



**THE FOUR GOOD DEEDS OF RA:
MAATIAN MORAL NOTIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

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THE DEEP thinking of our ancestors about ethical issues of being human in the world is nowhere more evident or important than the text in the Book of Vindication (or Coffin Texts) in the *Husia* titled “The Four Good Deeds of Ra”. In this text, the Creator, Ra, cites Four Good Deeds which he performed at the dawn of creation in order to create conditions which ensure human dignity, well-being and flourishing. They are divine endowments which carry with them associated rights and serve as ground for expanded concepts of the human person and of the rights or just claims humans have on society and in relation to others. Thus, this text serves as a significant ancient African source for modern discourse and advocacy in pursuit and protection of human rights.

Ra says of his First Good Deed, “I created the four winds so that every person might breathe in his own time and place.” The divine creation of the four winds so that humans might breathe in their own time and place is a metaphor for granting the breath of life or giving life itself. It is a divine endowment of life which is inclusive of all persons and reaches thru time and space, regardless of social or biological attributes, and irrespective of the era, place or circumstances in which one lives, as the use of the word (*hau*—time/place) suggests. With this divine endowment of life comes the right to life, reaffirming life’s divine character, sacredness and dignity-bearing nature, and establishing authoritative ground for respect of the human person and human life. Thus, there are prohibitions in the sacred texts against killing officially and unofficially.

Concerning his Second Good Deed, Ra says: “I created the great flood so that the

humble might benefit from it like the great.” The great flood is to be read here as a metaphor for the sustenance of life, for the Nile flood provided the basis for Egypt’s good harvests and agricultural abundance. This Good Deed, then, is the divine endowment of the sustenance of life and the associated right to the necessities of life, i.e., the goods and resources of the world so that one may live a life of dignity, well-being and flourishing regardless of one’s social status. Especially relevant to social justice concerns is that it is a right beyond class and power, for the text specifically states that the blessing or divine gift of the sustenance of life was given so that the humble or poor and low-ranking (*huru*) might benefit (*sekhem*) from it like the great or the high-ranking. This principle prefigures and anticipates what is called the second and third generation of human rights which have evolved in the international human rights covenants since the 1970s and which stress egalitarian distribution of critical goods and services and shared resources of the world.

The Creator, Ra, says of his Third Good Deed, “I made every person like his or her fellow and I did not command them to do evil. It was their own hearts and minds that caused them to disobey that which I said, i.e., “practice Maat”. This declaration contains a dual divine endowment. The first part of it is the endowment of human equality derived from the phrase that everyone was made by the Creator like his or her fellow. The word used is “*senu*” which means both *fellow* and *equal*, thus, establishing the concept of human equality and carries within it not only the endowment of equality, but also the associated right of equal treatment. The divine positing of similarity and equality

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reinforces the idea of a common humanity through divine endowment. This concept of shared human essence and equal status and worth and the companion concepts of divinity and dignity are remarkable, not only by their emergence at such an early period in human history, but also in the modernity of their insight and claim.

The second part of this divine endowment suggests the granting of free will in that humans are given the choice to follow the command of Maat (rightness) or choose the deviation of *isfet* (evil and wrongness). Attached to this, is the concept of being given an *ib*, a heart/mind for the exercise of moral conscience and competence, i.e., responsible choice and action. As supportive texts reveal, one may choose, but one must also bear moral responsibility for choosing wrongly, i.e., *isfet* over Maat. There is within Maatian moral anthropology a concept of the essential goodness of human nature rooted in the shared essence of the Creator, who created humans in His own image and endowed them with dignity. But one can lose one's way through various moral failures, including forgetting one's divine nature, lack of self-restraint or will, simply missing the mark or other weaknesses. However, humans must choose, for choosing is part of what it means to be human.

The Fourth Good Deed as stated by the Creator, Ra, is "I made the hearts of men and women so that they would not forget the Afterlife, and so that the sacred offerings might be made to the divine powers of the district." This is read in modern Maatian ethics as the divine endowment of moral and

spiritual consciousness and is linked to the endowment of free will. Thus, it carries within it the associated right to freedom of conscience. However, given one's status as a bearer of dignity and divinity it suggests, at the same time an obligation to live one's life in dignity-affirming and life-enhancing ways, i.e., in Maatian ways as reflective of one's nature. This is the meaning of sacred offerings to the Divine, for the central and paradigmatic offering, both in ritual and daily practice, is the offering of Maat in thought and practice.

In Maatian anthropology the heart/mind, *ib*, is the seat and source of moral and spiritual conscience and consciousness and is conceived in Kemetic ethical thought as a *divine presence (netcher)* within a person, which guides, instructs and causes one to achieve excellence and flourish in life. This concept is expressed in the autobiographical text of Intef which says: "It was my heart/mind that made me do this as it guided me. It was for me an excellent instructor and I did not disobey what it said.... I flourished greatly because of it. I excelled through what it caused me to do. I became excellent by its guidance. It is true what people say: It is a *divine presence* in every body; blessed is one whom it guides to the good way to act" (emphasis mine). Clearly, the Four Good Deeds of Ra offer us important insights into ancient African Maatian moral thinking and invites us to revisit original notions of human beings as possessors of dignity, divinity and rights, and explore the usefulness of Maatian teachings in both philosophic quests and social practice.

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