



Antithesis Between Loving Good and Hating Evil in Ancient Egypt

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ABSTRACT

The current research paper investigates love-hate relationship in regard to the concept of good and evil, i.e., the antithesis between love of good and hatred of evil in ancient Egypt. The objective is to uncover the rationale and functional relationship behind this antithetical relation. By examining the nuances, contextual variations, and semantic valences, the researcher investigates this antithesis relationship in textual sources.

The convergence of loving good, symbolising acceptance, and hating evil, symbolising rejection, holds political necessity, imposes a social imperative, moral urgency, and religious significance

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INTRODUCTION

Definition of *m3ʕt* and *isft*:

For a proper understanding of this topic, it is germane to define the terms ancient Egyptians used to determine “good” and “evil”.? The terms *m3ʕt* and *nfrt* were the most widely used to refer to “good” (Sweeney 1985, 224 note 42). *M3ʕt*, especially was in the ancient Egyptian ideology, a polysemous word that covered the idea of all that is agreeable and the attitudes included in the concept of good (Sweeney 1985, 213). Its meanings refer to socio-ethical ideals, e.g. justice, truth, right, righteousness, equity, honesty, charity, solidarity, and virtue. Another meaning refers to political ideals and cosmic-social harmony, e.g. right order, the world order, the cosmic order, harmony, balance the establishment of rule (*Wb* 2, 18.12; 19.1-5; *FCD* 101; Teeter 2001, 319; Assmann 2002, 153-154, 188-189; Hannig 2005, 334.12130-12153). Ethically, *m3ʕt* was a complex, intertwined, and interdependent to a sense of ethics tied to personal behaviours (Ockinga 2001, 484-487; Teeter 2001, 319). It is any action in conformity with a norm of morality as itself good. It is a synthesis of all virtues. Religiously and politically, it designates the idea of harmonising forces of connective justice that unifies all humans as well as animals, gods, the dead, objects, the cosmos and nature. In short, it is the meaning of creation, the form in which it was intended by the creator god (Assmann 2001, 3; Assmann

2002, 143-44), namely, the divinely ordained pattern of the universe. As a result, *m3ʕt* is the defence against chaos (Helck 1979, col. 1111). It was considered to be the force that kept chaos (*isft*), the antithesis of order, from overwhelming the world (Teeter 2001, 319).

As for “evil”, the opposite of *m3ʕt*, *isft* and *dwt* were the most widely terms used to translate this meaning. *Isft*, especially (*Wb* 1, 129.9; *FCD* 30, 320; Hannig 2005, 116.3891-3895; 1975.39767-39771) is a polysemous word accumulating bad meanings, closely connected with the notion of disagreeable and linked with the idea of error. The two terms cover a broad range of meanings. A group of these meanings refers to socio-ethical aspects, e.g. wrong, wrongdoing, sin, falsehood, uncleanness, injustice, inequality, lack, sickness, scarcity, theft, violence and death. The second group refers to political aspects e.g. deterioration, entropy, the disorder, chaos, war and enmity (*Wb* 1, 129.9-14; *FCD* 30; Assmann 2001, 3; Assmann 2002, 154). If there was a failure in the land, *isft*, a state of chaos, was said to prevail (Hoffmeier 1999, 151). In addition, evil can refer to a specific religious aspect that can be paraphrased with concepts like “forgetfulness of the afterlife”, “lack of piety,” and “irreligiosity” (Assmann 2001, 176). Thus, evil (as an opposite of *m3ʕt*) devastates the world, because the gods renounce their dwelling, not only in the temples of the local dimension, but also in the life-giving powers of nature in its cosmic dimension (Assmann 2001, 73).

In consequence, no single English word encompasses all the complex meanings of these two words (i.e., *m3ʕt* and *isft*). As a result, “good” and “evil” are the most agreeable words including most of their meanings, especially those denoting ethical aspects. The author adopted them to translate *m3ʕt* and *isft* respectively.

ANTITHESIS EXAMPLES

The Memphite Theology, the text of a well-known monument from Memphis, the Shabaka stone, now housed in the British Museum (EA 498). Pharaoh Shabaka (716-702B.C.) called it a “work of the ancestors”. Breasted places the original text in the middle of the 4th millennium B.C. (Breasted 1933, 29-33). Lichtheim believes that its original is a work of the Old Kingdom due to the language being archaic and resembling that of the Pyramid Texts (Lichtheim 1973, vol. 1, 51). Consequently, the authors followed their lead, and adopted it to be their first example, even though; it doesn’t fit the historical methodology.

The Memphite Theology has the earliest known philosophical discussion, as Breasted puts it (Breasted 1902, pls. 1-2; Breasted 1933, 35, 38): ⁵⁷...*irrw mrrwt msdwt sw didiw ʕnh n hry htp mt n hry hbt* “[As for] him (i.e. Ptah) the doer/maker of what is loved and the doer/maker of what is hated, [therefor] life is given to whom bears (lit. who is under) peace, and death is given to whom bears (lit. who is under) guilt”.

The god Ptah here is called the creator of both good and evil, i.e. preference and aversion as aspects of choice/ free will in accord with the greater will of Ptah himself. For the author, the past participle *mrrw* “what is loved” refers to the god’s reward for good deeds, while the other past participle *msdwt* “what is hated” refers to the god’s punishment of evildoers. Considering that “reward” is beloved and “punishment” is detestable, both are objects of the present participle *irrw*.

didiw may function as a present participle meaning “giver/doer”, rather than being a passive form. The function of *didiw* and its two objects (i.e., *ʕnh*, *mt*) is to give an interpretation to the past participles *mrrw* (as a reward), and *msdwt* (as a penalty). If this interpretation is correct, the revised translation is suggested: “the giver of life to whoever bears peace (as god’s reward) and death to whoever bears guilt (as god’s punishment)”. This leads to consider that the peaceful possession of life is a reward while death is a punishment. This interpretation appears to be confirmed by an official called Ahmose dating from Hatshepsut’s reign who said: *iw ntr*

[*db3=f*] *isfwt n iri sy m3^ct n ii hr s<y>* “god gives *isfwt* / “evils (= punishment) to whom commits it and *m3^ct* / “good (= a reward) to whom acts it (lit. Comes under it)” (*Urk* 4, 492.5-6).

Teeter highlights the connection between life and the goddess *M3^ct*: “By far, the most common staff that the goddess holds is the *‘nh*, which is related to the many associations on *m3^ct* with the concept of life” (Teeter 1997, 27).

In addition, there was an association between the act and its reward due to the role of *m3^ct* as an ethical concept. This point of view is adopted by Lichtheim who offered the translation: “<thus justice is done> to him who does what is loved, <and punishment> to him who does what is hated” (Lichtheim 1973, 55). Her translation and ours differ in that she inserted the phrase “thus justice is done” and the word “punishment” as additional words in the text. We understood the past participle *mrrw* as equivalent to the god’s reward and the other past participle *msddw* as equivalent to the god’s punishment, while Morenz renders *mrrw* as “justice” and renders *msdw* as “injustice” (Morenz 1973, 116).

The antithesis between loving good and hating evil is further supported by the self-praise in the autobiography of Thethi, a chief treasurer who lived at the 11th Dynasty: |⁷ ... *n wd.n (=i) m s3 |⁸ [b]w dwy msd.w rmt hr=s, ink mri=f nfrt, msd=f dwt* “|⁷... I did not seek after |⁸ the evil (*bw-dwy*) on account of which men are hateful. I am one who loved good and hated evil” (BM. 614= BAR 1, 202 §423E; Blackman 1931, 56, pl.8; Lichtheim 1988, 47; Simpson 2003, 416).

The quoted expression “for which men are hateful” confirms that the ancient Egyptian society’s hatred of evil doers was a response to misbehaviour. In other words, the perpetration of evil is the main motivator for hate because it worked as an incentive to gain society’s hatred. This concept pushed this official to assert his loving of good and his hating of evil to avoid any negative social responses against him as well as pushing against expected negative resonance which the netherworld may hide.

Rudjahau, a chief priest who lived at the end of the 11th Dynasty, asserted the same ethical principle, when he presents himself: |¹¹... *ink mri=f nfrt, msdi=f dwt* “I am one who loves good, hates evil” (BM Stela no. 159= Faulkner 1951, 47-48, Pl. 7, fig. 1; Lichtheim 1988, 72).

In the Coffin Texts, such assertions are also found. One of these is the deceased’s saying: *s3m n=i w3wt n hr=f h3=f mr=f m3^ct msd=f isft* “he (i.e., a mythological character or a demon?) guides roads for me in front of him and behind him, he loves good and hates evil” (*CT* 2, 138f, 139a).

In this example, it is unclear to whom the suffix pronoun *.f* refers in the quotation: “*mr=f m3^ct msd=f isft* “he loves good and hates evil”. Does it refer to the deceased or to a mythological figure? To date, no answer has been securely identified. If this suffix refers to a mythological figure, then *m3^ct* “good” and *isft* “evil” may refer to “reward” and “punishment” respectively, in accordance with what the authors already referred to above. As such, this mythological character’s role is limited to rewarding good, not to punishing evil. If so, the translation: “who loves the reward and hates the punishment” may be adopted as an epithet of this mythological being, considering the aforementioned evidence for using *m3^ct* and *isft* to mean “reward” and “punishment”.

Until then, it would be a truism to state that the deceased has been transmitted by this mythological personality; this is because they both had love of good and hate of evil. A love for good and a hatred of evil motivated the deceased to follow and be guided along certain paths in the netherworld. This desire for peaceful passage through the afterlife meant adhering to ethical and moral principles *m3^ct* by looking for good and rejecting evil *isft*.

Many kings demonstrated a commitment to similar ethical principles, including Rameses II, who was given the epithet *mry m3ꜥt [ms]dy isf[t]* “who loves good and hates evil” (KRI 2, 314.13; KRIT 2, 154). Rameses VII received the same epithet in a slightly different structure: *p3 [mrr.w] m3ꜥt [p3] msdd[.w] isft* “who loves good and hates evil” (Pap. Turin no. 1892 = KRI 6, 390.14-15). This ethical standpoint continued as a royal epithet until the Graeco-Roman period (Chassinat 1932: VII, 91, 21).

However, this royal epithet refers more to political aspects than purely ethical behaviours. Specifically, it portrays the king as the one who established order (which he loves) and eradicated chaos (which he hates). Textual evidence indicates that this presentation of the goddess *M3ꜥt* by the king to the gods dates back to the early Middle Kingdom (Teeter 1997: 81). When the king presented a statuette of the goddess *M3ꜥt* as an offering to the gods (Barguet 1962: pls. 214-215; Helck 1968: pls. 22, 36, 71, 78), this act showed his role as the founder of justice and divine order, ensuring the stability of the universe (Sauneron & Yoyotte 1959: 77-88).

There is no doubt that these epithets, reflecting a moral value, put all the king’s deeds under a cover of justice and rejected evils away from his character. As a king, his ethical authority watches over good-doers and punishes evildoers. One of the meanings of *isft* mentioned in the defining paragraph is “a mess”, highlighting its role as counter-functional to social and political orders, two of *m3ꜥt* meanings.

If that was the intended meaning, the idea presented here is more consistently linked to policy than the king’s ethical authority or the idea of ethics and morality. Antithesis denoted entrenching the king’s political role as an organiser of land, a protector of the order and a warrior of chaos against the disruption of order and the absence of indispensable organisation to render a viable and prosperous country of Egypt. The task of the king on earth was to realise *m3ꜥt*, i.e., its true function and value and drive out *isft* (as an opposite of *m3ꜥt*). This antithesis between *m3ꜥt* and *isft* had a political necessity. This is because it tended to be a manifestation of the required order and unity. Assmann said: “the Egyptians believed that there could be no rule without rebellion, just as there could be no light without darkness. As the sun cannot do without rays of devastating power, so the king cannot forgo symbolic and real force, the power and duty to kill” (Assmann 2002, 149-150).

SEMI-ANTITHESIS EXAMPLES

A semi-antithesis refers to the case in which two contrasting ideas are expressed through the context, rather than opposing words, i.e., it is an indirect opposite which the context suggests. The next paragraphs are examples referring to this semi-antithesis.

The next two paragraphs include two quotes, each replacing the verb *mri* (“love”) with the verb *iri* (“do/act”), while the first also replaces *bwt* with *šw*. These quotations not only fail to offer a different perspective but also emphasise our interpretation more strongly. This is because doing good reinforces the concept of loving good, and describing individuals as free of evil provides further confirmation of their aversion to it. An example can be found in the maxims of Ptahhotep, who describes the ideal father (i.e., the educator) with the phrase: *ir.w r m3ꜥt šw m grg* “Acting with truth, he is free of falsehood” (Žábás 1956: 532, 16.2; Lichtheim 1973: Vol.1, 73).

This quote suggests that teaching morality directly requires the educator to have a sufficiently coherent understanding of the essential principles of morality (Mackenzie 1909: 402). These principles, as gathered from the previous quote, consist of two parallel morals: first, the educator’s behaviour (i.e., their outer self) must align with truth; second, their inner self must be free from all forms of untruth.

The act of showing loving of good and hating of evil was the deceased concern; this act may be done by the deceased himself or by his priests. Therefore, he praised himself:

iri [=i] m3^ct bwt pw isft “I’m who does good, hates evil” (CT 6, 165e, f.).

And so did his priests showing his ethical character: *iw iri.n N m3^ct bwt=f isft, n m3=f is*

“The deceased N did what is good because he hates evil, and has never seen it” (CT 7, 2 f, g; FCT, v. 3, 1, Spell 789).

After all, doing good is a progressive point that focused on maximising the good which the deceased had done. Therefore, the priests put their effort into emphasising the deceased’s dedication to *m3^ct* “good” and his separation from “evils”.

One of the major expressions used in place of *mri.i m3^ct* is the expression: *ink m3^ct*. This is proved by an official from the period of Amenhotep III who said of himself: |¹⁷...*ink m3^ct bwt=f isfwt* “I am a good man; his hatred is evil” (BM. Stela no. 826= *Urk* 4, 1947.3; Varille 1942, 27, 29).

Without doubt, this expression can be seen as the amalgam between personality and loving good, i.e., referring to a characteristic pattern of loving justice. Therefore, it can be considered a semi-antithesis to what follows.

May and Ay, two officials from the reign of Akhenaten, praised themselves in a boastful manner: *di=f m3^ct m ht.i, bwt (=i) grg* “He (i.e., the king) put justice (or good, in general) in my body, (my) abomination is lying” (BAR 2, 410 § 993-994; 413 § 1002; Norman 1908, 5, Pl. 2; *Urk* 4, 1999.7).

The king Tutankhamun claimed the same ethical principle: |⁵...*m3^ct mnti[m st] di=f wn grg m bwt t3 mi sp=f tpy* “Who established justice, and made lying hateful all over the country” (*Urk* 4, 2026.18-19; Fontaine 1981, 156).

These two quotes replaced *mri* with *di* and *mnti* = “put”, “establish” respectively, and replaced *isft* “evil” with *grg* “lying”. These adaptations are compatible with justice which Akhenaten had adopted. Not only does this adoption confirm the king’s love of good and hate of evil, but it also refers to him as an executor of these ethics, through the verbs *di* and *mnti*. Not only are they asserting loving good but doing it also.

As for using *grg* instead of *isft*, it is known that both of them are opposite to *m3^ct* (*Wb* 1, 129.9; *Wb* 5, 189.2). This antithesis between *grg* and *m3^ct* can be seen as an antithesis between “truth” and “lying”. *grg* can also be translated by “the committed wrong” (*Wb* 5, 189.5) leading to the previously mentioned antithesis of “good” and “evil”.

In light of the above, ancient Egyptians didn’t miss any opportunity to show that they followed good moral standards, especially justice, and had rejected evil or any of its specific vices such as lying. No idea has been more consistently linked to ethics and morality than the idea of justice which they believed would guarantee them a good position in the after world. This principle was widely known during Akhenaten’s reign that marked all Egyptian fields with this royal principle which may be called “master morality”.

This “master morality” is an echo of a divine morality which User-Hat, the sculptor of King Seti I, referred to in an invocation to the gods: |²...i |³ *ntrw imyw T3-wr nbw n^hw tpy (.w) t3, msddyw grg isfwt n^htyw m m3^ct* “|²... O |² gods who are in Thinite, the lords of life upon earth, who hate lies and evils (*isfwt*), who live upon good” (KRI 1, 361.5-6. Kitchen translated *n^htyw m m3^ct* “who love upon right” (KRITA 1, 296).

Apparently, the context of this earlier divine epithet assumes that the phrase *n^htyw m m3^ct* put in place of *mri.sn m3^ct*. So, it would be a truism to state that the epithet: *n^htyw m m3^ct* is in a semi-antithetical relation context with what precedes it. God’s life rooted in goodness is a great manifestation of his love for good.

During Rameses II's reign, the ethical principle became prevalent, as demonstrated by the king or by his officials. For instance, Bakenkhonsw ensured his moral attitude: *hr[=i] hr m3ct[t], msdd=i isfwt* "I'm happy concerning good, I hate evil" (KRI 3, 297.11-12; Lalouette 1984, 185).

Similarly, the chief priest of Anuris, Anhor-mes, confirmed this attitude by stating: *ink rš hr mdt m3ct bwt (=i) sdm grg* "I rejoice in speaking truth; I hate hearing lies" (Ockinga & Al-Masri 1988; pls. 26-27). Rameses III quoted the same sentence as Bakenkhonsw on a statue in Karnak: *hr=i hr m3ct, msdd=i isfwt* (Cairo, CGC. 42155= KRI 3, 297.11-12; KRIT 3, 213).

According to the Egyptian religious conception, both man's happiness and his virtue are guaranteed if he lives in harmony with *m3ct* (Bleeker 1966, 85). The sentences embodied in the earlier quote in order to act the function of *mri.i m3ct*. For the author, these sentences are in a semi-antithetical relation context with what follows it. This relationship puts in a context built on a disjunction and contrast relation, so we cannot understand the feeling of hate without loving good. Rameses' III states about himself: |³⁷... *ib=i hr m3ct r^c-nb, bwt=i isft* "my heart carries good daily, my abomination is evil" (KRI 5, 42.12-13). This quote used the sentence *ib=i hr m3ct* to act the function of *mri.i m3ct*, due to the impact of love on the heart.

In Book of the Dead, the deceased says: *bwt=i pw isfwt, nn m3.n=i sy, nk3y=i m m3ct, nḥ=i im=s* "my abominations are evils, I have no regard for it, I believe in good and I live by it" (Budge 1898 184, Chapter 85).

nk3y=i m m3ct "I believe in good" replaces *mri=i m3ct*. Linguistically, *nk3y=i m m3ct* cannot be seen as an antithetical relation with *bwt=i pw isfwt*. However, the author believes that the meaning assigned to *nk3y* is not quite certain, and it must carry a stronger colouring here than the literal translation "to think". Allen proposed to translate *nk3y=i m m3ct* as "I ponder on truth" (Allen 1974, 72; Web 2, 345.13; Hannig 2005, 462.16670-1). However, this verb may be understood as combining belief in good with love for it, as those who have faith in good surely love it.

CONCLUSION

It appears that the ancient Egyptians employed the antithesis between "loving good" and "hating evil" to emphasise the contrast between these concepts, thereby promoting resistance against evil, vices, and disorder as ideal goals. This approach also served to amplify the focus on loving good, right order, and other virtuous ideals.

In some instances, the context itself, rather than the explicit opposition of words, was used to convey the antithesis between loving good and hating evil. This has been termed "semi-antithesis." To achieve this, the ancient Egyptians used various substitutions, such as replacing *mri N m3ct* with phrases like *iri N m3ct, di N m3ct, ink m3ct, hr N hr m3ct, ink rš hr mdt m3ct, ib N hr m3ct, nk3y N m m3ct, nḥyw m m3ct, nd m3ct mnti m st*. All these replacements likely derived from *mri N m3ct*. The notion of "hating evil" remained constant. This is likely because the repudiation of evil was a deeply ingrained idea in their worldview. Hating evil deeds implied that such individuals were far removed from any wrongdoing. In fact, these replacements for loving good place significant emphasis on this principle, as they consistently reinforce, through their context, the ideals of loving good and hating evil.

Moreover, showing as much as possible ethical behaviour was a motivating force for individuals, whether kings or deceased, to illustrate the feeling of love toward good, whereas showing a feeling of hate toward evil manifested the rejection of unethical conduct and moral culpability. The divine love for good-doers and the divine hatred for evildoers were seen as consequences of their ethical and unethical conduct. In other words, hatred was a response to vices, while vices served as strong motives for the emergence of hatred.

Finally, the notion of loving good and hating evil can be understood as synonymous with loving truth and hating lying, which represents the antithesis of *mꜣt*. This antithesis was a cornerstone of ancient Egyptian ethics. This moral duality was intrinsic to the concept of *mꜣt* and played a critical role in both personal declarations and royal ideology. By using hieroglyphic expressions and contextual contrasts, the Egyptians created a nuanced ethical framework that promoted virtue and order while actively rejecting evil and chaos. The enduring legacy of these ideals is a testament to the sophistication of ancient Egyptian moral philosophy and its profound influence on their civilisation's governance, culture, and religion.

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التناقض بين محبة الخير وكرهية الشر في مصر القديمة

الملخص

تستقصي هذه الورقة البحثية علاقة الحب والكرهية بمفهومَي الخير والشر، وبمعنى آخر المقابلة بين حب الخير وكرهية الشر؛ وذلك للوقوف على الأسباب المنطقية والوظيفية التي أنتجت هذه العلاقة التضادية، فضلاً عن استجلاء أثر هذه العلاقة على دلالة المعنى المقصود وإنتاج دلالات سياقية أخرى. ويتفق المؤلفان مع الدراسات السابقة التي خلصت إلى أن الجمع بين حب الخير (رمزاً للقبول) وكرهية الشر (رمزاً للرفض) كان له ضرورة سياسية، وضرورة اجتماعية، وضرورة أخلاقية، وجوانب دينية. وتجدر الإشارة إلى أن الهدف الرئيسي من هذا البحث هو استكشاف كيف يمكن لهذه العلاقة (التناقض وشبه التناقض)، أن تنتج ظلالاً وتكافؤات سياقية ودلالية لم يتم (إلى حد علم الباحثين) لفت الانتباه إليها من قبل.

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بيانات المقال

تاريخ المقال

تم الاستلام في ١٤ ابريل ٢٠٢٤

تم استلام النسخة المنقحة في ٢٣ اكتوبر ٢٠٢٤

تم قبول البحث في ٢٩ اكتوبر ٢٠٢٤

متاح على الإنترنت في ١٠ فبراير ٢٠٢٥

الكلمات الدالة

التناقض؛ الحب؛ الكراهية،

الخير؛ الشر؛ مصر القديمة