

## Divine Order and Devotion: Egyptian Maat and Roman Pietas in Ovid's Byblis and Iphis

Nithya Rajkumar – December 5, 2024 – 2 Extension Days Used

The *Metamorphoses* was an epic narrative written by the Roman poet Ovid in 8 CE that compiles the mythology of his time in many short tales, spanning from the creation of the world to Julius Ceasar's assassination. The short myths following individual characters contrast, support, and parallel each other throughout the poem. From the prominent themes arising from these comparisons, the *Metamorphoses* can reveal the societal and social virtues of 8 CE Rome, especially Ovid's understanding of those virtues. The parallel stories of Byblis and Iphis within Ovid's epic stand out in their illustration of Roman Pietas, but more so since Iphis was an Egyptian girl who shows devotion to Egyptian deities. The question arises from the presence of Egyptian gods of why Ovid would choose to incorporate gods from a different religion, especially when his views of duty towards family, country, and gods were characterized by Roman moral standards. However, regarding social conventions and devotion towards gods, the Egyptian standard of Maat was very similar to Roman Pietas, making including Egyptian religion in the *Metamorphoses* an agreeable yet creative choice to Ovid. In the parallel stories of Byblis and Iphis which demonstrated the importance of adhering to social conventions and giving up control in devotion to the gods, Ovid decided to incorporate the Egyptian gods as well as the Roman Pantheon due to the appeal of Egyptian religion, whose concept of Maat is very similar to Ovid's understanding of Roman Pietas.

The story of Byblis in *Metamorphoses* was a cautionary myth in which Ovid warns readers how feeling incestuous love and attempting to control the situation without placing faith in the gods to assist with the problem leads to destruction. Byblis was a girl who fell in love with

her brother Caunus, and she realized that her desire was not socially acceptable, shown by her exclamations, “Away, perverted passion! Let me love My brother with a proper sister’s love!”<sup>1</sup> However, her awareness did not stop her from pursuing Caunus and thinking about him constantly. Ovid clearly portrayed Byblis’s desire as wrong, but the girl’s greater fault was acting on her feelings. According to the myth, she decided to write a letter to her brother confessing her love, even justifying herself by thinking “Yet the gods have loved their sisters; yes, indeed! Why, Saturn married Ops, his kin by blood”<sup>2</sup>. By taking matters into her own hands and impulsively writing the letter, Byblis failed to show devotion to the gods. She believed she could handle the situation better than being devoted to the gods ever could, and even used the actions of the gods to justify her own desires, as if she were akin to the divine. To Ovid, Byblis’s arrogant belief that she had power over her situation was the evilest act because after the letter was sent, Caunus rejected her harshly. Byblis left for the forests, and “wasting by her weeping all away, Byblis became a spring.”<sup>3</sup> Ovid giving Byblis a tragic end details how her own actions of desiring her brother in the wrong way and her lack of devotion to the gods led to her demise.

The lesson of Byblis’s tale, the importance of conforming to societal expectations of relationships and devotion, represents Ovid’s understanding of Roman Pietas, the moral standard of Rome that was prevalent in 8 CE. Ovid’s writing suggests Byblis’s tale is an interpretation of Roman Pietas when he introduces the story: “The tale of Byblis shows that girls should love As law allows”<sup>4</sup>. This story was about the broader social concept, or law, of Roman Pietas that Ovid agreed with. Historian Mircea Eliade describes Roman Pietas as “not only scrupulous observance of the rites but also respect for the natural relationships (i.e., relationships in conformity with the

---

<sup>1</sup> A. D. Melville, trans., *Ovid Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> Melville, *Ovid Metamorphoses*. p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> Melville, *Ovid Metamorphoses*. p. 219.

<sup>4</sup> Melville, *Ovid Metamorphoses*. p. 213.

norm) among human beings... Together with *pietas* toward the gods, there is *pietas* toward the members of the groups to which one belongs, towards the city, and, finally, towards all human beings.”<sup>5</sup> In Ovid’s myth, Byblis failed to observe the rules of Roman Pietas when she didn’t give up control in devotion to the gods and when she did not show respect for the ‘natural relationships’ that were meant to be between human beings, like her incestuous love for Caunus. Byblis’s actions were wrong in the context of Roman Pietas and the eyes of Ovid, making this story a lesson about the importance of adhering to the moral standard.

Unlike Byblis who didn’t observe the rules of Roman Pietas, Iphis gave up control to the Egyptian gods in devotion to solve her own socially unacceptable love, and by doing so, the gods reward her by resolving the impossible situation. According to the tale, Iphis was a young girl raised as a boy by her mother due to her father’s belief that males were less of a burden. However, when it was time for Iphis to get married, she met her bride, Ianthe, and fell in love. Unlike Byblis, Iphis realized that her love for another girl was unacceptable, and she thought to herself, “So the birds mate, so every animal; A female never fires a female’s love... See now the longed-for time Is come, the day to link our love dawns bright; Ianthe shall be mine... It cannot be!”<sup>6</sup> Ovid wrote Iphis as not attempting to justify her passions and as lacking the ego Byblis had in the previous story, clearly contrasting the superior morality of Iphis against Byblis. In addition, instead of going through with the wedding with Ianthe, she and her mother prayed, “O Isis, gracious lady of the lands of Mareotis... bring me thy help, And heal, oh heal, my fear... That my daughter sees The light of day, that I am not chastised, Is thine, thy gift and guidance. Show us both Thy pity! Save us with thy power!”<sup>7</sup> Iphis chose not to go through with

---

<sup>5</sup> Willard R. Trask, trans. Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas, Vol. 2* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 116.

<sup>6</sup> Melville, *Ovid Metamorphoses*. p. 222-223.

<sup>7</sup> Melville, *Ovid Metamorphoses*. p. 223.

the wedding because it was a wrongful act, and instead, she gave up control over her situation to show devotion. Because she prayed and made offerings unlike Byblis, the Egyptian gods blessed Iphis by turning her into a man, making her marriage possible; “These offerings, vowed by Iphis as a maid, By Iphis, now a man, are gladly paid.”<sup>8</sup> Ovid gave the Egyptian Iphis a happy ending with Ianthe in contrast to Byblis’s death, showing that this tale demonstrates how people are blessed by gods when the moral standards of society are observed.

Iphis is a character by Ovid who follows the Egyptian religion and is representative of Maat, the moral standard of Ancient Egypt, whose structure is similar to Roman Pietas. Maat refers to the “Goddess of truth, justice, and cosmic order”<sup>9</sup> who is central to the weighing of the heart ceremony in The Book of Going Forth by Day, also known as the Egyptian Book of the Dead, which determines whether a person moves on to the afterlife. In addition to being the goddess of Justice, Maat also refers to the moral framework of Ancient Egyptian society; “Maat is right order in nature and society, as established by the act of creation and hence means according to context, what is right, what is correct, law, order, justice and truth.”<sup>10</sup> The concept of Maat gives importance to law, and this structure dictating right and wrong is similar to the Roman Pietas described in the story of Byblis, when Ovid writes “As the law allows”<sup>11</sup> when talking about Byblis’s unacceptable love. Both religions have a societal structure regarding morality in place, making Maat and Pietas similar. In addition, whether a person followed the law of Maat impacts their lives in the future, because “a man's success in life appears as proof of his frictionless integration in (this divine) order. Likewise, his opposition to it and his practice of

---

<sup>8</sup> Melville, *Ovid Metamorphoses*. p. 224.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond O. Faulkner trans., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead, The Book of Going Forth by Day* (Chronicle Books LLC, 2015) p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> Maulana Karenga, *Maat, the Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/imsa/reader.action?docID=182887>. p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Melville, *Ovid Metamorphoses*. p. 213.

isfet, i.e., wrongdoing, evil, disorder, etc., the opposite of Maat, insures his destruction.”<sup>12</sup> The punishments for not following Maat are harrowing and take place after the person has died; “These fates can be summarized in the expression ‘to die a second death,’ or become nonexistent, thus losing all hope of eternal life.”<sup>13</sup> Because of their belief in the afterlife and of punishment after death, the Ancient Egyptians had to observe the rules of Maat in their mortal lives. People being rewarded and punished for whether they follow societal expectations was an idea found in Ovid’s interpretation of Roman Pietas as well, especially when Byblis died for not showing devotion to the Gods and Iphis lived for praying instead of pursuing her impossible love. Both religions describe the consequences of not following their respective moral standards, making Maat and Roman Pietas very similar structures of morality. The two concepts are akin because they dictate what is right and what is wrong and because incentives were given to those who followed the law in both Roman religion and Egyptian Religion.

Both the Ancient Egyptian concept of Maat and Roman Pietas similarly dictate a person’s duty towards others and the gods, and the tenets of Maat often mirror Ovid’s understanding of morality in his stories of Iphis and Byblis. *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* describes Egyptian morality through the Declarations of Innocence, which lists the claims that deceased souls must make to prove their morality and enter the afterlife. The rules regarding duty towards the gods are demonstrated by the text when souls must claim, “O He-who-Prosper-the-Common-People who came forth from Asyut, I have not cursed a god.”<sup>14</sup> Subjects of both Ancient Egyptian and Roman religions must respect and show devotion towards the gods, making the concept of Maat and Roman Pietas in both cultures very similar in that aspect. This interpretation of devotion

---

<sup>12</sup> Karenga, *Maat, the Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics*. p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Faulkner, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead, The Book of Going Forth by Day*. p. 164.

<sup>14</sup> Faulkner, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead, The Book of Going Forth by Day*. Plate 31-B.

towards the gods is like Ovid's interpretation of Roman Pietas in the story of Byblis, where the existence of the character's passions and the refusal to give those passions up was an insult to the Gods, leading to her demise. The *Egyptian Book of the Dead* also mentions the importance of following rules about desire, when souls must claim, "O He-who-Sees-what-he-has-brought who came forth from the House of Min, I have not (wrongly) copulated."<sup>15</sup> Maat regulates the relationships between people, and desires between individuals are shown to have restrictions within the *Book of the Dead*. Ovid also believed in restrictions for passions, and his interpretation of Roman Pietas regarding relationships was demonstrated in his parallel stories where incestuous and homosexual love were portrayed as evil. The nature of devotion towards the gods and relationships between humans is vital in both Roman and Egyptian society, and the two cultures have very similar beliefs about that nature, making the concept of Maat very similar to Ovid's understanding of Roman Pietas.

Due to the similarity of the structures and tenets of Ancient Egypt's Maat and Roman Pietas, the Egyptian religion was very appealing to a lot of Romans including Ovid; the inclusion of Egyptian gods in a Roman story would not be heretical due to the similarity of beliefs, but the addition would also be creative and appreciated by readers. Maat first exited the bounds of Egypt during the time of the Greeks in the form of the Cult of Serapis. The religion was "the most civilized of all the "barbarian" religions: It preserved enough of the exotic to tickle the curiosity of the Greeks, but not enough to wound their delicate sense of moderation."<sup>16</sup> For this same reason, the religion spread to Rome around the age of Sulla (138 BC to 78 BC - before Ovid's time)<sup>17</sup>. Romans like Ovid would have had previous exposure to Egyptian religion due to the

---

<sup>15</sup> Faulkner, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead, The Book of Going Forth by Day*. Plate 31-A.

<sup>16</sup> Stewart Perowne, *Roman Mythology* (Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1969), p. 90-91.

<sup>17</sup> Perowne, *Roman Mythology*. p. 91.

Cult of Serapis. Because Egypt's Maat was very similar to Roman Pietas, Ovid would have agreed with the tenets of Maat enough to be fascinated with the Egyptian religion and gods. Writing Iphis as a girl who prayed to Egyptian deities would have been a unique inclusion to his *Metamorphoses*, allowing Ovid to explore more creative characters and themes outside of the Roman religion. In addition, audiences and readers would not have been insulted by the presence of beliefs other than their own due to the similarity of Maat and Roman Pietas, the latter of which affected the worldview of the average Ancient Roman citizen. This similarity is why Ovid decided to incorporate both the Egyptian and Roman gods into his parallel stories of Byblis and Iphis.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a complex collection of stories that ebb, flow, and change. The epic poem is further complicated by the fact that one story contains Egyptian Deities though it appears in a set having to do with Roman Pietas, the Ancient Roman standard of morality. This addition is not impossible, however, because the concept of Maat represented by the Egyptian Iphis is very similar to the standard of morality Ovid puts forth in Byblis's story about Roman Pietas. Both concepts were foundational in the lives of their respective followers, and certain actions defined as wrongdoings in the *Book of Going Forth by Day* are also evil according to Ovid's interpretation of Roman Pietas found in his *Metamorphoses*. In addition, Egyptian religion was not confined to Egypt; it had reached Rome shortly before Ovid's birth. Ovid would have had exposure to Egyptian religion, and since Maat and Roman Pietas were very similar, he would have felt comfortable writing about Egyptian deities in the stories of Iphis and Byblis, stories that the world continues to read to this day.