

## NOTES ON LATE-EGYPTIAN PUNCTUATION

M. KOROSTOVSEV

Institute of the Peoples of Asia, Moscow

Egypt is a country many times mentioned in the pages of the Bible and judging by the biblical data on Egypt the authors of the Bible were well informed on the country of pharaohs. Therefore the topic "Egypt and the Bible"—a vast topic which contains many very different problems—attracted the interest not only of biblical archeologists, but as well the attention of professional Egyptologists. Since the beginning of Egyptology many books and articles were dedicated to these problems. But it is necessary to point out that they have a very different scientific value and the problems raised and examined in them are yet far from their final solution. There is no necessity to recall the long list of these books and articles. Nevertheless an excellent study published by a professional Egyptologist should be mentioned here.<sup>1</sup> Far less known are works dedicated to the difficult problem of the connections between Egyptian and Hebrew languages. The work of the Hebrew scholar A. S. Yahuda<sup>2</sup> has met a severe critic from such an authority as T. E. Peet.<sup>3</sup> The present article does not bear on studies of this type—it deals only with some points of Late-Egyptian syntax, without any comparison whatever with Hebrew.

It is well known that since the New Kingdom some Egyptian texts have red points which separate different groups of words from other groups of words or from single words. A. Erman explained these points as signs that separate verses in songs.<sup>4</sup> Another scientist concerned with the problem gives the following point of view:

"the circles of red points separating verses in poems written in hieratic since the New Kingdom were generally interpreted as signs

- 
1. Vergote, J., *Joseph en Egypte. Génèse Chap. 37-50 à la lumière des études égyptologiques récentes*, Louvain, 1959.
  2. Yahuda, A. S., *Die Sprache des Pentateuch in ihren Beziehungen zum Ägyptischen*, Berlin, 1929.
  3. JEA, 30 (1916), 157-160.
  4. A. Erman, *Neuägyptische Grammatik*, Leipzig, 1933, §56.

of punctuation. Some observers compared them to the medieval "puncta" in the medieval West. . . . They recall that the Greek "stygma" indicated at the same time the fall of the voice and its rest, a sort of pause or silence. One can presume that the red points of the Egyptian scribes, as those of the Coptic medieval manuscripts, had approximately the same significance: they indicated a computed silence (i.e., an implied rhyme) and a fall of voice (i.e., an implied melody)."<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly the explanation of A. Erman and H. Hickman is substantial and important and cannot be repudiated. But unfortunately it does not cover all known facts and therefore is insufficient. It is well known that we find red points in texts which are neither poems nor songs, a fact that is recognised by A. Erman himself.<sup>6</sup> Then what was the function of the red points in such texts? Undoubtedly the function of computed silence was utilised and this brings us to the notion of punctuation and A. Erman admits that in general the Egyptian punctuation corresponds to our feeling, but in certain cases it contradicts it. For instance:

- (1) *ntj m t3 c n sb3 • irm • f* "which were in school with him" Blinding of Truth, 5.2. This example is really very instructive: if the point after the preposition *irm.f* "with him" undoubtedly has the significance of a point (as the point which begins a new sentence), what significance has the point before *irm.f*? One can assume for this case, but not prove, that it is an error. But it would be imprudent to explain all cases of discrepancy between Egyptian and our modern punctuation by the carelessness of Egyptian scribes.

To my knowledge the sole Egyptologist, apart from A. Erman and H. Hickman, who has dwelt on the problem of Egyptian punctuation is N. Petrovsky from Leningrad.<sup>7</sup> The point of view of this author is different from the explanation of red points by A. Erman and H. Hickman. N. Petrovsky advances the following explanation: the red points are used to separate one syntagme from the other, they are syntagme points.<sup>8</sup> Now what is a syntagme? The discussion of this question would lead as far away

5. H. Hickman, *Musicologie pharaonique*. 1956, Kehl, Rhin. p. 71-72 (*Le problème de la notation musicale dans l'Egypte pharaonique*).

6. A. Erman, op. cit. §56.

7. N. Petrovsky in "Egyptology and Assyriology Studies presented to V. V. Struve", Leningrad, 1964 (in Russian), p. 117-126.

8. ib. p. 124-126.

from our direct problem because linguists (F. de Saussure, V. V. Vinogradov, etc.) are not unanimous in the definition of a syntagme or a sense-group. Thus the very interesting research of N. Petrovsky does not exclude other explanations. The present author advances a new interpretation of the red points though he has not examined in an exhaustive manner all the existing material (i.e., all manuscripts containing red points).

A brief survey of texts shows that red points separate simple clauses, verbal or non-verbal, from other simple clauses.

- (1) *iw • f hr sdr hnc t3j • f hmt m p3 grh* "he slept with his wife this night." Doomed Prince, 4.2. The sentence is between two red points.
- (2) *wn • in • sn hr whm • sn n hm • f* "they repeated them to his majesty", ib. 4.5. This sentence, like the preceding, stands between two points.
- (3) *wn • in hm • f wd3 snb hr hprw iw ib • f dw r c3t wrt* "then his majesty became exceeding sore at heart", ib. 4.5. Here is quoted the excellent translation of T. E. Peet.<sup>9</sup> This example is very instructive. The sentence *iw ib • f dw r c3t wrt* is formally an independent sentence, but from the semantic point of view it is a subordinate sentence. Such sentences can be called auxiliary clauses.<sup>10</sup> But the auxiliary sentence in question has another specific trait: it is an idiomatic expression explaining after the verb *hpr* "come into being"<sup>11</sup> what exactly comes. We find exactly the same use of the corresponding verb in Coptic.<sup>12</sup> Therefore this example does not break the rule according to which a simple sentence is situated between two points. In our case the sentence (3) is situated between points.
- (4) *hr ir m-ht hrw sw3 hr nn* "now when many days had gone by" ib. 4. 11—an evident subordinate clause of time, i.e., a

9. T. E. Peet, The Legend of the Capture of Joppa and the Story of the Foredoomed Prince, JEA, XI, 1925, p. 227.

10. Cf. A. H. Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, §182: "when a subordinate clause has nothing to distinguish it from a complete sentence except its meaning and syntactic function it is called a virtual subordinate clause."

11. A. Taulkner, A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian, Oxford, 1962, p. 188.

12. W. Till, Koptische Grammatik, Leipzig, 1955, p. 171; 283, etc.

simple clause. It starts immediately after a point which stands at the end of the preceding sentence and is also separated from the following main clause by a point.

- (5) *iw • f hr ph p3 ssd n t3 sri n p3 wr n N3h3rin* "he reached the window of the daughter of the chief of Naharin" ib. 6.6.
- (6) *p3i • k itf p3i* "thy father is this." Blinding of Truth, 5.98
- (7) *nim iirr k3mn tw* "who has blinded you?" ib. 5.7.
- (8) *mtw • k s3w n • i p3j ih* "keep for me this bull" ib. 7.5.
- (9) *mtw • w i3dt • i* "and they torment me" ib 5.7.

In all these cases we have simple sentences situated between two red points. Such examples could be easily augmented and they give ground to believe that the red point served to separate a simple sentence from another one. In this function the red point nearly corresponds to our full stop. More difficult to explain are red points that separate not simple sentences but groups of words or single words. There also arises the question as why two simple propositions introduced by *iw* as in 7.3 Pr. are not separated by a red point? Are these facts the manifestation of the well-known carelessness of the Egyptian scribes or are they to be explained otherwise?

Undoubtedly A. Erman was right in maintaining that the red points were marked after the text was written and very often in haste and without due attention.<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly certain cases are to be explained in this way. But it is impossible to admit the carelessness of scribes in each case where the use of a red point is in evident discrepancy with our feeling of punctuation. This problem demands an exhaustive research of the available punctuated texts and we have to bear in mind the fact that we find contradictory use of red points in analogous situations. Thus *oratio recta* is often separated by a red point from the preceding text—Pr. 4.8; 5.5-6; 5.10; 5.11; 5.14; 6.2; 6.8, etc., but in the same kind of text in a series of other cases it is not separated—Pr. 4.9; 5.2; 6.7; 6.10; 6.11; 6.12.

The circumstance is often separated from the previous parts of the sentence by a red point, thus in the same text of the

13. A. Erman, op. cit. §56.

Doomed Prince: 4.11; 6.6; 6.8; 7.14; 8.6; 8.7. In other passages as 8.9; 8.11; 7.12; 7.15 the red point is missing.

Relative clauses introduced by *ntj* are sometimes separated (7.10), sometimes not (4.4; 4.8).

In the passages 4.4 and 7.6 of the Doomed Prince we find the red points separating not clauses, but words:

- (10) *iw • sn hr dd • mwt • f n p3 mshw • m-n3-pw hf3w • mitt p3 iw* "they said he shall die either by the crocodile or the snake or the dog", Pr. 4.4; the English translation (of T. E. Peet) does not require here any punctuation, but the French translation of G. Lefebvre) does: "elles dirent: il perira par le crocodile ou par le serpent, ou encore par le chien".<sup>14</sup>
- (11) *twi wd • kwi n 3 s3j • p3 mshw. p3 hf3w. iw* "I am ordained to three fates, the crocodile, the snake or the dog" ib. f.6 (translation of T. E. Peet); "je suis promis à trois destins: le crocodile, le serpent, le chien" (translation of G. Lefebvre).

The comparison of the Late-Egyptian punctuation on one hand and the punctuation in the translation of these passages into English and French on the other hand shows a nearly exact correspondence: the only substantial difference is that in Late-Egyptian the sole sign of punctuation is the red point while in English and French stops, commas and colons are used.

- (12) *iw • f hr t3j 10n ckw • w<sup>c</sup> h<sup>cw</sup> • w<sup>c</sup> rdwj tiwt • w<sup>c</sup> hnj • w<sup>c</sup> sfđ* "he took 10 breads, a staff, a pair of sandals, a water-skin, a sword", Blinding of Truth; 7.1; "il prit dix pains, un laton, une paire de sandales, une outre, une épée (translation of G. Lefebvre). In this passage the red point functions clearly as a comma.

Very instructive from this point of view is the list from Anastasi III, 2.3-2.8 where are enumerated different sorts of food; each word denoting a sort of food is separated from the other by a red stop.

Now if we lay aside all cases where the red points though expected are missing and if we examine the cases where they are present we are bound to come to the following conclusion: red points are used:

- (1) As a stop to separate simple clauses.

---

14. G. Lefebvre, *Romans et contes égyptiens*, Paris, 1949, p. 118.

- (2) As commas before clauses of circumstance and relative clauses to separate these clauses from main clauses; to separate words enumerating different objects.
- (3) As colon before oratio recta.

This study does not pretend to be full and exhaustive and many cases where the red points are used have not been examined. But it is clear from the convergence of evidence that the red point fulfilled the functions of different signs of punctuation and not the sole function of our stop.

If the lack of red points in punctuated texts is easily explained by the lack of due attention by the scribes the apparent contradictory use of the red point is well explained by its polysemantic function.