Did ancient peoples of Egypt and the Near East really imagine themselves as facing the past, with the future behind them?

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Linguistic studies in Egyptology, Assyriology and Biblical Studies harbour a persistent trope in which the inhabitants of the Ancient Near East and Egypt are believed to have visualised the past as in front of them and the future as behind them. Analyses of the spatial conceptualisation of time in language have revealed that the opposite is true of almost all modern cultures, with speakers seeing themselves as facing the future and the past as behind their backs. To date, only one language (Aymara, from the Andes) has been proven to employ the reverse orientation in its main spatial metaphor of time. Cognitive Metaphor Theory provides two spatiotemporal models that use different reference points – Event-RP vs. Ego-RP, also called Sequence vs. Deictic – and are therefore mutually exclusive. In modern languages, including English, key spatiotemporal prepositions/adverbs from the former model can stray into the latter while retaining their original temporal meaning. Taken literally, the resulting expressions indicate that the speaker is facing the past, an orientation that happens to align with the powerful KNOWLEDGE IS VISION metaphor. Lexical drift of this kind is also likely to have occurred in Egyptian and the Semitic languages. Correcting for the “mixed metaphor” problem permits ancient speakers of Egyptian, Akkadian, Ugaritic, Hebrew, etc., to have adopted the same spatiotemporal orientation as most modern people. However, very recent studies (2014–18) show that informants with a cultural or religious focus on the past tend to visualise past events as “in front of them” irrespective of the spatiotemporal metaphors in their language. Such mappings seem to be static rather than dynamic. It is therefore inappropriate to envisage ancient thinkers as walking backwards into the future or as sitting with their backs toward the source of the “river of time;” rather, we should imagine them stopping frequently on life’s path in order to turn about-face and contemplate the (temporal) terrain already traversed by their society. Traditional societies whose aim is to return the world to its original perfection may even see the past and future as interchangeable.

1. Introduction

Natural languages make extensive use of space as a conceptual metaphor for time; all – or almost all1 – languages use at least some spatial terms as expressions of temporal relations. In Cognitive Metaphor Theory, the TIME IS SPACE metaphor corresponds to a mapping from a concrete, tangible source domain (space) to a conceptually more abstract target domain (time); we use the former to facilitate our comprehension of the latter.2

Every language allows its speakers to employ a range of spatiotemporal metaphors, and these need not be compatible with one another. In English, we are free to visualise time as forming a horizontal sequence (“the past is behind me, a bright future lies ahead”) and then to describe the consequences of a particular decision as “cascading down through the years,” as if time ran vertically from above (earlier) to below (later). Then we may observe that, “up to
now, we have done okay,” as if the past were below the present and the future above it. In Irish, you can specify “after lunch” with the phrase *indiaidh an lón,* (lit. “behind lunch”) which suggests a horizontal timeline, but to say “for the past year” you would use *le bliain anuas,* lit. “with the year downward,” where *anuas* suggests that time flows from above to below.3

The same discontinuities are found in ancient languages, such as classical Hebrew. Psalm 77:5 reads “I have considered the days of old (*miqqedem,* where the temporal term (*miqqedem*) corresponds to the positional “front” or compass point “East,”4 both of which suggest a horizontal distribution of time, yet in 1 Sam 30:25 we read “From that day upward (*omar*) he made it a statute and an ordinance for Israel,” as if time flowed vertically from below to above. Latin has two linear metaphorical schemes, a horizontal one where the future is in front of the author and the past behind him/her, and a vertical one where time flows from above to below.5 In addition, Latin can distinguish between linear and cyclical time.6 In Egyptian, the counterparts of these two concepts in eternity – *D.t* and *nHH* – respectively convey everlasting “completedness” and “ongoingness,” complementary categories that in turn reflect the aspect of the verb – the perfect(ive) and imperfective, respectively – in the language’s grammar.8 Latin is but one of many languages in which one can also conceive of time in wholly non-spatial terms, e.g., as a commodity or as money that can be “weighed” and “spent.”9 For the ancient Egyptians, time could also be envisaged a container that an individual was obliged to fill10 – much as we ourselves speak of “filling in time.”

Despite the availability of multiple conceptualisations of time in a language, most of its speakers/authors will tend to favour a particular model, which is usually one of the spatial metaphors. For modern English-speakers, the dominant timeline is horizontal11 – perhaps due to the prevalence of graphs and charts in the information stream of Western society, where time is invariably plotted linearly along the horizontal x-axis (in mathematical parlance, the “abscissa”).12 In terms of personal self-orientation, we overwhelmingly position ourselves within this horizontal timeline with our faces toward the future and our backs to the past13 – in this paper, we will investigate this model of time, and its verbal articulation, more closely in Section 3.

Interestingly, linguistic studies in Egyptology, Assyriology and Biblical Studies harbour a persistent trope in which the inhabitants of the Ancient Near East and Egypt are believed to have visualised themselves in precisely the opposite orientation, with the past in front of their faces and the future behind their backs. This view has attracted both fierce criticism and dogged support. Investigating it is an interdisciplinary endeavour that spans philology, linguistics, semantics, psychology and cognitive science. To some, the premise will be new; to others, an old chestnut. But even those already familiar with the terrain may be surprised by findings that have emerged only recently from the discipline of cognitive science, which shed new light on an old argument.

One would be forgiven for thinking that a paper focused on the use of prepositions and adverbs in ancient languages must necessarily be either uninteresting or incomprehensible, but – using the bare minimum of specialist jargon – I hope to show that there is a story here that is both thought-provoking and rewarding, and that the twists and turns of its plot are accessible to all.
2. Back to the future?

In a short but profound book titled *Idea into Image: Essays on Ancient Egyptian Thought*, Erik Hornung writes “In Egyptian linguistic usage the future is behind: it is what human beings, oriented toward the past, are as yet unable to see.” No doubt his view is motivated by the use of simple prepositions such as *hnt* (“in front of”) and compounds containing *bḥḥ* or *ḥḥt* (“front”) – such as *m-bḥḥ*, *m-ḥḥt*, *r-ḥḥt* and *ḥr-ḥḥt* – to mean both “in front of” (spatial) as well as “before” or “formerly” (temporal). Similarly, compound prepositions involving *sḥ* (“back;” spatial) – such as *ḥr-sḥ* – are used adverbially to denote “subsequently,” “later” or “afterward” (temporal).

A similar phenomenon occurs in the Semitic languages. In classical Hebrew, temporal adverbs meaning “formerly” are often formed from ספנים, *panim*, the noun for “face,” which in its spatial sense signifies “in front.” As anticipated in Section 1, an alternative is provided by מַדְמִין, * qedem*, which means both “in front” (spatial) as well as “of old” (temporal). Hans Walter Wolff commented in 1974 that, in the Hebrew bible, “we see a relationship of time that is different to the one familiar to us. It emerges even more clearly in a common Old Testament turn of speech. The Israelite sees former times as the reality before him, whereas we think that we have them behind us, as the past. Ps 143.5: I remember the days before me (*miqqedem*).” Diana Lipton, writing much more recently, shares this view:

I see Exod 33:23 as one of a number of biblical texts whose authors located the past in front of them, since they could see it, and the future behind them, since they could not see it. Our present-day conception of time is far from straightforward with regard to spatial orientation. Sometimes [...] we see the future ahead of us, [...] but on other occasions we speak of the future, say new generations, coming up behind. In Biblical Hebrew, a strong linguistic case can be made for claiming that the future was physically located behind. Meanings of the root word מַדְמִין [qdm] range from “original” and “early” through “past” and “ancient” to “before” and “in front of,” while meanings of the root מַדְמִין [ḥr] include “afterwards” and “end” (as in מְדוּר, “end of days”) alongside “behind” and “back.” [...] A similar perception of time seems to have operated in classical antiquity; the Septuagint’s [Greek] term for “back” in Exod 33:23 conveys the same spatial and temporal dimensions as the Hebrew – behind and future, respectively.

The concept has become popular in Christian ministry:

The Hebrew language has a peculiarity when it comes to the looking back at the past and facing the future – it has the two concepts switched up entirely. The word for yesterday, אחר, (*etmol*) is connected to the concept of being opposite to, or facing something. We are facing and looking directly at the past, not the future. Equally, the word for tomorrow, מחר, (*machar*) is connected to the concept of being behind or after. The future is behind our backs. We cannot see it. We have our back to the future, so to speak. We can see clearly what has happened in the past, and God wants us to do that. But we are forbidden from trying to see what’s coming.

Most support for the concept comes from biblical scholars; speakers of modern Hebrew tend to dispute the idea that their language orients them with their backs to the future.

In a book titled *The Mythic Mind: Essays on Cosmology and Religion in Ugaritic and Old Testament Literature*, Nicolas Wyatt explains that “The Ugaritic aḥr and its derivative forms [...] probably have a basically spatial sense, ‘behind’, which is used metaphorically in a
temporal sense, with reference to the future. [...] This is also the sense of 'ahar in Hebrew.”23 Later, he elaborates:24

The radical qdm may be defined as the spatial and temporal antonym of ahr. [...] The basic sense appears to mean ‘before the face’ [...] The metaphorical and temporal sense [is] ‘before’, that is, ‘past’, and often with a sense of ancientness, of primordiality [...] When the temporal senses of the terms qdm and ahr are used, it is with a nuance of facing back – or more accurately facing forwards – into the past, and of having the future behind the back. This is perhaps most powerfully illustrated in a relief on the wall of the Seti I temple at Abydos in Egypt. [...] Seti stands with his son (the future Ramses II) contemplating rows of cartouches of the kings of previous dynasties. The past is before them.”

In his chapter on Ugarit in the Handbook of Ancient Religions, Wyatt reprises the linguistic data and reiterates that “What this evidence indicates is that people ‘looked’ into the past, with the future an unknown quantity behind them.”25 In the Handbook of Ugaritic Studies, he extends the pattern to include cognate terms for front/past and back/future in Akkadian (qudmu and ahru, respectively) and for front/past in Arabic (qadam, qidm, qidam, etc.). He also widens the correspondences to include left vs. right and the cardinal points of the compass. He concludes that “The same pattern also obtains in other languages such as Sanskrit, and is probably widely attested.”26

Using Akkadian examples as his workhorse, Stefan Maul arrives at the same conclusion. “If we regard the Akkadian ... terms that designate ‘past’ and ‘future’... we make an astounding discovery. [...] F]or a Babylonian the past lay before him – it was something he ‘faced’; whereas that which was coming, the future [...] was something he regarded as behind him, as at his ‘back.’ In the mental world of our own modern society the exact opposite is, of course, the case.”27

As hinted above in the quotation from Diana Lipton, the very same claim can made for ancient Greek. “[T]he ancient Greeks regarded the past as what lay before them (prosso), the future as what lay behind (opisso), i.e. their mental orientation was towards the known, the traditional and the customary, unlike the modern ‘progressive’ outlook which tends to turn its back on the past and its face towards the future.”28

3. Looking forward to it

As anticipated in Section 1, the orientation just established for the ancient thinker – his/her face to the past and back to the future – is actually the opposite of the self-orientation shared by almost all people in the modern world.29 Cognitive scientists Núñez and Sweetser express it thus: “So far all documented languages [...] appear to share a spatial metaphor mapping future events onto spatial locations in front of Ego and past events onto locations behind Ego,” where by Ego they mean the thinker/speaker/author. It is certainly true that, in English, this is our dominant mode of thought: we put unpleasant past experiences behind us and try not to look back at them, preferring instead to look forward to a future in which the years ahead of us will (hopefully) prove kinder.

Psychomotor tests prove that this is not just an abstract convention, but that we do in fact visualise ourselves as facing the future. Ulrich et al. (2012) preface their German study by observing that “in languages worldwide, there is a strong tendency toward the use of the back–front axis where the future is mapped onto the front and the past onto the back.”30
Their experiments asked subjects to move a sliding control switch forward in response to future-related sentences and backward in response to past-related ones, and compared their response times with those from tests using the reverse directions. “From a psycholinguistic point of view, the back–front dimension is particularly relevant because almost all languages of the world associate future (past) with front (back). [...] Consistent with the notion of a back–front mental timeline, faster responses occurred for the past–back and future–front mapping than for the reverse mapping.”31 In other words, tests employing the future-in-front mapping were congruent with the subjects’ perceived self-orientation with respect to time. Other dynamic studies, including analyses of postural sway and gesture, “confirm the cognitive reality of front–back mappings [...] originally noted by linguists.”32

The future-in-front orientation draws strong support from its congruence with the ubiquitous life is a journey metaphor.33 Normally, we all walk forward with our eyes anticipating what lies ahead, i.e., in the future, while those features of the landscape that we have just passed slip behind us into (the near-homonym of) the past. In the modern world, the resulting metaphor – time is ego’s motion along a path – is considered to be universal, or very nearly so.34

4. A muddle of models

From a joint consideration of Sections 2 and 3, one might conclude that a personal orientation of past-in-front is a feature of ancient languages, or perhaps peculiar to Semitic and Afro-Asiatic languages. However, Martin Haspelmath has shown that this is emphatically not so. In From Space to Time: Temporal Adverbials in the World’s Languages, published in 1997, Haspelmath systematically explored the spatiotemporal mappings in a sample of 50 languages – including Hebrew and Arabic, although not Egyptian or Akkadian. “The cross-linguistic evidence overwhelmingly confirms the view that time is conceptualized in terms of space, more particularly in terms of the frontal axis. A large number of languages from a wide variety of families show this association either synchronically or diachronically. In almost all cases, the front is associated with ‘before’ and the back is associated with ‘after’.”35 In other words, “in front” corresponds to earlier times and past events, whereas “behind” represents later times and future events.

Since this is the same spatiotemporal mapping that we encountered in Section 1 for Egyptian, Akkadian, Hebrew, etc., it is clear that the past-in-front model is not just a feature of ancient languages, or a peculiarity of languages from Egypt and the Near East. Moreover, since Haspelmath’s past-in-front ordering of the linguistic timeline is the opposite of the future-in-front mappings attested for all languages in Section 3, we have some explaining to do.

The apparent conflict stems from the use of two mutually exclusive models whose incompatibility stems from the use of different temporal reference points. In the first model, commonly called Ego-Reference Point (Ego-RP),36 the thinker (“Ego”) provides the anchor-point with respect to which the spatial terms are employed. Future events advance toward Ego from the front (Fig. 1a) – or, equivalently, Ego moves forward towards future events (Fig. 1b)37 – whereas past events recede behind him/her. It is what is known as a deictic
**Fig. 1a.** Ego-RP model, “moving time” variant. Future events advance toward the thinker/viewer (“Ego”) from the front.

**Fig. 1b.** Ego-RP model, “moving Ego” variant. The thinker/viewer (“Ego”) moves forward towards future events.
In the second model, which we can call Event-Reference Point (Event-RP), the spatiotemporal terms describe the relationship between events on the timeline without reference to Ego – October is before November, bedtime is after dinner, etc. Some people call this Sequence-time (S-time), the “field-based” scheme, or the Time-RP model, but “Event-RP” is a more helpful name because the position of one event relative to another in the sequence is all that matters. In this model, sequential events may be likened to a flotilla of ships sailing in a single line, one after the other, proceeding from the future into the past. To grasp the concept, it may be easier at first to think of this as a side-to-side timeline rather than a front-back one; specifically, a left-equals-earlier, right-equals-later timeline for those whose language scripts are read from left to right (e.g. Indo-European languages; Fig. 1c) and the reverse of this for those whose scripts are read from right to left (e.g. Semitic languages). In this model, earlier events are in front of later ones, later events are behind earlier ones. In our maritime analogy, the front of each ship – in nautical parlance, the “fore” – arrives earlier than the rear end – the “aft” – does; the nautical terms (which preserve archaic English usage) are even congruent with the temporal adverbs “before” and “after,” respectively (Fig. 1c). Haspelmath’s analysis shows that the spatiotemporal terms “before” and “after” (and the equivalent terms in other languages, such as ante and post in Latin) derive their validity from the Event-RP model rather than the Ego-RP one.

Haspelmath’s finding stems from the fact that, in the Ego-RP model, “the observer moves from earlier moments to later moments and thus faces the future. [...] If the observer ‘looks ahead’ to a future event, say, his death, then situations that are earlier than his death are ‘in front’ of his death,” and thus “before” it (Fig. 2a). With regard to past situations, however, the Ego-RP model makes a different prediction: “If the observer ‘looks back’ to a past event, say, his birth, then situations that are earlier than his birth are ‘behind’ his birth,” and thus “after” it, while ones that are later than his birth will now be “before” it (Fig. 2b). But
Fig. 2a. In the Ego-RP model (Fig. 1a/b), Ego looks ahead to his impending injury in an explosion and subsequent death from those injuries. The explosion is “in front” of his death and thus before it.

Fig. 2b. In the Ego-RP model (Fig. 1a/b), Ego looks back to his birth and his later purchase of a motorcycle as a teenager. The motorcycle event is “in front” of his birth and thus “before” it, but in all languages one would say that the motorbike came after his birth.
Haspelmath’s study has shown that “anterior/posterior adpositions are never sensitive to the deictic [i.e., Ego-based] past/future distinction – there are no languages that invert their ‘before’ and ‘after’ adpositions in past situations.” Since these two spatiotemporal terms are independent of Ego, they necessarily derive from the Event-RP model.

To recapitulate: Haspelmath’s overall finding is that the spatiotemporal terms “before” and “after” (and the equivalent terms in other languages) derive their validity from the Event-RP model (Fig. 1c) rather than the Ego-RP one (Fig. 1a/b). This startling revelation means that it is inappropriate to interpret the past-in-front features embedded in spatiotemporal adverbs as indicating that the past is in front of Ego (the thinker, speaker or writer), as was done in Section 2; they merely indicate that earlier events are in front of later ones.47 The past is in front of the future, not in front of the thinker.

5. Tread warily!

The potential for confusion is exacerbated by the fact that different academics use identical technical terms to signify models that are mutually exclusive. For example, Haspelmath calls the Ego-RP model the “moving Ego” model and the Event-RP model the “moving time” model,48 whereas for Núñez and Sweetser the “moving Ego” and “moving time” models are both subtypes of the Ego-RP model – variants (anticipated in Section 4) that differ only in whether one considers Ego to be moving forward along the timeline, like a walker on a path (Fig. 1b), or stationary and allowing time to flow past him/her, like an island in a river (Fig. 1a).49 The confusion is compounded by Haspelmath’s attempt to distinguish between the Ego-RP and Event-RP models using examples that are all Ego-RP and that actually only distinguish between its sub-models in the sense of Núñez and Sweetser (e.g., “We’re approaching the end of the year” vs. “Noon crept up on us”).50

That the terrain remains treacherous may be inferred from the following excerpt, taken from a 2012 publication on lexical semantics in ancient Egyptian: “There is substantial cross-linguistic data to suggest that space and time are often expressed in similar ways, being based on a horizontal axis (Haspelmath 1997: 57), with the past usually behind and the future before a human being. This is certainly visible in the Egyptian compounds with ḥt that express relations of ‘in front/before.’”51 But these Egyptian compounds do not make visible the future-in-front orientation described in the first sentence of the quotation – they overwhelmingly refer to the past,52 and if they locate this temporal “before” in front of us, they indicate a past-in-front perspective. The incongruity is passed over without acknowledgement or explanation.53

Within the Semitic languages, there are complexities that serve as further traps for the unwary, extending even to the apparent inversion of both the positional and time-related meanings of a spatiotemporal term. Consider, for example, the Hebrew ṭin (maḥar, “behind” or “after,” from Section 2) with the definition “tomorrow,” “in time to come.”54 Paradoxically, the Assyrian (Akkadian) cognate maḥru conveys precisely the opposite spatial and temporal senses; it means “front, often of time, though always of former time, of old.”55 As we shall see later (Box A and Section 10), the Akkadian maḥar (from maḥărūm, “to
face,” “to confront”) also signifies a frontal position, with mahrum meaning “front.” Yet in Section 2 we saw that the ostensible roots – Hebrew ‘aḥar (‘hr), Ugaritic aḥr and Akkadian aḥru (Assyrian aḥrātu, aḥrātu) – all specify “back” and “future.”

6. “Mixed metaphors” in modern languages

As mentioned in Section 1, languages employ a range of spatiotemporal metaphors. These need not be compatible with one another, nor do they necessarily reflect the spatiotemporal orientation of a speaker/writer. It is easy to imagine that the key spatiotemporal terms in Event-RP statements (such as the prepositions from “January is before February” or “dinner will be after nightfall”) might stray from their original context and be applied unthinkingly – with retention of their original temporal meanings – in Ego-centred statements. Even if the speaker envisages him/herself as facing the future, the resulting “mixed metaphors” would, at face value, suggest the opposite. We see this happen in English when we speak of “the generations who have gone before us;” this Ego-RP statement refers to people of the past, but using the term “before us” (a borrowing from the Event-RP world) does not mean that we actually perceive the past to be in front of us. Neither does speaking of “the generations who will come after us” or “those coming up behind” mean that we must picture ourselves as facing away from the future. With a healthy dose of Orwellian double-think, we can speak of our “forebears” while localizing them mentally as our “hindbears.”

An analogous process can be demonstrated for other modern languages. In Irish, the phrase roimh Chríost means “before Christ.” Since it could mean either in front of Christ (as in “we will all be judged before Christ”) or earlier than Christ (as in “the last few centuries before Christ”), one could again argue that the ability to call our ancestors ár n-aithreacha romhainn, “Our fathers before us,” indicates a past-in-front orientation for the speaker. In French, the avant-garde were the troops in front of the main army, while avant Jésus-Christ indicates (like the Irish phrase) a time preceding that of Christ. Since the word denoting temporal “earlier” and spatial “in front of” is the same, one could again argue that the ability to call our predecessors ceux qui sont allés avant nous, “those who have gone before us,” betrays a past-in-front orientation for French speakers.

As foreshadowed in Section 4, many languages spoken today – tongues as diverse as German, Hungarian, Basque, Japanese, Chinese, Tamil, and Maori – use cognate terms for spatial “in front” and temporal “before,” or spatial “behind” and temporal “after,” with some doing both, so the phenomenon is widespread. The ease with which “mixed metaphor” examples can be found in English, Irish and French suggests that one could find similar diffusion of these spatiotemporal terms (with retention of their Event-RP temporal meanings) into Ego-RP statements in most or all of these other languages. At face value, sentences compromised by “lexical drift” of this kind would appear to show that speakers of these languages localise the past in front of them and the future behind them. And yet, as we saw in Section 3, speakers of all of these languages actually perceive themselves to have the reverse orientation.
Being independent of the speaker’s circumstances, the Event-RP model is likely to have cognitive primacy over the Ego-RP metaphor, and this is consistent with the direction of drift discussed so far. Although less common, there are also examples where Ego-RP terminology seems to have drifted into Event-RP statements. In Japanese and Marathi (one of the four main languages of India), certain phraseology can cause “in front” to mean “later” and “behind” to mean “earlier” in statements about sequential events, which of course is totally contrary to expectations. The phraseology in question seems to trigger an (undeclared) Ego-RP perspective, which prompts the use of Ego-based spatiotemporal terms in the Event-RP statement. In front/later mapping in Event-RP statements can also occur in the African languages Hausa and Wolof, where again they are thought to arise from covert introduction of an Ego-RP perspective.

7. “Mixed metaphors” in ancient languages

As we have seen in Section 6, spatiotemporal “mixed metaphors” are found across many languages, and the resulting hybrid-model sentences – sentences that mix incompatible temporal reference points – should not be taken at face value. Ancient languages, too, tend to use cognate terms for spatial “in front” and temporal “before,” or spatial “behind” and temporal “after.” Latin is one, as we can see even from Latin usages in English: ante does this sort of double duty in “antechamber” (the vestibule preceding the main room) and ante meridiem (a.m., the part of the day before noon), while post does it in “postscript” (an addition appended belatedly to the end of a text) and post meridiem (p.m., the part of the day after noon). In Section 2, we have seen that double duty of the spatiotemporal kind occurs in Egyptian, Hebrew, Ugaritic and Sanskrit. Just as with modern languages (Section 6), with ancient languages we need to beware of instances where spatiotemporal terms from Event-RP statements may have drifted into Ego-RP ones. Reflecting upon the Latin, Mark Liberman is quite correct when he says “I suspect that the temporal applications of ante and post to time came originally from thinking about a line of march of a group [our Event-RP], not the visual field of an individual [our Ego-RP].” Where Event-RP terms have drifted into definite or possible Ego-RP statements, such as first-person declarations, we need to refrain from taking the resulting “mixed metaphors” literally and reading them as pure Ego-RP statements. Specifically, as we have seen with modern languages, such statements cannot be used to assign a spatiotemporal orientation to the thinker/speaker/writer.

Egyptian-language statements that employ spatiotemporal prepositions or adverbs (Section 2) are for the most part straightforward Event-RP statements, such as sdm w° hr-s° sn.nw=f n rdl.t sdm hr(y)-p(°)r(w) r-h3t hr.y, “Each one is heard after his fellow, without one of low rank [being heard] before one of high rank,” or bn-iw-n3 g3 (r) hr pr m-s3=f° sp-2, “No other will come into existence after him ever again!” If we allow for lexical borrowing of temporal h3t- and s3-compounds (with their original temporal meanings) from the Event-RP model, an ostensibly Ego-RP statement such as spss.ki hr hm=f° hr pr.w m-h3t(=i), “I was promoted under his majesty more than those who were before (me),” need not suggest that its Old Kingdom author, Khentika-Pepi, actually considered his forerunners to be located in front of him.
Similarly, most Hebrew statements that include spatiotemporal prepositions or adverbs (Section 2) are straightforward Event-RP statements, such as the praise of King Josiah in 2 Kgs 23:25, “Before him (לפניו) there was no king like him [...] nor did any like him arise after him (ואחריו).” Lexical borrowing of panim-, qedem- and ʾaḥar-derived terms with their Event-RP temporal meanings into explicit or implied Ego-RP statements will result in “mixed metaphors” that should not be construed literally. Accordingly, the Teacher’s boast in Ecc 2:7-9, “I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me (לפני) in Jerusalem [...] So I became great and surpassed all who were before me (לפני) in Jerusalem” need not mean that he envisaged the former inhabitants of Jerusalem as being before his eyes. Likewise, in the prayer of Ez 9:10, “And now, our God, what shall we say after this (־זאת אחריו)?” we should not read Ezra’s question as “what shall we say behind now?” and conclude that his and his co-religionists’ backs must be set toward the future. Moreover, most temporal uses of qedem and its derivatives are probably not Ego-RP statements in the first place. Revisiting the quote from Ps 143:5 (Section 2), we find that miqqedem is not really the Ego-RP expression that Wolff proposes (i.e., “before me”) but rather an Event-RP one (“like beforetimes” or “as of old”). The same is true of other first-person statements containing qedem-based temporal relations, such as the lament in Job 29:2, “O that I were as in the months of old (בימים)!”

In being required to refrain from a literal reading of spatiotemporal “mixed metaphors,” we should remember that the same caveat applies to almost all metaphors and figures of speech. For instance, we are required to translate Egyptian idioms such as liʾ ib, lit. “to wash the heart,” non-literally in the sense of “venting one’s feelings,” and to render the semantic content of liʾ hr, lit. “to wash the face,” with “to exact vengeance.” If, in relation to a potentate, we are told that a man is hr mw=f, lit. “upon his water,” then we know that he is loyal to that leader, as opposed to floating in one of his irrigation canals. In Akkadian, if our subject is “carrying the face” of someone, then he or she is treating that person with forbearance, as opposed to having flayed their severed head. In Hebrew, YHWH’s self-description in Exod 34:6 as אפים ארך, lit. “long of nose,” must be rendered as “patient” or “slow to anger” if our translation is not to provoke well-deserved laughter. For idiosyncrasies related to plurality in these languages, where hyperliteral readings must again be avoided, see ahead to the final panel of Box A.

The examples in the previous paragraph show that, over time, phrases that originally were visually active metaphors become purely literal fixed phrases that are used automatically. Incongruous imagery is especially likely to be elided, so the cognitive dissonance inherent to spatiotemporal mixed metaphors such as “the generations who have gone before us” readily slips below the threshold of awareness. Accordingly, the last part of Khnumhotep II’s claim – “Greater were my monuments [...] than (those of) the ancestors, than the tombs which were made before me (hr-h3.t=i)” – may not have stimulated much spatial imagination on the part of the author or of the readers of his biography at Beni Hassan.

8. Why has the past-in-front concept proved so persuasive?

Since ostensible past-in-front-of-Ego statements in ancient Egyptian and classical Hebrew are relatively infrequent, and since their status as truly deictic statements is often less than
certain, one must wonder why the idea of a past-in-front self-orientation has proven so persistent in the scholarship of ancient languages.82

A strong incentive to read potential or actual “mixed metaphor” statements as the product of a genuine past-in-front-of-Ego orientation comes from the fact that placing the past before our eyes is consistent with the ubiquitous and powerful KNOWLEDGE IS VISION metaphor. We know what has happened but not what will happen, so there is an undeniable cogency to the idea that our faces are turned to the past, while the future creeps up on us from behind, unseen and unknown.83 This is the variant of the Ego-RP model that Núñez and Sweetser would call “moving time”(Section 5), since we are stationary while time flows past us (in this case, from behind) (Fig. 3a).

We can, of course, equally well imagine a “moving Ego” variant (Fig. 3b).84 As Leon Derczynski puts it, with modern languages in mind, “some have suggested that we travel through time facing backwards, because we can only see the past and not the future.”85 Brent Strawn attributes precisely the same concept to ancient Semites: “Hebrew conceptions of time seem oriented [...] with the speaker evidently facing the past, since ‘the past’ is קדם / qdm, a word related to what lies ‘before’ or ‘in front of,’ which means the speaker rows backward into ‘the future,’ which in Hebrew is related to אחר / ṭhr, “behind.”86 In an article titled “Walking Backwards into the Future,” Stefan Maul similarly credits the Akkadians: “While we [moderns] advance along a time-line that has us ‘facing the future,’ the Mesopotamians advanced along the same time-line but with their eyes fixed on the past. They moved, as it were, back-to-front – backing into the future.”87

Attribution of this “moving Ego” variant to classical Hebrew is especially popular in Christian ministry. The homiletic example quoted in Section 2 continues: “We have our back to the future [...] Like people walking backwards, we cannot see what we’re walking into.”88 Equally: “The Old Testament people teach us that the future is behind us and the past is in front of us. The Hebrew word for past means ‘in front of’ and the word for future means ‘behind.’ We have hope for the future because of God’s fidelity to us in the past. That’s how we move forward, with our eyes locked on God’s loving deeds in the past.”89

It is worth pointing out that we have already witnessed two appeals to the KNOWLEDGE IS VISION metaphor in in Section 2. One came from Erik Hornung: “In Egyptian linguistic usage the future is behind: it is what human beings, oriented toward the past, are as yet unable to see.”90 The other was from Diana Lipton, who – in respect of Hebrew – spoke of “biblical texts whose authors located the past in front of them, since they could see it, and the future behind them, since they could not see it.”

One may wonder whether any spatiotemporal terms reflect the idea of the unseen and unknown future being concealed behind Ego. Haspelmith notes that in some languages “behind” carries the additional sense of “hidden,” which makes logical sense in that a person cannot see things hidden behind obstacles or objects located behind their head.91 In Egyptian, however, it is not “behind” that carries the meaning of “hidden” or “unseen” but rather inn, the positional term that denotes the right-hand side and – by extension – Imn.t, the West.92
Fig. 3a. Past-in-front-of-Ego model, “moving time” variant. Future events advance toward and past the thinker/viewer (“Ego”) from behind, unseen and unknown, whereas past events are seen and known.

Fig. 3b. Past-in-front-of-Ego model, “moving Ego” variant. The thinker/viewer (“Ego”) travels backwards into the future, which is unseen and unknown, whereas past events are seen and known.
given that the canonical orientation for an ancient Egyptian was southward, facing toward the source of the life-giving Nile.95 And rather than \( \text{Imn.t} \) being the home of the “hidden” future, Egyptians always associated the West — where the sun “died” every evening — strongly with the realm of the dead, the netherworld inhabited by people of former times.96 Its ruler, the “Foremost of the Westerners” is equated with the past.97 “As for yesterday, that is Osiris.”98 There is little comfort here for anyone wishing to claim that Egyptians located the future behind them because it was hidden.

9. All just a terrible misunderstanding?

At this point, one might well suspect that the whole notion of ancient Egyptians and Near Easterners visualising the past as in front of them and the future as behind them is just a misunderstanding born of a frequent failure to identify the correct temporal reference point in their spatiotemporal expressions (Event-RP, rather than Ego-RP), a failure that encourages literal readings of “mixed metaphors” where the two models have been fused together.

This is certainly the view of Michael Streck, whose primary focus is Akkadian. Explaining, in 2016, the source of confusion in a manner analogous to Sections 6 & 7 above, he takes aim at Maul and others who attribute a past-in-front orientation to ancient Near Easterners:99 Unfortunately, the rich linguistic literature on the subject, ignored by these authors, makes it clear that this statement [i.e., the supposed past-in-front orientation] is based on a misunderstanding of the linguistic facts in several aspects, and therefore also the conclusions for a specific Mesopotamian or Ancient Near Eastern conception of time are untenable. This was already pointed out by several authors before [...] In a study ten years ago100 which aims to warn Ancient Near Eastern scholars against drawing naive conclusions from linguistic facts onto the minds of speakers of ancient languages, basing myself on two articles of Traugott, I again refer to parallels between Akkadian and Indo-European, but also to other languages such as Chinese, I refute the explanation of the phenomenon given by Wilcke, Maul, Selz and Archi, and I give instead the commonly accepted explanation in linguistic studies.

Later in the paper, Streck adds “In English, German and other languages, the time moving101 [i.e., Event-RP] metaphor and the ego-moving [i.e., Ego-RP] metaphor are not mutually exclusive, but are rather used side-by-side in different expressions. The same is true for Akkadian.” In conceptual terms, of course, the two models are mutually exclusive, but what Streck means is that speakers of many languages unthinkingly mix together the two incompatible metaphors, and that this is not just a modern phenomenon.

In passing, it is interesting to note that the same charge – of confusion between Event-RP and Ego-RP statements – has been levelled at scholars of East Asian languages. As Günter Radden writes:102 For example, a term like \text{FRONT} may refer to the deictic sphere lying in front of the observer [Ego-RP] or, as the head of a sequence [Event-RP], to a past point in time (Chin. day-front ‘a few days ago’). Since the same forms are used to mark different spatio-temporal arrangements, people, including scholars, sometimes confuse the opposing uses of ‘front’ and ‘back’ and hence are, for instance, led to believe that, for speakers of Chinese, the past is in front and the future is behind.
Clearly, attempts to exoticise certain societies with respect to time-perception on linguistic grounds are not limited to cultures of the distant past; similar claims have also been made for contemporary peoples of the Far East.

10. Why, then, are ancient future-in-front expressions so infrequent?

If the past-in-front-of-Ego orientation attributed to ancient Egyptians and Near Easterners is truly spurious, one might expect to find an abundance of figures of speech that indicate the reverse orientation. Expressions that are congruent with a speaker’s intrinsic temporal orientation are likely to be more effective, and therefore more frequent, than ones that seem to contradict it. This is the case in English, for example, where the expressions with an apparent past-in-front personal orientation, such as “the generations who have gone before us” and “those coming up behind” (Section 6), are outnumbered by expressions with a future-in-front orientation, such as “looking forward to next week” or “thinking back to his glory-days.”

An examination of spatiotemporal figures of speech in a representative corpus of texts for Egyptian and Hebrew – William K. Simpson’s The Literature of Ancient Egypt and the NRSV\textsuperscript{103} edition of the Hebrew bible, respectively – revealed surprisingly few expressions that correspond to explicit future-in-front mappings in the original language (Box A). These findings were supplemented by a possible Akkadian example found while searching through versions of the Epic of Gilgamesh (Box A). As proof that the author positioned the future in front of him, none of these figures of speech are entirely convincing. More frequently encountered in the exercise were LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphors (Box B),\textsuperscript{104,105} which imply a future-in-front orientation insofar as a traveller normally directs his or her gaze toward the path about to be traversed (Section 3). A third category involves expressions in which past events are considered to be gone, forgotten, and out of sight – and thus, by implication, behind (Box C). At best, however, examples from the last two categories provide only indirect evidence for the innate temporal orientation of their authors.

It is only in highly specialised publications on the topic of temporal prepositions and adverbs, written by experts in the relevant ancient languages, that a few definite examples of a future-in-front orientation (such as use of the spatial “in front” to denote a future event) emerge to view. For Egyptian, Camilla di Biase-Dyson cites just two examples: \textit{i wn hrw(.w) dy r-h3.t=t\text{`}n}, “Oh, what a day there is before you” and \textit{bw rh=k n m(w)t n 5nh p3 nt.y r-h3.t=k}, “You can’t tell whether life or death is that which lies before you.”\textsuperscript{106} The future-in-front-of-Ego meaning for \textit{h3.t}-compounds is very limited, being restricted grammatically to \textit{r-h3.t} and historically to the late New Kingdom.\textsuperscript{107} For Akkadian, Michael Streck can cite only one example of this type: \textit{n\text{"}n\text{"} mahr\text{"} t\text{"}an\text{"} taka li\text{"}m\text{"}},\textsuperscript{108} “May future (lit. in front (of me/us)) people listen to your praise.”\textsuperscript{109} This uses a term related to \textit{mah\text{"}r} in the example from Gilgamesh (Box A); on the semantic complexity of Akkadian \textit{mah\text{"}r} and \textit{ahl\text{"}r}, see Section 5. Note that the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary translates the same sentence as “May the people
### Egyptian

*Box A. Future is forward of Ego in figure of speech – few of these, most weak*

**Egyptian**

\[ hpr \ 3w \ hr \ m \ hw \ ib \ m \ w3 \ n \ n.t(y) \ t \ n \ iy.i.t, \]  “He who looks too far ahead will become disquieted, so do not dwell on what has not yet befallen.”

Uses 3w hr, “farsighted,” lit. “long of face,” where face = vision.

\[ lti.n=f \ m \ swh.t \ iw \ hr=f \ r=s \ dr \ msi.tw=f, \]  “While still in the egg, he [King Senwosret I] conquered, and his face was toward it since he was born.”

Story of the Eloquent Peasant.

\[ 3wy=i \ ib=i' \ n(n) \ r-h3.t, \]  “I directed my thoughts to turn back to the past,” lit. “I directed my thoughts to turn back in front.”

Attributed in the Famine Stela to King Djoser.

\[ iw \ mwt \ m-hr=i \ min, \]  “Death is before me today” [continues: “(Like) the healing of a sick man, Like going outside after illness.”]

Dispute of a Man with his Ba.

**Hebrew**

“The house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God, from that day forward.”

Ez 39:22. Uses הלאה, “[then] and onward/further/beyond.”

**Akkadian**

“He [Gilgamesh] will face a battle he knows not.”

Epic of Gilgamesh, Standard Babylonian version; Assyrian equivalent: “Thou didst affect him to go [...] to face an uncertain battle.” Statements use mahar, from mahārum: to face, to confront, to encounter, to withstand. Etymologically related to mahrum, “front,” rather than to pānum, “front.”

The plural of the latter – panū – provides the noun for “face” (cognate with the Hebrew panim, Sections 2 & 7), with related terms such as pana, pānum, panātu, panītu, etc. used to represent the past, formerly, earlier, etc. On the semantic complexity of Akkadian mahru and ahrū, see Section 5.

*Curious Plurals.* The Akkadian and Hebrew words for “face” are grammatically plural but semantically singular, perhaps in allusion to a person wearing different faces for different emotions. The Hebrew word for God, אדנה (Elohim), is also grammatically plural but is considered to be the “plural intensive” or “plural of excellence,” akin to the “royal we” in English. The Hebrew words מים (mayim) “water” and שמיים (shamayim) “sky,” are dual nouns, presumably a reflection of the cosmography of Gen 1:6 in which there are waters above and below the earth. The Hebrew toponym מצרים (Mizraim), “Egypt,” is also dual, in keeping with Egyptian self-identification; ancient Egyptians always considered their king to be the Uniter of the Two Lands (sm3-t3, wyr) of Upper and Lower Egypt. In the Egyptian language, some nouns that are conceptually singular carry plural determinatives; these “collective nouns” are usually transliterated and translated in the singular, e.g. mw, “water,” īrp, “wine;” mṛt, “sickness/disease;” ḫtp.t, “offering;” nbw, “gold.” Sometimes the plural is transliterated, e.g., nfr.w, “perfection,” especially if the plural suffix (.w) is explicit in the orthography, e.g. ḫtp.w, “peace;” nḥt.w, “victory/hostage.” Face, however, is grammatically singular, Hr.
**Box B. Explicit journey metaphors, implying forward equals future – many of these**

**Egyptian**

“The gaze of the steersman is directed forward, But the ship drifts of its own will.”¹²⁹
Tale of the Eloquent Peasant.

“A man who looks in front of himself does not stumble and fall.”¹³⁰
The Instruction of ‘Onchsheshonqy.

“The path of god is before all men. The troublemaker does not find it.”¹³¹
The Instruction of ‘Onchsheshonqy.

**Hebrew**

“Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. Keep straight the path of your feet, and all your ways will be sure.”¹³² Prov 4:25-26.

“Yet they [= your ancestors] did not obey or incline their ear, but, in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels, and looked backward rather than forward.”¹³³ Jer 7:24.

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**Box C. Yesterday is gone and forgotten / out of sight / behind**

**Egyptian**

“For a good disposition means being remembered, Even after years are past and gone.”¹³⁴
Teaching for King Merikare.

“When one fights on the field of struggle with the past forgotten...”¹³⁵
Teaching of King Amenemhet I.

“Whom can I trust today? There is no remembrance of the past.”¹³⁶
Dispute of a Man with his Ba.

“And his Majesty answered, ‘About what will come to pass, for today has (already) occurred and is past and gone.’”¹³⁷ Prophecies of Neferty.

**Hebrew**

“For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten.”¹³⁸ Ecc 2:16.

“Because you have forgotten me and cast me behind your back ...”¹³⁹ Ezek 23:35.

“Our name will be forgotten in time, and no one will remember our works.” Wis 2:4.
of the present (day) hear your praise,” so the phrase “people in front [of me/us]” can be construed as a spatial abstraction, without any sense of futurity.\textsuperscript{140}

Streck, who strenuously opposes the attribution of a past-in-front-of-Ego orientation to ancient Near Easterners (Section 9), admits the paucity of future-in-front figures of speech and then ventures an excuse. “Indeed, expressions like ‘the future is ahead of me’, ‘the past is behind me’ are practically not attested in Akkadian. However, the reason for this is most probably not that these expressions do not exist in Akkadian but simply that the nature of the textual record does not favour such expressions.”\textsuperscript{141} If correct, this circumstance is far from universal for ancient cultures and their textual legacies. As William Short demonstrates with copious Ego-RP examples, “one ‘looks backward’ (respicere) to past events in Latin […] and equally, one ‘looks forward’ (providere or prospicere) to future events.”\textsuperscript{142}

\textbf{11. Plot twist: Aymara speakers do face the past}

Aymara is an Amerindian language spoken in the Andean highlands of Bolivia, Peru, and Chile.\textsuperscript{143} Instead of the seemingly universal self-orientation in which the future is perceived to be in front of the thinker/speaker (“Ego”) (Section 3), linguistic and gestural data show that Aymara speakers have “a major static model of time wherein FUTURE IS BEHIND EGO and PAST IS IN FRONT OF EGO.”\textsuperscript{144}

As Núñez & Sweetser explain, “In Aymara, the basic word for FRONT (nayra, ‘eye/front/sight’) is also a basic expression meaning PAST, and the basic word for BACK (qhipa, ‘back/behind’) is a basic expression for FUTURE meaning.”\textsuperscript{145} However, Ego remains implicit, rather than overtly marked, in Aymara Ego-RP expressions; an Aymara speaker never specifies that it is the year “in front of me” or “in back of us.”\textsuperscript{146} It is for this reason that Núñez & Sweetser had to recruit co-gestural data, which showed graphically that these expressions are in fact deictically centred and function relative to the speaker’s present “now.”\textsuperscript{147} Aymara speakers also use Event-RP statements, and in such non-deictic relations the passage of time is indicated by left-to-right co-gestures;\textsuperscript{148} unlike Ego-RP relations, Event-RP ones may be dynamic.\textsuperscript{149} The Aymara language emphasises visual perception as a source of knowledge, and its speakers are required to distinguish – by grammar or inflection – events personally witnessed from reports that are hearsay.\textsuperscript{150} Due to the language’s unusual stress on personal knowledge, especially that gained through sight, Núñez & Sweetser hypothesise that an Aymara-speaker’s temporal self-orientation is based on the KNOWLEDGE IS VISION metaphor.\textsuperscript{151} The fact this static metaphor provides less elaborate inferential mappings between the source and target domain than does the TIME IS EGO’S MOTION ALONG A PATH metaphor may well account for its rarity worldwide.\textsuperscript{152} One of the missing correspondences in the KNOWLEDGE IS VISION metaphor relates to scale, an issue considered in the next paragraph.

Locations in front of an Aymara speaker and closer to him/her represent more recent times in the past, whereas locations in farther in front of him/her represent less recent times in the past.\textsuperscript{153} Kevin Moore agrees with Núñez & Sweetser that Aymara’s past-in-front-of-Ego orientation draws its point of view from the KNOWLEDGE IS VISION metaphor, but points out that the incremental mapping of ever less recent times onto increasingly farther distances in
front of Ego cannot be accounted for by a purely vision-based hypothesis. He therefore suggests that Aymara draws its spatiotemporal sense of scale from the sequence of events in the Event-RP model, where the past is indeed in front of the future and where distance in space corresponds to distance in time.\(^{154}\) The resulting hybrid, in which Ego projects him/herself into an Event-RP sequence so that he/she is facing in the same direction as the “flow of events” is captured graphically in Fig. 4. Núñez & Cooperrider seem to anticipate such a possibility from another direction when they say that the Event-RP model “inherently involves an external perspective and whether it permits an internal form is unknown (although recent experimental evidence suggests that this form can be enacted under specific circumstances, for example, when acoustic stimuli and non-spatial (verbal) responses are involved).”\(^{155}\)

Recently, a co-gestural analysis of Eastern Khanty, an indigenous language of Siberia, suggests that it too maps the past to in front of the speaker.\(^{156}\) There are also rumours that gestures in some West African languages indicate a past-in-front self-orientation,\(^{157}\) although an explanation dismissing some supposed examples in Wolof and Hausa has already been intimated in Section 6. Other, more exotic, mappings have also come to light, all of them from geographically restricted populations that follow a predominantly traditional lifestyle and have low levels of literacy.\(^{158}\) For example, among the Yupno of Papua New Guinea, whose homeland is situated on steep slopes, the past is construed as downhill and the future as uphill, and – like the paths in their territory – the timeline is not a straight line.\(^{159}\) Paman-speaking Australian Aborigines from Pormpuraaw, a remote Australian Aboriginal community in Cape York, Queensland, map Ego-RP time using an axis based on compass directions.\(^{160}\) As with Semitic languages (Section 1), the past is in the East and the future in the West, a mapping that is presumed to reflect the fact that the sun rises in the East (earlier time) and sets in the West (later time).\(^{161}\)

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**Fig. 4.** Ego projects himself/herself into the Event-RP sequence, oriented as if he/she were one of the events.\(^{162}\)
Naturally, discovery of the Aymara’s past-in-front self-orientation has encouraged those who would like to attribute the same perspective to ancient authors. Having discussed the Aymara situation, John Sanders writes in his 2016 book that “A few other languages, such as the cognate languages Ugaritic and Biblical Hebrew, also construe the future as behind the self. In both languages, achr means behind the physical body as well as the future while qdm means both before/in front of the body and the past. [...] The motivation for why these languages construe the future as behind the ego [...] is not yet understood.” Online, Edward Cook describes the published work on Aymara temporal self-orientation and comments: “It should be noted that Hebrew and Aramaic also have this perspective, to some extent. [...] This is not a complete survey of all the time-related words and expressions in Aramaic and Hebrew, but it’s enough to show that, cross-linguistically, Aymara is not alone.” The longstanding counter-argument that sees the supposed past-in-front-of-Ego orientation of Semitic languages as an accidental by-product of “mixed metaphors” (Section 7) – reiterated most recently and forcefully by Michael Streck (Section 9) – remains unacknowledged and unaddressed; presumably it is either unknown or unpalatable.

Unfortunately, co-gestural data are not available for ancient speakers of Egyptian, Akkadian, Ugaritic, or Hebrew. All we can say is that, as mentioned in Section 2, speakers of modern Hebrew tend to disagree with the suggestion that their language orients them with their backs to the future. In a 2013 review of spatial construals of time in current languages, Núñez & Cooperrider left the nature of the Ego-RP model for modern Hebrew unresolved; their table provided no entries for internal deictic time mapping or spatiotemporal metaphor, declaring for the latter that “to our knowledge, the phenomenon has not been documented systematically.” Interestingly, the two versions of horizontal spatiotemporal mapping for Hebrew speakers that have been documented have opposite polarity; one runs left to right, whereas the other runs right to left.

12. Traditionalism promotes a past-in-front personal orientation

In modern Arabic, as in European languages such as English and Spanish, the future is in front of the thinker/speaker and the back is behind him or her. But a recent study has revealed that speakers of Darija, a Moroccan dialect of modern Arabic, were likely to gesture and to complete a simulated Ego-RP task test (Fig. 5) using a past-in-front-of-Ego orientation – in opposition to the spatiotemporal metaphors in their language. In contrast, Spaniards – who formed the experimental control group – tended to gesture and complete the Ego-RP task test using the default mapping for the Western world, i.e., future-in-front-of-Ego. The study’s authors, de la Fuente et al., reconcile the difference as follows: “Compared with many Europeans and Americans, Moroccans tend to focus more on past times and older generations, they are more observant of ancient rituals, and they place more value on tradition (Mateo, 2010). Spaniards, by contrast, appear to have greater focus on the future, valuing economic development, globalization, and technological progress.” Indeed, in a subsequent questionnaire-based test of temporal focus, members of the Moroccan test group showed about twice as much empathy with past-focused statements (such as “The young people must
Fig. 5. The (simulated) Ego-RP task test. Test subjects were shown a cartoon character viewed from above, with a box in front of him and behind him. They read that yesterday this man went to visit a friend who liked plants, and that tomorrow he would be visiting a friend who likes animals. In the Spanish/Darija version, subjects were told to write the initial letter of the word for “plant” in the box that corresponded to past events and the initial letter of “animal” in the box that corresponded to future events; in the Chinese adaptation, the Chinese character for “plant” and “animal,” respectively, were to be written in the boxes. The order in which plants and animals were mentioned, and their pairings with “yesterday” and “tomorrow,” were counterbalanced across the test paper ensemble.167

preserve the traditions”) as did members of the Spanish control group.168 As might be expected, enthusiasm for future-focused statements was lower among the Moroccans than the Spaniards, although this difference was less pronounced.

A more fine-grained examination revealed that non-cultural parameters could also have a bearing on the outcome of the Ego-RP task test. Within a group (only the Spanish one was tested) there was a greater likelihood of a past-in-front self-orientation for older compared to younger subjects.169 This was explained on the basis that “Seniors [...] may focus more on the past because they are on the far side of the reminiscence bump (i.e., the period of years from approximately age 10 to 30 during which the most frequently recalled autobiographical events occur.”170 When a Temporal Focus Index (TFI) was calculated from the questionnaire-based test for individuals across the two groups (-1 = strong past focus, +1 = strong future focus), low TFI scores correlated strongly with a past-in-front outcome in the Ego-RP task test.171

Pre-test conditioning – sometimes called induction, priming or training – in which (mainly young) Spanish subjects were required by a writing exercise to focus on either their past or
their future, impacted the subjects’ temporal self-orientation. Specifically, in the Ego-RP task test, the past-in-front outcomes for the past-conditioned group (46%) were far higher than for the future-conditioned group (5%), with both differing from the frequency for an unconditioned cohort (14%). While the previous tests had only provided correlations, the conditioning test revealed a causal (and indeed dynamic) connection between a subject’s immediate temporal focus and their self-orientation in the Ego-RP task test.

Overall, de la Fuente et al. propose a temporal-focus hypothesis, in which “People’s implicit associations of “past” and “future” with “front” and “back” should depend on their temporal focus. That is, in people’s mental models, they should place in front of them whichever pole of the spacetime continuum they tend to “focus on” metaphorically – locating it where they could focus on it literally with their eyes if events in time were visible objects.” Their hypothesis is cleverly captured in the title of their paper, “When You Think About It, Your Past Is in Front of You.”

In a study published in 2018, Li & Cao adapted the simulated Ego-RP task test (Fig. 5) and temporal focus questionnaire developed by de la Fuente et al. for use in a Chinese context and used them to investigate the ability of religion – “a prominent layer of culture” – to influence temporal self-orientation. Buddhism is considered to be a past-focused religion because its adherents’ actions are profoundly influenced by belief in karma; accordingly, Buddhists “believe that the past practices cause the visible effects in the future and thus past is more important for them.” In contrast, Taoism is particularly concerned with the future: “immortality and transcendence are the critical components of Taoism (Girardot, 1988). Taoists [...] constantly devote themselves to pursuing immortality from the present to the future. Thus, the eternal life in the future appears to be more significant for Taoists than past experiences.” Although Taoism is both “traditional” and “future-focused,” it is expedient for our discussion to continue using “traditional” in its usual sense of “displaying attitudes and practices modelled upon the past;” any departures from this convention will be made explicit at the time.

In line with expectations from the temporal-focus hypothesis, in the Ego-RP task test, most of the Buddhist monks (65-73%) conceptualised the past as ahead of them and the future as behind them. The reverse was true for Taoist monks, of whom the majority (79-86%) conceptualised the future as ahead of them and the past as behind them. In the temporal focus questionnaire, Buddhists agreed more often with past-focused statements, whereas Taoists agreed more with future-focused ones, and responses from an atheist control group were evenly split between future- and past-focused statements. As with the Spanish/Darija study, low TFI scores correlated strongly with a past-in-front outcome in the Ego-RP task test.

A pre-test conditioning exercise was used to test whether a short exposure to Dipamkara (an iconic Buddha of the Past) or Maitreya (an iconic Buddha of the Future) influenced a Buddhist monk’s temporal self-orientation. In the Ego-RP task test, the past-in-front outcomes for the past-conditioned group (91%) were far higher than for the future-conditioned group (44%), with both differing from the frequency for an unconditioned cohort.
As with the Spanish/Darija study, the conditioning test revealed a causal and dynamic connection between a subject’s immediate temporal focus and their self-orientation in the Ego-RP task test. Religious conditioning was successful even with non-religious cohorts; in a group of atheists primed by watching video clips about Buddhism, 75% provided past-in-front responses to the Ego-RP task test, whereas in a group of atheists primed by watching video clips about Taoism, 85% provided future-in-front responses. The responses of a control group consisting of unprimed atheists were split equally between the two self-orientations.

13. Integrating the experimental data and revisiting the ancient world

If focusing on the past places it in front of the thinker (Section 12), then perhaps the reverse also holds true. We must therefore wonder if Aymara speakers’ self-orientation of past-in-front (Section 11) causes them to value the past more than the future. Experimental data from an unrelated cohort suggest that it should. Specifically, English-speakers who were trained to use spatiotemporal metaphors in which the future was projected behind the body (out of sight) and the past ahead of the body (within sight) considered past events to be more relevant than did a control group using the canonical future-in-front metaphors.

Equally, one could apply the causality in the opposite direction and propose that the past-in-front self-orientation of Aymara speakers is the consequence of them focusing on the past. Aymara society is very much a traditional one in which the past is prized over the future. For example, Rafael Núñez’s research group lists them among “more traditional, pre-industrial groups,” and the Conquistadors apparently considered them as shiftless – uninterested in progress or going “forward” (in the Spanish understanding of the metaphor). In fact, Núñez & Sweetser state directly that “Aymara speakers tend to speak more often and in more detail about the past than about the future. Indeed, often elderly Aymara speakers simply refused to talk about the future on the grounds that little or nothing sensible could be said about it.”

Similarly, the past-in-front-of-Ego orientation hinted at by gestural analysis of some Siberian and African languages (Section 11) may be due to the traditional nature of those societies and an associated preoccupation with the past.

Taken together, the two preceding paragraphs amount to a metaphorical chicken-and-egg conundrum; we cannot be sure whether Aymara-speakers’ past-in-front orientation causes them to privilege the past, or whether their traditionalism and fixation on the past causes them to see the past as in front of them. The situation is probably best viewed as a self-reinforcing positive feedback cycle. We should note that the KNOWLEDGE IS VISION metaphor – proposed earlier by Núñez & Sweetser as the basis of Aymara spatiotemporal mapping (Section 11) – has not been abandoned, as it is an integral component of the temporal-focus hypothesis. However, the new paradigm is broader and more comprehensive in scope.

Overall, it seems that the Aymara-speaking population’s dual preoccupation with the past and with vision underpins their past-in-front-of-Ego orientation, which in turn informs the dominant metaphor in their language. Although spatiotemporal metaphors need not reflect the mental orientation of a speaker/writer with respect to time (Sections 1 & 6, and above for
Darija-speakers),\textsuperscript{187} it is likely to be advantageous if the dominant Ego-RP metaphor in a language aligns with the habitual self-orientation of its speakers (as it does, for example, in English; Section 10). In cognitive terms, from congruence comes synergy. Since congruence is not unidirectional, the process is reciprocal: the spatiotemporal metaphor of past-in-front reinforces Aymara speakers’ temporal self-orientation, and this in turn consolidates the primacy of visual data and of the past in their thoughts.

Does this paradigm mean that – despite the refutation of grammar-based arguments from “mixed metaphors” (Sections 4, 7 & 9) – ancient thinkers could have subscribed to a past-in-front self-orientation after all? Presumably so, if their societies were traditional and focused on the past. Presciently, Nicolas Wyatt bolstered his grammar-inspired argument that speakers of ancient Semitic languages “saw the past as in front of them” by characterising these societies as traditional and focused on the past, as well as stressing the pre-eminence of vision and anticipating the role of religion in the process. Following a consideration of Ugaritic king-lists, in 2005 he wrote:\textsuperscript{188}

\begin{quote}
The experience of time expressed by means of an orientation into the past, towards memory and tradition as in the range of vision, and as vital for the present well-being of society, illustrates both a growing awareness of temporality, and also of its ancient roots in seeing (perhaps in dreams and visions). The idea that you can contemplate your past either in real vision, or in your mind’s eye, and determine your position in the world primarily with reference to such a concern, can readily be seen to have enormous intellectual and social implications. Tradition, conservatism, well-tried procedures, established patterns all show how a society feels its way into the future by way of its security in the past. Religion [...] is simply the epitome of such processes.
\end{quote}

It is to testing the accuracy of this portrayal of the Ancient Near Eastern mindset, and the extent to which it also applies to ancient Egypt, that we must now turn.

\section*{14. Traditionalism and ancient cultures}

Ancient societies that devoted extensive resources to monumentality – such as the Egyptians and Mesopotamians of the fourth to first millennia BCE – valued the past and the remembrance thereof. As Serena Love points out, “the Latin word for monument translates to mean ‘reminder,’” and the social motivation behind monumental architecture is memory.\textsuperscript{189} Nicolas Wyatt adds that “It is no accident that the etymological meaning of the Greek term for ‘truth’ (\textit{άληθεια}) means ‘not-forgetting’. Tradition is ‘true’, and theology is ‘true’ because it is traditional.”\textsuperscript{190} A nexus between tradition and religion in the ancient world should come as no surprise, given that we recently encountered religion as a sub-genre of traditionalism in the modern world (Section 12). But, in that encounter, we saw that some traditional religions are nevertheless future-focused. What of the religions of the Ancient Near East? Wyatt clearly sees them as preoccupied with the past, observing that:\textsuperscript{191}

\begin{quote}
it is above all in religious belief and practice, with its hallowing of tradition (the experienced and reconstructed or invented past), and repetition in ritual of established, normative patterns of behaviour, that we discern the formal impact of accumulated cultural experience on a society. The significance of the psychology to which this evidence witnesses is as follows: it is clear that memory of the past is a vital part in the life of a
\end{quote}
community. It is the past and the perpetuation of its paradigms and values which legitimizes the present. Theology, mythology and ritual are the means whereby this memory is reinforced by constant repetition, and the unknown future can therefore be engaged with confidence.

For the ancient Egyptians, Erik Hornung connects religion with the past, or – more accurately – connects the past with religion: “History is stylized but not falsified in ancient Egypt. It resembles religious worship in that it too is celebrated in firmly established rituals.” In this view of “history as religious celebration,” Jan Assmann explains that history consists of “quasi-ritual reproduction of basic ritual patterns” in which “the meaning-imparting illumination of mythic archetypes sheds light on any contemporary contingency.” Insofar as there is a temporal dimension to Egyptian religion, it is “mythic, by which is meant sacred tradition, ‘what is said about the gods,’ the presence of the divine in the cultural memory as set down in myths, names, genealogies and other forms of tradition.” In other words, the religious focus is overwhelmingly retrospective; all of its values are derived from the “mythic past.” Let us turn now to a consideration of the non-religious sphere, insofar as one can be discerned for the ancient inhabitants of Egypt and the Near East.

For most of pharaonic history, Egyptians looked to their past as both the inspiration and template for their civilization; in Anthony Loprieno’s words, “The past is a classical model to be emulated by the present, which is perceived as less prestigious.” As one facet of this preoccupation with the past, the language of the twelfth Dynasty – Middle Egyptian – lived on (alongside its vernacular successors) as the “classical” variety of Egyptian until the end of ancient Egyptian history; as another, “The sculpture, reliefs and painting of the twelfth Dynasty provide the models on which the academic training of Egyptian artists was focused up until the time of the Ptolemies.” In fact, archaism was an endemic feature of Egyptian culture from as early as the Old Kingdom. James Pritchard points out that “The word sebayit ‘teaching,’ came to be used by the Egyptians for ‘wisdom,’ because of their orientation toward the models of the past,” as seen for example in Ani’s exhortation to “Go daily towards the traditional path.” In an essay titled “Looking Back into the Future,” Dietrich Wildung speaks of the Egyptian kings’ perennial legitimation through a “reverential use of history.” (And, like Egypt’s concept of eternity, its understanding of history can also be characterised by analogy with grammatical verb forms.) In practical terms, the primary concern of individuals for the future beyond their own lifetimes seems to have been to ensure – within the means at their disposal – that their identities and achievements were preserved for posterity, accompanied by a mortuary cult to sustain them in the afterlife.

The commemoration of individuals and events for posterity was also a priority for the elites of the Ancient Near East. For example, the inscriptions on the statues of Gudea of Lagash (ca. 2150-2125 BCE) record the activities and accomplishments of his life. Moreover, the statues themselves were “a valid substitute for the person in perpetuity [...] to provide a form of immortality. [...] The portrait statues were animate substitutes for the person represented both during their own lifetime and long after.” Typically, the patrons of such statues desired both an eternal representation before the gods and an enduring legacy for future...
generations. Their concern for the future arose directly from their own valuing of the past and from a keen awareness that they themselves would soon be part of it.

Similar to the retention of Middle Egyptian for formal writing in Egypt, Standard Babylonian – the form of Akkadian spoken beginning of the second millennium BCE, and which even then was full of archaisms – continued as the “classic language” of Mesopotamian inscriptions throughout the first millennium BCE. Indeed, Sumerian – which had been the spoken language of Babylonia in the third millennium BCE – was retained for religious and scholarly writings over the same time-period. Archaic versions of cuneiform were regularly used to write royal inscriptions. Historical consciousness peaked in expression under rulers such as the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (r. ca. 668-627 BCE), who collected over 30,000 literary and scholarly tablets in his huge library at Nineveh. Another conspicuous individual was the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus (555-539 BCE), an arch-traditionalist whose excavations in the temple of the moon-god Nanna/Sin in Ur unearthed inscriptions made by a former EN-Priestess, Enanedu (ca. 1828 BCE), and by King Nebuchadnezzar I (1125-1104 BCE); Nabonidus used the recovered information to restore the temple and to revive its cult, even appointing his own daughter as EN-Priestess. Zainab Bahrani summarises the conservatism of the region well: “The ancient Mesopotamians were constantly concerned with the reverence and respect for the remains of the past, and Mesopotamia is the earliest place where we can study such deep historical consciousness through textual and archaeological evidence. We can even say that the reverence for the past and the concern with preservation of their ancient temples and cities was distinctive of Mesopotamian cultures.”

In the Hebrew bible, the word “remember” (root זכר) is used 234 times, mostly in exhortations to the people of Israel. The retrospective, traditionalist nature of Israelite society is evident in the instruction from the Song of Moses, Deut 32:7 “Remember the days of old, consider the years long past” and the almost antiphonal response of Ps 77:5 & 11 “I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago […] I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old.” Biblical scholars refer to “Israel’s reverence for its past.” This treasuring of the past was to become even more pronounced among early Jews, who displayed a “self-effacing reverence for their Biblical past.” In an article titled “Memory, Tradition, and the Construction of the Past in Ancient Israel,” Joseph Blenkinsopp provides the following commentary on the Passover festival (Ex 12:14): Passover is both a remembering and a re-enacting of a shared past. The Passover seder is couched in the plural – “we were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt” – but the individual participant is also invited to internalize the collectively experienced past: “In every generation one must look upon oneself as if one had in one’s own person come out of Egypt.” In the course of time every gesture performed and every item of food eaten during the ceremony is given its specific historical referent. There can be no clearer example of the pressure exerted by the past on the present. Passover is the prime example of a commemorative ritual.

The family focus of the seder meal provides a useful reminder that power-relationships in the Ancient Near East were largely patrimonial, i.e., the administrative structure was a society-wide extension of the reciprocal obligations inherent in the traditional household.
Accordingly, “house” is an emic category which reflects the structure of society at all levels (e.g., יִשְׂרָאֵל בית, “House of Israel,” Ps 135:19), within which individuals expressed friendship, trust or dependency in terms of (fictive) kinship. Patrimonial authority requires a belief in the innate value of familial traditions, including deference to patriarchal authority. Moreover, “the extension of the social group through time [...] is often expressed as the endurance of an eponymous ancestor’s household [e.g., דוד בית, “House of David,” 2 Sam 3:1]. This is reflected in reverence for deceased ancestors, who were thought to have some kind of ongoing participation in the life of their household.” Up to – and, in the case of Israel, including – the 1st millennium BCE, the Near East seems to have operated on the basis of patrimonial administration. Egyptian society, too, was strongly patrimonial, although from the late Middle Kingdom onward (i.e., after ca. 1850 BCE) an overlay of governmental bureaucracy (i.e., a territorially-based rational officialdom composed of officers appointed on job-related ability and skill) is increasingly evident.

Writing on the general culture of the Ancient Near East, J.D. Ray observes that “All the literate societies of the area needed to train an administrative class, and all probably approached the problem in much the same way: complex writing systems required long training, with emphasis on rote-learning and reverence for the past.” He identifies within this type of schooling, which was often temple-based, a “combination of tradition, didacticism, and repeatable sentiment.” Kenton L. Sparks, too, acknowledges “the strong momentum of tradition in ancient societies” of this region. Overall, it would seem that Nicolas Wyatt’s representation of Ancient Near Eastern cultures as traditional, conservative societies preoccupied with the past (Section 13) stands vindicated. In such societies, “The past provided the paradigms for religious and social behaviour: myth and tradition alike were ‘given’, and one observed and honoured patterns established in tradition, by the gods and the ancestors.”

15. “Mixed metaphors” revisited

From the foregoing (Sections 12-14), one may reasonably assume that the traditionalism and religious focus of ancient speakers would have inclined them to indulge in past-in-front-of-Ego interpretations of “mixed metaphors” (Section 7), much as was done by the scholars cited in Section 2.

For example, when Nebamun says of king Thutmose III sōn=f wi r wn=ī r-h3.t, “He made me greater than I was before,” he may in fact be thinking of his former days as physically r-h3.t – in front – of his eyes. Compounds such as m-h3.t and hr-h3.t are open to the same reading, so when Djehutyhotep says ḫ3.tyw-n iri.w m-h3.t [...] n k3i ih=sn nn iri.n=t, “The nomarchs who had acted before [...] , their hearts could not have planned this [thing] which I have done,” he may have been picturing these former leaders as spatially in front of him as well as temporally prior to him. Similarly, we now have licence to reimagine the examples of “mixed metaphors” discussed previously – the statements of Khentika-Pepi, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes, Ezra, and even the Psalmist and Job (Section 7) – in a mode where the past was in fact considered by the author to be visually in front of him.
Since the repeated use of past-in-front-of-Ego mappings enhances the importance of the past to the speaker (Section 13), the habitual privileging of this perspective by ancient Egyptians and Near Easterners in the interpretation of ambiguous metaphors would have served to strengthen the traditional and past-oriented nature of their culture. As with Aymara (Section 12), in this metaphorical chicken-and-egg situation we can discern the ingredients of a self-reinforcing positive feedback cycle.

16. The “past-scape” – a snap-shot, not a movie

The past-in-front personal orientation seems naturally to be a static model; even Aymara speakers – for whom it is the default model – do not seem to envision relative motion between Ego and the time-scape. Accordingly, the “past-scape” is better thought of as a static snap-shot rather than as a continuous movie, regardless of whether the latter consists (metaphorically) of the view from the window of a train in which the video-camera operator sits facing away from the direction of motion (Ego-RP, moving Ego), or the view from an island where the operator sits facing downstream and records objects as they float past in the river’s flow (Ego-RP, moving time).

From this, it follows that it is inappropriate to envisage the ancients as walking backwards into the future or as sitting with their backs toward the source of the “river of time” (Section 8). The latter option would be particularly incongruous for the Egyptians, whose canonical orientation in space was southward, so that their faces were turned toward the source of the Nile (Section 8). Rather, we should conceptualise ancient thinkers as pausing frequently on the forward-leading “path of life” and turning through 180° in order to place the past before their gaze. In so doing, they were able to contemplate the (temporal) terrain already traversed by their society, in fulfilment of their culture’s ongoing focus on the past and the traditions arising from it.

Of course, one cannot actually pause time, and therefore nobody can truly stop on the “journey of life.” But the construct promoted in this section is metaphorical, and metaphors tend to be imperfect or incomplete. A metaphorical source domain often has attributes that are not reflected by the target domain; as Núñez & Cooperrider explain, “humans do not map space and time onto each other in an exhaustive fashion, but rather recruit a limited subset of possible spatial experiences (e.g., forward motion along a path) for construing the full complement of temporal experiences.” Moreover, a source domain usually does not capture all aspects of the target domain. As John Sanders observes, “we typically use several sources for the same target since a single metaphor does not disclose all that can be thought about the target.”

Every metaphor and figure of speech involves a dash of poetic licence, and an excessively literal approach will cause the analogy to fail.

The “snap-shot” analogy is in fact congruent with spatiotemporal conceptualisation in languages of the modern world, whether Western or Eastern. Günter Radden has observed that “static types of spatio-temporal relations outnumber dynamic types and, among static relations, deictic [i.e., Ego-RP] types of spatio-temporal relations by far outnumber non-
deictic types.” In apparent disagreement with Núñez & Sweetser and Moore (Section 11) he adds that “[S]tatic deictic relations of time allow for more and more complex spatial arrangements than dynamic relations.”

17. The past is the future?

The retrospective gaze of the ancient Egyptian or Mesopotamian was probably quite alien to the modern sense of history. As Erik Hornung observes, “The Egyptians had no historiography as we know it, no objective narrative of the past. In their view the past was of interest only to the extent that it was also the present and could be the future. [...] In other words, working toward the future is actually striving toward the furthest imaginable point in the past: the moment when our world began.” The aim of the civilization was in fact “to restore to the world something of the perfection it enjoyed at the time of its origin.”

The Ancient Near East, being politically and culturally more diverse than Egypt and correspondingly more prone to strife and fragmentation, tended toward cosmogonies that were predicated on divine conflict. However, there wereexceptions. Like the Egyptian origin-myths, the cosmogony of ancient Israel (Gen 1-11) was not impelled by divine conflict and it posited, at the outset, a perfect creation. Did the Israelites therefore see the ideal future as a return to an ideal past, and might signs of such past/future equivalence even be embedded in their language? There is a grammatical construction in Biblical Hebrew in which a prefixed waw – used as a consecutive conjunction – causes the meaning of the verb forms that we normally translate using the past and future tenses to be exchanged; in a surprising about-face, the imperfect now indicates the past and the perfect indicates the future. Despite this linguistic curiosity and an awareness that history was inclined to repeat itself, ancient Israelites were unlikely to have seen the past and future as interchangeable. Rather, they studied the past to learn about YHWH’s attributes, demands and self-imposed covenants in order to predict the future in the form of prophecy. This was “revelation by means of history.” The lesson of time was relatively straightforward. When sinful kings ruled in Jerusalem, they were punished and experienced military setbacks; when righteous kings reigned and the people were faithful to the God of Israel, the kingdom prospered and expanded.

With the human world as the creation of angry or in-fighting gods, one might expect the inhabitants of ancient Ugarit or Babylonia to have been less likely to want to return it to its primal state, and thus to equate the future with the past. Accordingly, many scholars might settle for saying of the Ancient Near East that “insofar as one might speak of a goal in history, it was the establishment of a definitive, lasting kingship.” This aspiration was of course shared by the Egyptians, for whom it was an interim goal, but there the teleological overlap might end. For the Mesopotamians, like the Israelites, “It was possible, and even likely, that history would repeat itself,” but for the former “the purposes of the gods were indiscernible. [...] There was ignorance concerning where history was going (if anywhere), and the inscrutable acts of the gods were only faintly divulged by the readable effects in the omens.”
Other scholars, however, do claim for Mesopotamia what Hornung claims for Egypt. There is general agreement that Ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies “described not only the beginning of things, but paradigmatic events that could be reenacted over and over.”

Indeed, the belief was that these events needed to be re-enacted repeatedly in ritual form because “th[e] creation, or the order of the cosmos, is fragile and has to be reestablished periodically in the face of recurring dangers,” just as “for the Egyptians, th[e] creation was not a onetime occurrence; it needed continual repetition and regeneration.” Stefan Maul extends this line of thinking to its logical conclusion. For him, “the focus of Mesopotamian culture is on the past, and thus ultimately on the primordial point of all being,” with the intention that the world should be returned to this Urpunkt. For example, Maul’s view of the excavation and restoration of ancient temples by kings such as Nabonidus (Section 14) is that it reflects the Mesopotamian notion of each thing in the world being allocated its own fixed, unshakeable and eternal place. This divinely willed but historically altered place was to be restored with the reconstruction of the old temple. Myths that have grown up around Babylonian temples recount how these were not built by human hands but were erected by the gods themselves as part of the work of creation at the beginning of time. Restoration of the temple according to the undistorted divine plan was intended by the Babylonian kings to transport both the state and its subjects back to their original, pristine, hallowed beginnings. Hence, the search of Babylonians and Assyrians for “antiquity” emerges as a striving after the unsullied original order of a “distant yore,” to which the gods themselves had imparted form through the act of its creation. Mesopotamian culture was ever focused on the origin of all things.

Maul does not cite Hornung’s work as an inspiration, yet the similarity in these scholars’ claims for Mesopotamia and Egypt, respectively, is striking. If we accept Maul’s arguments, then the Mesopotamians must be grouped with the Egyptians in wishing to restore a disordered world to its original state. Certainly, the kings of both Egypt and Mesopotamia portrayed their campaigns against the enemies of the empire as the ever recurring primeval battle of the World-God against the forces of chaos, ending with the triumph of world order in the work of creation.

To the extent that a traditional society’s hope for the future is actually to return the world to its original perfection, the past and the future may be thought of as interchangeable. A compounding of the two temporal categories was suggested by Henri Frankfort when he remarked that “Egyptians had very little sense of […] past or future. […] The past and the future – far from being a matter of concern – were wholly implicit in the present.” Maul has observed that “For Mesopotamian society the past already contained (pre-formed) all possibilities for the future, and hence its preoccupation with bygone mythical or historical epochs was simultaneously a preoccupation with the future.” In a mind-bending twist on the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, Antonio Loprieno recently commented of the Egyptians that “The present is always presented as following in the past’s footsteps.” If the present is simultaneously headed into the future and the past, or if it is headed into a future which is the past, then the future and the past must in some sense be identical.

Accordingly, the dominant polarity of an ancient Egyptian’s or Mesopotamian’s personal orientation with respect to time (Sections 15 & 16) – and its opposition to our own – may not
be so important, at least not if we employ their way of thinking. After all, verb forms in the
Egyptian and Akkadian languages are primarily concerned with aspect – completedness vs.
uncompletedness of an action – rather than tense, the distinguishing between past, present
and future that is central to modern Western thinking. 255

18. Conclusion

Grammatical constructs are deceptive; as we have seen, a common sleight-of-hand in respect
of the temporal reference point can prove highly misleading, and may encourage us to believe
that a speaker/writer sees the past as “in front of/before them” when the spatiotemporal terms
are in fact drawn from a model in which the past is “in front of/before the future.”
Prepositional and adverbial expressions do not necessarily dictate or reflect the
spatiotemporal orientation of a speaker/writer; we ourselves can happily speak of ancestors as
“those who have gone before us” while continuing to visualise the ancestral past as “far
behind us,” and when we “think back” to our origins we contemplate an era “long before our
time.” The ancient speaker/writer had a range of spatiotemporal metaphors at his or her
disposal, and – like us – was free to switch between (and even mix) mutually exclusive
models, just as we might speak of “looking ahead to the following weeks.” 256 Insofar as they
pondered events yet to happen, ancient thinkers are likely to have worked in terms of the
ubiquitous LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, with the future mapped to the path ahead and the past
falling behind them (Boxes B & C). But from the temporal focus hypothesis we know that the
ancients’ cultural and religious preoccupation with the past means that they will probably
have spent more time with the past “before them,” consistent with a switch to the
KNOWLEDGE IS VISION metaphor.

The past-in-front-of-Ego orientation seems naturally to be a static model – even for Aymara
speakers, for whom it is the default model. Its non-dynamic quality means that the “past-
scape” is better thought of as a snap-shot than a movie. It is therefore not appropriate to
envisage the ancients as walking backwards into the future or as sitting with their backs
toward the source of the “river of time.” Rather, we should conceptualise them as pausing
frequently on the forward-leading “path of life” and turning through 180° in order to place
the past before their gaze. In this way they were able to “see the past before them” and
contemplate the temporal terrain already traversed by their society. Traditional cultures
whose aim is to return the world to its original perfection may even see the past and future as
interchangeable. Accordingly, the dominant polarity of the ancient Egyptian’s or
Mesopotamian’s personal orientation with respect to time – and its opposition to our own –
may not be so important after all, at least not when considered from an emic perspective.

To recapitulate: cultural and religious preoccupation with the past means that thinkers will
spend more time seeing the past as in front of them, an orientation achieved by pausing on the
journey of life and turning about-face. That this was a major mode of thought for the ancients
of Egypt and the Near East may be inferred from the paucity of figures of speech in which the
future is explicitly pictured as residing in front of the author (Box A). Unlike our own
circumstances, the instances of an ancient author “looking forward” to a future event or
“putting the past behind him/her” seem to have been relatively infrequent and the expressions
themselves either ambivalent or short-lived. Although – as already noted – linguistic
constructs need not dictate or reflect the spatiotemporal orientation of a speaker/writer, there is a cognitive advantage when they are congruent. The lack of overt future-in-front and past-behind-self expressions is consistent with the predominance of a retrospective gaze in the traditional, past-focused societies of dynastic Egypt and the Ancient Near East.

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Biblical quotations not otherwise attested are from the New Revised Standard Version. All URLs were current at 14 Jun, 2018.

3 Ó Donaill (1977), p.400 & p.50, respectively.
5 Short (2016), p.386-392. East Asian languages are more inclined to use a vertical timeline than Western ones, with earlier times being above later ones; Radden (2011), p.38.
7 Transliterations in this paper follow the convention of Ockinga (2012).
12 Cooperrider et al. (2014).
13 Cooperrider et al. (2014).
14 Hornung (1992), p.66.
17 Bible Hub, online at http://biblehub.com/hebrew/6440.htm. On the plural grammar of $p\text{anim}$, see ahead to the last panel of Box A.
21 One for Israel (n.d.).
22 Quora (n.d.).
37 We will distinguish more carefully between these two Ego-RP options in Section 5, where they are identified as the “moving time” and “moving Ego” sub-models, respectively.

38 This is the “moving event” version of Event-RP; in the way that Fig. 1a (“moving time”) relates to Fig 1b (“moving Ego”), one could also imagine a “moving time” variant in which the boats are anchored and future events move toward them from the front, i.e. where time’s arrow moves from left to right.


45 As also explained by Short (2016), p.393.

46 The motorcycle clipart was modified by Paolo Sinigaglia from Image:ClipartmotoBlu.jpg, and is reproduced here under Creative Commons licence CC-BY-SA-3.0( http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/ ). Online via Wikimedia Commons at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MotoClipart.png.


49 Núñez & Sweetser (2006), p.405-406. Lakoff & Johnson (2003), p.41-44, consider the two Ego-RP variants to be “coherent metaphors” in that, in both cases, the future is in front of us and the past is behind us.


52 As we have seen in Section 2, and as the source paper goes on to document in detail.

53 The silence is all the more surprising since it later becomes clear that the author is aware of the Ego-RP vs. Event-RP dichotomy.

54 Bible Hub, online at http://biblehub.com/hebrew/4279.htm.


61 One could extend the list to include other languages, e.g. Estonian; Veissmann (2016).


“Were” in the sense of “existed;” in English idiom, we would say “came” or similar. Osing (1982), Item 27, at p.29-32 & Pl. 6a,b & Pl. 60; Di Blasi-Dyson (2012), p.263.


Bible Hub, online at http://biblehub.com/interlinear/psalms/143.htm.


Wilcke (1987), p.84.


The 1.s. suffix pronoun (=i) on the hr-h3:t compound is explicit in the inscription; see Kanawati & Evans (2014), p.35-36 & Pl. 114 (b), col. 212-213. Also Nederhof (2009a); Simpson (2003b), p.424.

Paradoxically, Event-RP/Ego-RP “mixed metaphors” seem to be more abundant (or at least easier to identify) in modern languages, perhaps because the datasets are far more extensive and our familiarity with them is much deeper. Other causes may include the fact that the creators of these datasets are not restricted to formally-trained scribal elites and the corpus encompasses much in the way of casual and individualistic self-expression.


Lakoff & Johnson (2003), p.41-44, call the “moving time” and “moving Ego” variants the TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT metaphor and the TIME IS STATIONARY AND WE MOVE THOUGH IT metaphor, respectively. They describe them as “coherent metaphors” because they “fit together,” a reflection of the fact that both are sub-types of the Ego-RP model.


One for Israel (n.d.).

Bird (2016).

Hornung (1992), p.66.

Haspelmath (1997), p.60


This is of course an Ego-RP model, just like Fig. 1a, but to avoid any confusion between this and the canonical Ego-RP configuration I have chosen a slightly different nomenclature.

This is of course an Ego-RP model, just like Fig. 1b, but to avoid any confusion between this and the canonical Ego-RP configuration I have chosen a slightly different nomenclature.

Vasunia (2001), p.106; HaCohen (2017); Wyatt (2014), p.131-132; Keßler (1977). The southward orientation of the Egyptians contrasts with their neighbours in the Ancient Near East, whose canonical orientation was (as we may have deduced from the first Hebrew quotation in Section 1) toward the East, where the sun rose each morning. Since ymn, the Semitic cognate of the Egyptian imn, retains the primary meaning of “right-hand side,” the cardinal point designated by its extended meaning in Hebrew, Ugaritic, etc., is the South. See the references listed earlier in this note and Drinkard (1992).

Müller (2005).


Faulkner (1972), p.44 (Spell 17). In contrast, Paman-speaking Australian Aborigines from Pormpuraaw – whom we shall meet in Section 11 – associate the past with the East because the sun rises there (earlier time) and sets in the West (later time); Moore (2014), p.147-148.


He means the “moving time” model as defined by Haspelmath, which is the same as our Event-RP model (as explained in Section 5).


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For further examples from Egyptian wisdom literature, see Di Biase-Dyson (2016), p.456-457; Horn et al. (2016).

For further examples from the Hebrew bible, see Băncilă (2009).


KAR 104: 19-20 (SB).


Speiser (1978), p.81


Caplice (2002), p.22; Roth (2005), p.84.

Roth (2005), p.76-82.

Hebrew Pod 101 (n.d.).

Bible Hub, online at http://biblehub.com/hebrew/430.htm; Kautzsch & Cowley (1910), §124 (c).


156 Filchenko (2016). See also Section 13.
158 Núñez & Cooperrider (2013), p.226 (Table 1, Group 2); also, for Toba time, see Radden (2003), p.230-231.
159 Núñez & Cooperrider (2013), p.222-223 & p.226 (Table 1, Group 2).
160 Boroditsky & Gaby (2010); Núñez & Cooperrider (2013), p.226 (Table 1).
161 Boroditsky & Gaby (2010); Núñez & Cooperrider (2013), p.226 (Table 1).
162 Adapted from Moore (2014), Diagram 12.2 (p.143).
164 Núñez & Cooperrider (2013), p.226 (Table 1).
165 The two mappings consist of an Event-RP model and a scheme in which the deictic centre is displaced from and external to the timeline. The former presumably reflects the direction of time-axes on graphs and calendars in the Western world (and thus in modern Israel) whereas the latter reflects the reading direction of the language’s script (Section 4). Núñez & Cooperrider (2013), p.222 (Fig. 1) & 226 (Table 1).
166 De la Fuente et al. (2014), p.1684.
167 Adapted from de la Fuente et al. (2014), Fig. 1a (p.1684) and Li & Cao (2018), Fig. 1 (p.1045).
168 De la Fuente et al. (2014), p.1685 & Fig. 2.
171 De la Fuente et al. (2014), p.1686-1687 & Fig. 4.
172 De la Fuente et al. (2014), p.1687-1688 & Fig. 5.
183 Hömke (2013).
184 Cooperrider et al. (2014).
187 De la Fuente et al. (2014), p.1689, comment that “implicit space-time mappings can change more flexibly than explicit spatial metaphors for time in language, the way people are thinking about time at any moment may be exactly reversed from the way they are talking about it.”

37
Just as *d.t* and *nhh* have been likened to the perfect(ive) and imperfective, respectively (Section 1), the mythic and archival versions of Egyptian history have been characterised in terms of the perfective aspect and perfect tense, respectively. Loprieno (2003), p.142 & 149.
In Egyptian, too, there are unexpected exchanges of verb form which are seemingly accompanied by tense shifts, but these concern negation and do not connect the past with the future. Specifically, when prefixed with the negative \( n \), the \( \text{sdm}.n = f \) verb form that normally represents the Perfect (completed action, and therefore usually translated as past tense) now denotes the present. At first sight the switch appears reciprocal, in that \( \text{sdm}=f \) normally indicates the present and the negative \( n \text{sdm}=f \) denotes the Perfect, but the verb form in this negated expression is understood to be a Historic Perfect, which also has the morphology \( \text{sdm}=f \) [Ockinga (2012), p.79-81 & 83]. Unexpected “tense shifts” of this kind can be considered an artefact of translation, insofar as Egyptian verb forms are primarily concerned with aspect whereas English verbs focus on tense [Allen (2010), p.239-240 & 269]. The aspect/tense contrast is commented upon in the main text of this section. Hebrew verbs, too, are primarily aspectual, but it is more difficult to explain away the “past/future” exchange referenced in the preceding note.
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