpened and placed it in his hand. His elder brother stood behind the door of his stable in order to kill his younger brother upon his return in the evening to let his cattle enter the stable. Now when the sun set, he loaded himself with all vegetables of the fields, according to his daily habit, and returned. The lead cow entered the stable and said to its herdsman: Look, your elder brother is standing in wait for you bearing his spear to kill you. You shall depart from his presence. He understood what his lead cow had said, and the next one entered and said it also. He looked under the door of his stable and observed his elder

5. This sentence, which is also not part of the narrative proper, serves to explain how Anubis would customarily return home before Bata, thus setting the stage for the episode at the barn door; see Wente, *JNES* 21: 309-10.
6. Or, "and became like one who has been criminally assaulted."

7. A restoration that would permit the translation, "See, as soon as he returns, you are to kill him, for I am suffering from this wicked proposition which he would carry out yesterday," has been suggested by Klaus Baur, in *JEA* 51 (1965): 139 and 142, but his restoration of ntrwk is questionable on paleographic grounds. Although Horus and Seth, 310, may be cited in support of rendering In by "suffer from," the determinative of the verb in Two Brothers is different and favors the verb šml, "curse." The term *yesterday* is used because day was over at sunset, even though the Egyptian day began at dawn; see Siegfried Schott, *Altegyptische Gedichte* (Mainz: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, 1953), p. 20.
brother's feet as he was standing behind the door with his spear in his hand. He set his load onto the ground and hastened to run off <in> flight, and his elder brother went in pursuit of him, carrying his spear.

Then his younger brother prayed to Pre-Harakhti, saying: My good lord, it is you who distinguishes wrong from right. Thereupon Pre heard all his petitions, and Pre caused a great (gulf of) water to come between him and his elder <brother>, infested with crocodiles, so that one of them came to be on one side and the other on the other (side). His elder brother struck twice upon (the back of) his hand because he had failed to kill him. Then his younger brother called to him on the (other) side, saying: Wait there until dawn. As soon as the sun rises, I shall /be judged with you in his presence, and he shall deliver the culprit to the just, for I will never again be present in your company nor will I be present in a place where you are. I shall go to the Valley of the Pine.

Now after dawn and the next day had come about, Pre-Harakhti arose, and they observed each other. Then the youth argued with his elder brother, saying: What's the meaning of your coming in pursuit of me in order to kill <me> unjustly without having heard what I have to say? For I am still your younger brother, and /you are (associated) with me after the manner of a father, and your wife is (associated) with me after the manner of a mother, isn't it so? When you sent <me> to fetch us seed, your wife said to me, "Come, let's spend an hour sleeping (together)." But see, it has been distorted for you as something otherwise. Then he informed him about all that had transpired between him and his wife. He swore by Pre-Harakhti saying: As for your <coming> in order to kill me unjustly, carrying your spear, it was on account of a sexually exhausted slut. He fetched a reed knife, cut off his phallus, and threw it into the water. The catfish swallowed <it>, and he grew weak and became feeble.

His elder brother became exceedingly grieved and stood weeping for him aloud. He could not cross over to where his younger brother was because of the crocodiles.

Then his younger brother called to him, saying: If you have recalled a grievance, can't you recall a kindness or something that I have done on your behalf? Please depart to your home and take care of your cattle, for I shall not stay in a place where you are. I shall go off to the Valley of the Pine. Now what you shall do on my behalf is to come and care for me if <you> find out that something has happened to me <when> I extract my heart and put it on top of the flower of the pine tree. And if the pine tree is cut down and falls to the ground, /you are to come to search for it. If you shall have spent seven years in searching for it, don't let your heart become discouraged, for if you do find it and put it into a bowl of cool water, then I will become alive in order that /you may avenge the wrong done to me. Now you shall ascertain whether something <has happened> to me if a beaker of


9. In the two occurrences of this expression, here and in 7.8, there is disagreement in the determinatives. In the second occurrence the writing suggests possibly, "in (all) readiness"; see Caminos, p. 180.

10. For the god Bata's association with the catfish, see Seibert, Die Charakteristik, p. 63.

11. Supplying m before p3y4 3d.
beer is delivered to you in your hand and produces froth. Don’t delay upon seeing that this comes to pass with you.

Then he went off to the Valley of the Pine, and his elder brother went off to his home with his hand(s) placed upon his head and his (body) smeared with dirt. Presently he reached his home, and he killed his wife, cast her to the dogs, and sat down in mourning over his younger brother.

After many days following this, his younger brother was in the Valley of the Pine with no one with him while he spent all day hunting desert game. He returned in the evening to spend the night under the pine tree on top of whose flower his heart was. And after many days following this, he built for himself a country villa with his hands in the Valley of the Pine, filled with all sorts of good things, with the intention of establishing a home for himself.

Presently he went out from his country villa and encountered the Ennead as they were walking (along) governing the entire land. The Ennead spoke in unison, saying to him: Oh, Bata, Bull of the Ennead, are you alone here having abandoned your town before the face of the wife of Anubis, your elder brother? See, he has killed his wife, and thus you will be avenged upon him for every wrong done against you. For they were exceedingly sorry for him. Pre-Harakhti told Khnum: Please fashion a marriageable woman for Bata so that he does not have to live alone. Thereupon Khnum made for him a house-

12. The company of the major gods.
13. Taking n #w  masons for  m  w  masons, lit. “as one among themselves.” But perhaps the passage is to be rendered, “spoke (first) among themselves and (then) said to him.”
14. A creator god represented as shaping man on a potter’s wheel.

companion who was more beautiful in her body than any woman in the entire land, for the seed of every god was in her. Then the seven Hathors came to see her and said all together: It is by an execution knife that she shall die.

Then he proceeded to cover her exceedingly while she was dwelling in his house and while he spent all day hunting desert game, bringing (it) back, and putting (it) down before her. He told her: Don’t go outside lest the sea carry you away, for I will be unable to rescue you from it, because I am a female like you and my heart lies on top of the flower of the pine tree. But if another finds it, I will fight with him. Then he revealed to her all his inmost thoughts.

After many days following this, while Bata went to hunt according to his daily habit, the maiden went out to stroll under the pine tree which was next to her house. Thereupon she beheld the sea surging up behind her, and she hastened to flee from it and entered her house. Then the sea called to the pine tree, saying: Seize hold of her for me. And the pine tree removed a curl from her hair. The sea brought it to Egypt and deposited it in the place of the launderers of Pharaoh, l.p.h. Then the scent of the curl of hair appeared in the clothes of Pharaoh, l.p.h., and the king wrangled with the launderers of Pharaoh, l.p.h., saying: Scent of ointment is in the clothes of Pharaoh, l.p.h. The king came to wrangling with them daily, but they didn’t know what to do. The chief

15. The goddesses who determine an individual’s fate; see The Doomed Prince, p. 1.
17. Bata’s wife is still a virgin.
launderer of Pharaoh, l.p.h., went to the bank with his mind exceedingly vexed as a consequence of the wranglings with him daily. Then he stopped still and stood by the seashore opposite the curl of hair that was in the water. He had someone go down, and it was brought to him. Its scent was found exceedingly fragrant, and he took it away to Pharaoh, l.p.h.

Then the learned scribes of Pharaoh, l.p.h., were brought. They told Pharaoh, l.p.h.: As for this braid of hair, it belongs to a daughter of Pre-Harakhti in whom there is the seed of every god. Now it is a tribute to you from another country. Send envoys forth to every foreign country in order to search for her. As for the envoy who will go to the Valley of the Pine, have many men go with him in order to fetch her. Then His Majesty, l.p.h., said: What you have said is very good, very good. And they were sent off.

After many days following this, the men who had gone to a foreign country returned to render report to His Majesty, l.p.h., whereas those who had gone to the Valley of the Pine failed to return, for Bata had killed them leaving (only) one of them to render report to His Majesty, l.p.h. Then His Majesty, l.p.h., again sent forth many soldiers as well as chariots in order to fetch her, there being a woman among them through whom all (sorts of) beautiful feminine adornments were presented to her.18

The woman returned to Egypt with her, and there was jubilation for her in the entire land. Then His Majesty, l.p.h., proceeded to love her exceedingly, and the king appointed her to be Chief Lady. The king spoke with her in order to have her describe the nature of her husband, and she said to His Majesty, l.p.h.: Have the pine tree cut down and hacked up. The king sent soldiers bearing their copper (implements) in order to cut down the pine tree, and they reached the pine tree. They cut off the flower upon which was Bata's heart, and he fell dead at the very same moment.

After dawn and the next day had come about and after the pine tree had been cut down, Anubis, the elder brother of Bata, entered his house and sat down and washed his hand(s). He was handed a beaker of beer, and it produced froth. Another of wine was handed him, and it turned bad. Then he took his staff and his sandals as well as his clothes and his weapons, and he hastened to journey to the Valley of the Pine. He entered the country villa of his younger brother and found his younger brother lying dead upon his bed. He wept when he saw his younger brother lying in a state of death, and he went to search for his younger brother's heart beneath the pine tree under which his younger brother slept in the evening. He spent three years in searching for it without finding it. Now when he had commenced the fourth year, his heart desired to return to Egypt, and he said: I shall depart tomorrow. So he said in his heart.

After dawn and the next day had come about, he began walking under the pine tree and spent all day searching for it. He gave up in the evening. Again he spent time in order to search for it, and he found a (pine) cone. He left for home with it. It was really his younger brother's heart. And he fetched a bowl of cool water, dropped it into it, and sat down according to his daily habit.14


14.1 After darkness had fallen, his heart absorbed the water,
and Bata shuddered over all his body and began looking at his elder brother while his heart was (still) in the bowl. Anubis, his elder brother, took the bowl of cool water in which was his younger brother’s heart and <had> him drink it. His heart assumed its (proper) position so that he became as he used to be. Then each embraced the other, and they conversed with one another. Then Bata said to his elder brother: Look, I shall become a large bull that has every beautiful color and whose sort is unparalleled, and you shall sit upon <my> back. As soon as the sun rises, we shall be where my wife is that <I> may avenge myself, and you shall take me to where the king\(^9\) is, for every sort of good thing shall be done for you and you shall be rewarded with silver and gold for taking me to Pharaoh, l.p.h., because I shall become a great marvel, and there shall be jubilation for me in the entire land, and (then) you shall depart to your (home) town.

\(15.1\) After dawn /and the next day had come about, Bata changed into the form which he had mentioned to his elder brother. Then Anubis, his elder brother, sat down upon his back until dawn, and he reached the place where the king was, and His Majesty, l.p.h., was informed about him. He saw him and became exceedingly joyful over him. He served him a grand oblation, saying: It is a great marvel that has come to pass. And there was jubilation for him in the entire land. Then /his weight was made up in silver and gold for his elder brother, who (again) took up his abode in his (home) town. The king gave him much personnel and a lot of goods, for Pharaoh, l.p.h., preferred him exceedingly over anybody (else) in the entire land.

\(15.5\) Here and following, the Egyptian uses the term One in reference to the king.

\(16.1\) Now after many days following this, he entered the kitchen and stood in the place where the Lady was. He began speaking with her, saying: See, I’m still alive! She said to him: Who are you, I ask? And he told her: I am Bata. I realize that when you caused the pine tree to be hacked up for Pharaoh, l.p.h., it was on account of me, to keep me from staying alive. See, /I’m still alive, but as a bull.

The Lady became exceedingly fearful because of the revelation which her husband had made to her. Then he left the kitchen, and His Majesty, l.p.h., sat down and made holiday with her. She poured (drinks) for His Majesty, l.p.h., so that the king was exceedingly happy in her company. Then she said to His Majesty, l.p.h.: Swear to me by god as follows, “As for what <the Lady> will say, I shall grant it to her.” And he heard all that she said: Let me eat of the liver of this bull, /for he never will amount to anything. So she said speaking to him. The king became exceedingly vexed over what she had said, and Pharaoh, l.p.h., was exceedingly sorry for him.

After dawn and the next day had come about, the king proclaimed a grand oblation as an offering to the bull,\(^20\) and the king sent a first royal cupbearer of His Majesty, l.p.h., to sacrifice the bull. And subsequently he was sacrificed. While he was upon the shoulders of the men, he trembled in his neck and caused two drops of blood to be shed beside the two doorposts of His Majesty, l.p.h., one landing on one side of the great portal of Pharaoh, l.p.h., and the other on the other side. They grew into /two large Persea trees, each one of which was choice. Then someone went to tell His Majesty, l.p.h.: Two large

\(17.1\) Or possibly, “as a sacrifice of the bull.”
Persea trees have grown this night as a great marvel for
His Majesty, I.p.h., beside the great portal of His Majesty,
I.p.h. And there was jubilation for them in the entire land,
and the king presented an offering to them.

After many days following this, His Majesty, I.p.h., ap-
peared at the audience window of lapis lazuli with a
wreath of every sort of flower on chis neck, and he
mounted] a chariot of electrum and came out from the
palace, I.p.h., in order to inspect the Persea trees. Then the
Lady came out in a chariot following Pharaoh, I.p.h. His
Majesty, I.p.h., sat down under one Persea tree, and the
Lady under the other Persea tree. And Bata spoke with
his wife: Ha, you liar! I am Bata. I am alive in spite of
you. I realize that as for your having had the pine tree
that I was on account of me. And I became a bull, and you had me killed.

After many days following this, the Lady stood pouring
(drinks) for His Majesty, I.p.h., so that the king was
happy in her company. She told His Majesty, I.p.h.: Swear
to me by god as follows, “As for what the Lady will tell
me, I shall grant it to her.” So you shall say. And he heard
all that she said, and she said: Have these two Persea
trees cut down and made into fine furniture. Then the
king heard all that she had said, and after a brief moment
His Majesty, I.p.h., sent skilled craftsmen, and the Persea
trees were cut down for Pharaoh, I.p.h. The queen, the
Lady, observed it (being done), and a splinter flew up
and entered the Lady’s mouth. She swallowed it and
became pregnant in the space of a split second, and the
king made out of them whatever was her desire.

After many days following this, she bore a son, and
someone went in order to tell His Majesty, I.p.h.: A son
has been born to you. Then he was brought, and nurse
and maids were assigned to him. There was jubilation for
him in the entire land, and the king sat down and made
holiday and proceeded to hold him on his lap. His
Majesty, I.p.h., cherished him exceedingly immediately,
and the king appointed him Viceroy of Kush.

After many days following this, His Majesty, I.p.h.,
made him crown prince of the entire land. And after many
days following this, when he had completed many years
as crown prince in the entire land, His Majesty, I.p.h.,
flew up to the sky. Then the (new) king said: Have
my great officials of His Majesty, I.p.h., brought to me
that I may inform them regarding every situation that
I have been involved in. His wife brought to him, and
he was judged with her in their presence. A consensus
was reached among them. His elder brother was
brought to him, and he appointed him crown prince in
the entire land. He spent thirty years as King of Egypt.
He departed from life, and his elder brother acceded to
his throne on the day of death.

Thus it concludes happily and successfully.

22. Following the interpretation of Hellmut Brunner in Die Geburt
23. A common expression used to refer to the death of the king; see
24. I.e. Bata. The relationship of this story to the Egyptian concept
of royal succession has been discussed by Helmut Jacobsohn,
Die dogmatische Stellung der Königs in der Theologie der alten
 Ägypter (Gluckstadt: J. J. Augustin, 1939), pp. 13-15; G. Posener,
92-93, and Brunner, Die Geburt, pp. 205-06.
25. The implication is the condemnation of Bata’s unfaithful wife,
whose death by execution had been fated by the seven Hathors.