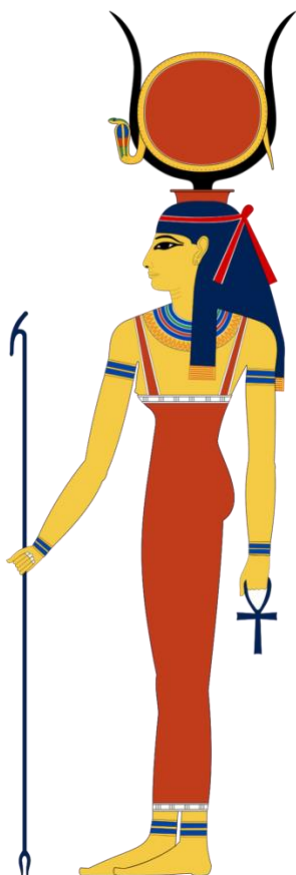


## The Five Gifts of Hathor: What Should Be Your Attitude to Gratitude?

When you think of Ancient Egypt, you probably think of pyramids, pharaohs, mummies and hieroglyphics. I see them as the inventors of the long-haul flight. They didn't have the technology to make planes, so they had to make do with their idea of the afterlife, but they had all the ingredients of international travel.

They put a lot of effort into packing everything they would need for the journey - into tombs rather than suitcases. They had guidebooks for the destination, "Books of the Dead". These gave you handy phrases, in this case for pleading with the forty-two judges of the next world, such as, "Hail, Her-f-ha-f, who comest forth from thy cavern, I have made none to weep." They had to pass nervously through security, the wolf-headed god Anubis, who would weigh their heart to check it was lighter than a feather. I expect by the time they got to their hotel, they were too tired to unpack and just went straight to bed.

If an Ancient Egyptian's heart passed Anubis's test, it would be thanks to... gratitude. For the Ancient Egyptians, its opposite, ingratitude, not being thankful for what you had, was the first step down the slippery slope to a selection of sins. Like many complex civilisations, they placed a high value on peace and harmony. They thought ingratitude for what you had could lead to envy for what others had, which could lead to anger, to rebellion, to war. No more peace and harmony.



One religious rite to dissuade people from ingratitude and encourage gratefulness was "The Five Gifts of Hathor." Hathor, traditionally pictured with a fetching head-dress of cow horns and the sun, was the generous goddess of the sky, women, fertility, love and agriculture. When working in the fields, cutting the crops that were part of Hathor's bounty, an Ancient Egyptian labourer's left hand would always be in front of him or her, with the knife to cut the crop held in the right. So, worshippers were asked to look at their left hand, and think of the five things for which they were most grateful - one for each digit. Then whenever you saw your hand, you might be reminded of the things for which you were thankful.

I'm not encouraging you to worship Hathor. She's been left alone for fourteen centuries and is probably used to the quiet. But you can still do this as a secular (non-religious) exercise. Look at the digits - fingers and thumb - of your left hand and associate each one with one of the

five things for which you are most grateful. When I say “things” I don’t mean just objects that could be wrapped up as a birthday present. It could be some of the people in your life, or something you enjoy doing, or something about you yourself that makes you glad.

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It’s interesting to compare the things that people list as their “five gifts”. Why are people’s lists different? There are some less interesting, more obvious answers. If you have a dog and I don’t, I can’t be grateful for having a dog; or you might not like having a dog, and so not be grateful for it; or something might just not have made the top five that became your list. But what about something that two people both have and enjoy, but one feels grateful for it and not the other? Why might that be? What makes some people grateful about something that others are not?

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One thing that might make the difference is whether you even notice something enough to be grateful for it. If you take things to an extreme, you could be grateful for gravity, or that there’s air to breathe, or that a meteorite wiped out the dinosaurs and allowed our ancestors to evolve from tiny shrew-like creatures without being eaten. But there are other, more meaningful things that you might notice enough to be grateful for, or that you might “take for granted”: things you are so used to benefitting from like roads or supermarkets, that they are just “there”. To be grateful for something, must you know, or at least imagine, life without it?

That’s an exercise from the Stoic philosophers, such as Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. They would imagine not having something, or even voluntarily go without it, such as sometimes sleeping on the floor rather than a comfortable bed. They did this partly to toughen themselves up in case it happened for real, but also to appreciate more what they had, rather like the Five Gifts of Hathor. Have you ever been more grateful for something after a time without it? Is there anything you could give up for a while, in order to develop your ability to do without it, and your gratitude for when you get to enjoy it? Would there be any benefit to point in putting yourself through that?

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Back to our Ancient Egyptians, looking at their left hands as they grip the crop they are cutting and trying to count their blessings, while the sun beats on their bent backs. Something to know is that the crops they are cutting aren’t their crops, and the fields they are working in aren’t their fields.

Picture Egyptian society, appropriately enough, as a pyramid, with each block of stone representing one person (make it a solid pyramid). At the very top of society, you have the Pharaoh, master of everything he sees. Below him, are the royal family, then the nobles and high priests, then the wealthy landowners, then the merchants, then the skilled craftspeople and ultimately the unskilled labourers and slaves. As you go lower and lower, the power and wealth of each person gets smaller and smaller. But bigger and bigger grows the number of people in each layer, just as the narrow pinnacle of a pyramid is supported by the mass of stone beneath.

That hierarchical society, with lots of layers of power and money one on top of the other, is how nearly all civilisations have worked until quite recently. I say nearly all, because while we hear a lot about Egypt and Babylon and the Incas and the Aztecs, there was one early civilisation in the Indus valley where things appear to have been a lot flatter and more equal. But we don't read so much about them because they didn't build stone pyramids either.

Like many such societies, Ancient Egyptians placed a high value on harmony and balance – but

There's an argument that it was very convenient for the powerful people in Ancient Egyptian society that the working masses looked at their left hands and thought about what they had. If they had looked instead at the hand that held the knife and thought about what they didn't have, they might have been more inclined to rise up and claim a bigger share. Harmony and balance sound like very good things, but part of that balance was that one wealthy person could own as much as fifty, a hundred or ten thousand poor people.

Were the Five Gifts of Hathor just a clever way to encourage poor people to be content with their poverty so the rich could stay rich? Lots of religions and philosophies contain messages to be less concerned about money and possessions, which is great if it encourages people to be charitable and buy less pointless rubbish for themselves, but perhaps not so good if it encourages people to put up with an unfair situation.

For example, you could be a committed Christian and still feel queasy about one of the original verses from a famous hymn you might have sung in assembly. The hymn starts like this:

*All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful,  
The Lord God made them all.*

The hymn is a list of all the things we should be grateful for. But one of the later verses doesn't get sung so much these days:

*The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them, high and lowly,  
And ordered their estate.*

In other words, if you're poor/lowly, that's how God meant you to be, and it's all for the best, just like the "little flower that opens" and "the little bird that sings." The philosopher Karl Marx, author of "The Communist Manifesto", famously said of religion, "It is the opium of the people." – in other words, like a drug that made put up with the pain of a heartless world rather than trying to change it.

Of course, there are also many religious practices that are about looking after the poor, and religious leaders have sometimes been strong defenders of equality. Religions also tell us that everyone has a soul, and sometimes that everyone is equally important to God. When you balance it out, do you think religion makes people more equal, or less equal?

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Back to our Ancient Egyptian labourers again, who are getting cramp from waiting so long with their sickles raised. Imagine you were able to go back in time and advise them. Put aside the paradoxes of time travel, like setting off a long chain of consequences that ends with Liverpool being relegated from the Premier League. Would you tell them to practice The Five Gifts of Hathor, or to stop being grateful for what they had, and band together to get more of what they didn't have – money, land and power?

Should we ever say "no thanks" to gratitude?

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