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THE LIMITATIONS OF FORMAL ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION*

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By the Eighteenth Dynasty the temples had become a major factor in the spiritual, economic, and political life of Egypt. The temple of Amun at Thebes was by then the predominant religious complex. Though based in Upper Egypt, this estate came to own vast tracts of agricultural land throughout the Nile Valley. Other religious institutions did as well. Even if we are less informed about them, extant data prove that a sizeable portion of Egypt was directly controlled and administered by the temples.¹

Notwithstanding the economic importance of such religious corporations, scholars are currently focusing on the spiritual effects of this situation. New Kingdom cultic practices, and particularly those of the mortuary temples²—with their detailed festival calendars of yearly celebrations—provide a useful starting point from which to address the less than communal nature of Pharaonic religion.³ Modern researchers describe temple religious practices as closed, that is, generally restricted to the priests and a few high officials. Even at Opet, while riverine journeys were viewed by the public, cultic activity took place unwitnessed behind temple walls.⁴

There were daily morning, midday, and evening rituals at specific locations within temple precincts. As described at Edfu and Dendera, the priests “awakened” the cult image, enacted a ritual “rebirth,” and clothed the statue; but afterwards the deity was “revealed” only within the temple walls.⁵ The performances were standardized, even mindless. They were dramatic only insofar as they represented specific antitheses in life: birth/death or triumph over a foe. No spontaneous revelation or charismatic behavior ever took place.⁶

* Abbreviations follow the standard norms found in W. Helck, E. Otto, and W. Westendorf, eds., *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (Wiesbaden, 1975–92).

¹ J. J. Janssen, “Absence from Work by the Necropolis Workmen of Thebes,” *SAK* 8 (1975): 139–50, 180–82; with his later study, “Die Struktur der pharaonischen Wirtschaft,” *GM* 48 (1981): 74–76; note also the compendium of S. Katary, *Land Tenure in the Ramesside Period* (London and New York, 1989).

² B. J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (London and New York, 1989), pp. 185–97.

³ H. Altenmüller, “Feste,” in W. Helck, E. Otto, and W. Westendorf, eds., *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (*LÄ*) vol. 3 (Wiesbaden, 1977), pp. 171–91, provides a detailed analysis of these inscriptions; see also S. Sauneron, *Les fêtes religieuses d’Esna aux derniers siècles du paganisme* (Cairo, 1962); my *Three Studies on Egyptian Feasts and Their Chronological Implications* (Baltimore, 1995), pp. 1–5; and A. Grimm’s detailed study, *Die altägyptischen Festkalender in den Tempeln der griechisch-römischen Epoche* (Wiesbaden, 1994).

⁴ S. Schott, “The Feasts of Thebes,” in H. H. Nelson and U. Hölscher, eds., *Work in Western Thebes 1931–33* (Chicago, 1934), pp. 63–90; W. J. Murnane, “Opet-fest,” in *LÄ*, vol. 4 (Wiesbaden, 1982), pp. 574–77 with his “La grande fête d’Opet,” *Les dossiers: Histoire et archéologie* 10 (1986): 22–25; L. Bell, “Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka,” *JNES* 44 (1985): 251–94; and Kemp, *Ancient Egypt*, pp. 206–8. On the limited nature of the audience, see, in particular, J. Assmann, *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur* (Stuttgart, Berlin, Cologne, and Mainz, 1984), pp. 14–16.

⁵ M. Alliot, *Le culte d’Horus à Edfou au temps des Ptolémées* (Cairo, 1949–54), and H. W. Fairman, “Worship and Festivals in an Egyptian Temple,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 37 (1954): 165–203.

⁶ Assmann, “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest,” in J. Assmann and T. Sundermeier, eds., *Das Fest und das Heilige* (Gütersloh, 1991), pp. 105–22; M. Römer,

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Repetition of the daily cult was not overtly political. Still, it reinforced both the importance of the deity and the self-awareness of the local priesthoods, who considered themselves a force for stability and permanence in society.

In order not to present a one-sided viewpoint on these immense religious corporations and their internally directed face, I can mention various sectors of such buildings wherein prayers could be given before the specific gods. This was first shown in some detail by C. F. Nims and later elaborated upon by him when the Eastern temple of Thutmose III was analyzed.⁷ Similar shrines can be found at Heliopolis, Abydos, the Ramesseum, and elsewhere.⁸ Examples given by him and subsequent data point to the Eastern Temple at Karnak, the Ramesseum, Luxor, and elsewhere. More recently, E. Teeter has discussed the same issue of this evidence for popular worship, with some additional data.⁹ Nonetheless, there still remains the issue concerning the wealth of inscriptional and pictorial data from these temples themselves, which studiously avoid the "popular aspect" of religious life in the Nile Valley, and it is to the "legitimate" if not "decorous" aspect of Egyptian cultic religion that this study is devoted. In fine, if I might make use of an image: I am examining the Church of England, the Established Religion, not Methodism and not the fringe.

By the New Kingdom even the day feasts had become restricted.¹⁰ In the Calendar of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, itself a copy of Ramesses II's at the Ramesseum, a clear distinction is made between the "festivals of heaven" and the so-called seasonal festivals.¹¹ The latter were simply those key celebrations which occurred once a year, whereas the former took place more than once in the Egyptian civil year. Whatever the original significance of the dichotomy, the "festivals of heaven" had been diminished to a series of lunar-day occurrences that took place frequently throughout the year. Medinet Habu listed these regular monthly feasts in the following order: days 29, 30, 1, 2, 4, 6, 10, and 15, in addition to daily offerings to the royal standard of Amun (thereby confirming this interpretation of annual repetition).¹² On the contrary, the second major subgrouping of the

Gottes- und Priester-Herrschaft in Ägypten des Neuen Reiches (Wiesbaden, 1994), pp. 142–52, 478–80; and P. Vernus, "La grande mutation idéologique du Nouvel Empire: Un nouvelle théorie du pouvoir politique, du démiurge face à sa création," *Bulletin de la Société d'Égyptologie de Genève (BSEG)* 19 (1995): 69–95.

⁷ C. F. Nims, "Popular Religion in Ancient Egyptian Temples," in D. Sinor, ed., *Proceedings of the Twenty-Third International Congress of Orientalists* (London, 1956), pp. 79–80, as well as "The Eastern Temple at Karnak," in *Aufsätze zum 70. Geburtstag von Herbert Ricke*, Beiträge zur ägyptischen Bauforschung und Altertumskunde, Heft 12 (Wiesbaden, 1971), pp. 107–11.

⁸ In addition to the evidence brought forward by Nims, see as well K. A. Kitchen, *Ramesseid Inscriptions*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1975), p. 77.7; vol. 2 (Oxford, 1979), pp. 582.2 (cf. W. Helck, *Die Ritualszenen auf der Umfassungsmauer Ramses' II. in Karnak*, Text [Wiesbaden, 1968], p. 129 and E. Wente's review of the latter in *JNES* 30 [1971]: 317–18), *KRI* 607.14–15, 616.3, 616.16–617.1, 653.4–5 (cf. Helck, *Die Ritualdarstellungen des Ramesseums* [Wiesbaden, 1972], p. 153). I am indebted to E. Wente for these references (and the

next) as well as for the focus of the immediate discussion at this point.

⁹ E. Teeter, "Popular Worship in Ancient Egypt," *KMT* 4/2 (1993): 28–37. This study, although extremely popular in orientation, is a useful one. Nonetheless, I adhere to Nims's earlier comments.

¹⁰ Altenmüller, "Feste," pp. 172–73; and my *The Private Feast Lists of Ancient Egypt* (Wiesbaden, 1996), chap. 1. I define the "day festivals" as those celebrations connected solely to the various (lunar-based) days of the month, for example, *psdntyw*, day 1, *3bd*, day 2, and so forth. For the relative unimportance of such lunar-determined feasts, see my article, "The Lunar System in Festival Calendars: From the New Kingdom Onwards," *BSEG* 19 (1995): 25–40.

¹¹ Kitchen, *Ramesseid Inscriptions*, vol. 5 (Oxford, 1983), pp. 130 and 140; my *Three Studies on Egyptian Feasts*, pp. 3–4, and *The Private Feast Lists of Ancient Egypt*, chap. 1.

¹² Kitchen, *Ramesseid Inscriptions*, vol. 5, pp. 130–37; and H. H. Nelson, "The Calendar of Feasts and Offerings at Medinet Habu," in Nelson and Hölscher, eds., *Work in Western Thebes 1931–33*, p. 51.

religious events, the “seasonal feasts,” commenced with the coronation (actually, accession day) of the monarch, followed by Sothis, the eve of the Wagdy festival, and so forth, completing a calendrical arrangement from the beginning of the civil year to its end.¹³

With the possible exception of the king’s accession day, there is no indication that any of the day festivals were publicly organized or enacted by many participants or intended for a large audience augmented by outsiders.¹⁴ True, the day celebrations often were connected with auspicious events, such as the founding of a temple or the revelation of the divine plan. This was due, however, more to the importance of the liturgical lunar calendar itself—which was preserved solely within a cultic setting—than to a desire to make the celebration public.

Key events in which the Pharaoh participated happened at major annual festivals such as Opet. Hatshepsut, for example, had her revelation of becoming ruler proclaimed by Amun on the 29th day of the 6th month which was both the 3d day of an Amun feast and the 2d day of the Liturgies of Sekhmet.¹⁵ In similar fashion, at the end of the same civil month Thutmose III witnessed a series of remarkable omens by Amun at Karnak concerning the Pharaoh’s wish to begin construction on his Festival Temple.¹⁶ Once again the extraordinary character of the divine-royal interconnection took place within a religious setting and on a specific festival day: the tenth of an extended feast for Amun. When ruling alone, he also had carved at Karnak a remarkable account of divine nomination to be Pharaoh, revealed by Amun even though Thutmose was still a temple acolyte and not yet a prophet of Amun.¹⁷ Although the date of this divine manifestation is not recorded, it is probable that Thutmose was personally designated to be king during a great feast, quite possibly that of Amun himself. Certainly, the preserved account makes it clear that some type of religious procession was taking place inside Karnak while the king was officiating at his god’s altar.

These three separate divine interventions indicate that the routinized activity of the temple was not interrupted for an all-important occurrence. Rather, as J. Assmann has indicated, it was during the major feasts that the ongoing and repetitive nature of Egyptian cultic religion was broken.¹⁸ To put it another way: the outstanding or unique characteristics of Egyptian religion were not set within the “permanent” milieu of the standard daily routine of the priests.¹⁹ Quite to the contrary, both Hatshepsut and Thutmose III, to take the examples listed above, witnessed the singular intervention of their deity Amun during major religious events. As a result, the celebration was made even more singular. Since normal religious progression was interrupted, we may consider such manifestations to be historical in the narrow sense. That is to say, an important, but nevertheless officially

¹³ Kitchen, *Ramesseid Inscriptions*, vol. 5, pp. 140–83; and Nelson, “The Calendar of Feasts and Offerings at Medinet Habu,” p. 52.

¹⁴ Assmann, “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest,” pp. 106 and 108.

¹⁵ J. Yoyotte, “La date supposée du couronnement d’Hatshepsout,” *Kêmi* 18 (1968): 85–91.

¹⁶ J. von Beckerath, “Ein Wunder des Amun bei der Tempelgründung in Karnak,” *MDAIK* 37 (1981): 41–49.

¹⁷ J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, vol. 2 (Chicago, 1906), pp. 55–68; K. H. Sethe, *Urkunden der*

18. Dynastie, vol. 4 (Leipzig, 1930), pp. 156–75; and D. B. Redford, *Pharaonic King-Lists, Annals and Day-Books* (Mississauga, 1986), pp. 168–71, with his most recent structures in “The Concepts of Kingship during the Eighteenth Dynasty,” in D. O’Connor and D. Silverman, eds., *Ancient Egyptian Kingship* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne, 1996), pp. 157–84.

¹⁸ Assmann, “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest,” pp. 108–10.

¹⁹ Idem, *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur*, pp. 58–63.

celebrated, occurrence could equally contain a unique factor, one that transformed the reenactment of a rite into a transcendent event.²⁰

Annual festivities were the nexi for such wonders (oracles and the like) because of the broader audience. High officials outside of the temple hierarchy were among the onlookers as well as the participants. Riverine voyages or processions outside of the temple precincts revealed the cult image and priesthood to the locals. For Assmann, "movement" characterizes these celebrations in contrast to the daily activity which emphasized "rest," and he further remarks that such religious events appear to be "Volksfeste" simply because the people were involved to some degree in the drama.²¹

For earlier periods, there is little documentation of just how involved the populace may have been with their cults, but by the New Kingdom the duality in temple activity is evident. The yearly performances were organized by a select few, and the participants were, for the most part, members of the clergy. What anyone else could have seen was physically limited due to the setting of religious events behind temple walls. No acts were performed in public areas. True, the bark of the god could be transported from one temple to another; note, for example, the trip of Hathor of Dendera to Edfu and her return or the events surrounding the temple of Esna in the Greco-Roman period, not to mention Opet in the New Kingdom (Karnak to Luxor and back again). These processions, however, though crucial to the entire enactment and overtly public, formed only part of the program of events.

These more "open" religious celebrations, despite their public show, in no way attempted to unite the general populace with the elite (clergy and high officials).²² Opet, with its intimate connections with royalty, remained the preserve of the select few. The sacral nature of this rite segregated viewers and participants, as well. The event might seem extroverted, but it remained exclusive, the purport limited. Its restricted nature is perhaps the best event with which to delve deeper into the problems of Opet, for it is not enough to analyze that celebration merely from a point of view of elite solidarity.²³ True, the lengthy and, in the New Kingdom, ever-expanding festival of Opet served as a main religious link between the monarch and his father, the god Amun. Connected to the overt paternal relationship was the event's concentration on the king's *ka*. The Pharaoh's power/virility was edified through his connection to divinity.²⁴ Amun, at the temple of Luxor, officially and openly transferred his powers to the king who, in return, retransmitted the *ka* back as a proper son should do, through offerings (*ka*) of whatever sort.²⁵ This situation of "give and take" is considerably more complicated. To quote from L. Bell's study of the cult of the royal *ka* at the temple of Luxor, the king "grows into the unique *ka* which is shared by all the kings

²⁰ Idem, "State and Religion in the New Kingdom," in W. K. Simpson, ed., *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt* (New Haven, 1989), pp. 71–72, as well as his equally useful remarks in the same volume, "Death and Initiation in the Funerary Religion of Ancient Egypt," pp. 140–42.

²¹ Assmann, "Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest," p. 108.

²² S. Lukes, "Political Ritual and Social Integration," in *Essays in Social Theory* (London, 1977), pp. 53–73, provides a useful sociological study.

²³ See D. Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the 'Invention of Tradition', c. 1820–1977," in E. Hobs-

bawn and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 104–8, for helpful parallels.

²⁴ Vernus, "La grande mutation idéologique du Nouvel Empire," provides a very penetrating study of this development in the New Kingdom.

²⁵ F. Teichmann, "Der Ka—Ein Wesensglied des Menschen in altägyptischer Auffassung," *Die Drei* 7–8 (1975): 360–70, gives an important and still up-to-date study of the concept of the Egyptian *ka*; see as well Assmann, "Das Bild des Vaters im alten Ägypten," in H. Tellenbach et al., eds., *Das Vaterbild in Mythos und Geschichte* (Stuttgart, Berlin, Cologne, and Mainz, 1976), pp. 46–49; and Bell, "Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka," pp. 251–94.

of Egypt and has been handed on from ruler to ruler since the creation of the universe.”²⁶ Furthermore, the king still has one more astonishing transformation to make at the climax of the offering ritual. Amun diverts “the benefit of the offering onto the king; the many pious and beneficial acts which the king has performed for the sake of the god are reflected in each of the new names” which he has just been given.²⁷ The performances within Luxor were never intended for all and sundry. In addition to the location of the innermost rooms of the temple of Luxor in which some type of mystical union and rebirth took place, only select viewers and participants had a place in the entire drama.

But what, then, was the public and overt aspect of the Opet feast? Was it merely the character of the processions hither and thither with “beiden Seiten der Feststraße . . . Lauben aufgestellt, die mit Speisen und Getränken zur unentgeltlichen Versorgung der Festteilnehmer und Zuschauer aufgestellt sind”?²⁸ Was the whole complex a demonstration of abundance as well, and did it thereby represent the opposition to daily life or the daily ritual? Despite the state character of this celebration, it in no way is parallel to the common national festivals of today. Many inhabitants of Thebes (let alone the entire nation) did not see the performance. Furthermore, it was the institutions of Amun—Karnak and Luxor—that actively staged the event. While Opet was an attempt to resolidify a ruling elite’s perception of itself and, more specifically, of the monarchy, it was a demonstration of Amun’s role vis-à-vis the monarchy and thereby his priesthood. This religious event was more precisely aimed than a “collective representation” of elite solidarity and a “political ritual expressing-producing-constituting value integration.”²⁹ One can note the hieratic alignment of the military; were they ever there? If Opet is understood only as an elaborate coronation rite, then where were all of the town mayors, the local administrators, and the like? The reason that they do not appear is simple: they had no role. Rather, the main groupings of individuals appear to be the king (and one assumes the royal family), the temple hierarchy, and certain state officials, such as the vizier.

In contrast to Assmann, I do not see this great procession feast as one in which a large number of people actively involved themselves in some way that can be described as religious.³⁰ There is little doubt that by the New Kingdom the career of priest had risen to be one of the highest in the Egyptian social constellation. Moreover, no longer were all the temples locally based or in possession of only a small amount of arable land. By the Eighteenth Dynasty at least, the Amun complex had moved to a key position in the economic and social life of the country. With this development came the professionalization of the priesthood and the then increased exclusivity of religion. By religion, I must reiterate the earlier premise of temple-based religious thought, and this implies, if I follow Assmann correctly, that no longer did the elders and primary social administrators (for example, regionally based leaders such as mayors or provincial nomarchs/governors of an earlier time) organize knowledge. Now, and to an extraordinary degree, policy was determined by the various institutions, especially by the temples.³¹

²⁶ “Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka,” p. 280.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 281.

²⁸ Assmann, “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest,” p. 108.

²⁹ Lukes, “Political Ritual and Social Integration,” p. 68.

³⁰ Assmann, “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest,” p. 110.

³¹ Idem, “Frühe Formen politischer Mythomotorik: Fundierende, kontrapräsentliche und revolutionäre Mythen,” in D. Harth and J. Assmann, eds., *Revolution und Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), p. 46.

A case in point, the Min Feast,³² was a common seasonal festival set on a date determined by the moon—"on the going forth of the Protector of the Moon."³³ As recounted in one brief subsection of the official calendar at Medinet Habu, this celebration took place on day 11 of the 9th month of the civil calendar, which corresponded to the first lunar day. Under the laconic calendar heading, the deity is merely stated to have proceeded to the staircase. Recorded elsewhere in Ramesses III's mortuary temple, however, is the Program of the celebration. A useful parallel is found at Karnak as well.³⁴

Clothed in military accoutrements, the king officiated.³⁵ He was preceded by his elite, the *rh nswt*, with their military equipment, and followed by four court officials, with the royal children and the queen, standard bearers, more soldiers, and a single lector priest. There was a great procession involving the Pharaoh, the statue of Min, and a bull. The entire ceremony explicitly referred to an agricultural rejuvenation accomplished by the chief of the land and his immediate relatives. The language of the ritual was archaic, as were the events themselves—such as the release of birds to the four cardinal directions and the presentation of the sheaf of grain.³⁶ At the Ramesseum in Medinet Habu, various royal ancestors were intimately associated with the role of the king at this ceremony.³⁷

According to Assmann, this festival is associated with the king's coronation.³⁸ Earlier, however, C. J. Bleeker saw its more basic meaning. The event directly involved the earthly monarch in his role as provider and sustainer of his people. As such, the event symbolizes the return of the annual harvest. The first sheaf is cut in a magical ceremony of reaping. For Bleeker, the undemocratic character of the entire event is surprising.³⁹ This aspect of the event is, however, not at all important. The concept of the yearly repetition is completely different. True, the sacral nature of the Pharaoh was evident as is the subsistence-based agricultural dimension. But there was no need to invoke the rather limited number of participants in the ceremony. The king simply effected the symbol of harvest, the sheaf, as he represented its success. Furthermore, noting the absence of narrative in the account of Medinet Habu,⁴⁰ we can single out three main aspects of the ceremony, following Bleeker, namely, (1) the procession of Min to his staircase, (2) the ritual of harvest, and (3) the rejuvenation of the kingship.

These three aspects are interconnected, as Min was a harvest deity *par excellence*. His erect penis and association with the bull are too blatant to overlook. The heap of fertile earth and the choral dance before Min on the *hsp*-beet both represented the vegetative renewal, which was the object of the entire ceremony.⁴¹ Moreover, according to Bleeker, the "staircase" of Min indicated the "stylized original hill from which the sun god emerged in order to set the world in order" and to rule the world. Figuring in the harvest rites were a sack of emmer and a sickle. Min's symbol was a sheaf of wheat.

³² C. J. Bleeker, *Die Geburt eines Gottes* (Leiden, 1956), pp. 59–93; the standard study remains that of H. Gauthier, *Les fêtes du dieu Min* (Cairo, 1931).

³³ R. A. Parker, *The Calendars of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago, 1950), pp. 39–40, and his review of S. Schott, *Altägyptische Festdaten* (Wiesbaden, 1950), in *BiOr* 9 (1952): 102.

³⁴ Kitchen, *Ramesseum Inscriptions*, vol. 5, 213.7–16.3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 201–16.

³⁶ Bleeker, *Die Geburt eines Gottes*, p. 75.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁸ Assmann, "Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest," p. 112.

³⁹ Bleeker, *Die Geburt eines Gottes*, p. 88.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

The date of the Min feast was set close to the beginning of the third civil season for proximity to that of the harvest goddess Renenutet on the first day of the ninth month. If we follow the Medinet Habu calendrical references, then the "Procession of Min" took place on the first day of the Egyptian lunar month which *followed* (or coincided with?) the day 1 of the 9th civil month (= the day of the feast of Renenutet).⁴² One wonders whether there was a minor alteration in the timing of both ceremonies when the Egyptian civil calendar was established. Did Min's celebration occur on the first lunar day in the *original* third season ("harvest") in lunar month 9 as its later noncivil setting would seem to imply? Moreover, was it for this that Renenutet's feast was firmly located in the same designated month (the 9th) but permanently anchored to the civil calendar on the day 1 of that month? Such questions can only be answered in a speculative manner although the Medinet Habu reference to the 11th civil day of month 9 cannot automatically be dismissed. Nor can the intimate association of Min with Renenutet be sundered; Esna places the procession of Min-Amun on day 1 of the 9th civil month, which is, after all, the precise day of Renenutet's celebration.⁴³

It is evident from the reliefs and rather detailed explanations of the ceremony that the Festival of Min was intimately connected to the king's role as initiator, purveyor, and sustainer of his country's harvest. His presence was crucial. Aside from chants and short speeches by various assistants, the god acted alone. He appeared to say little if anything at all. The acts of the king therefore set into motion the harvest and, as such, must have been a continuation of a very old religious celebration. In the tombs of the Fifth to Sixth Dynasties the "Procession of Min" was one of the standard feasts with which private individuals wished to be associated after their death.⁴⁴ In their lists of religious events it was generally placed in the eighth position. The fragmentary Festival Calendar of Niuserre from Abu Ghubab likewise preserves a reference to this event (fragment 482); the date unfortunately is lost.⁴⁵ Later, private feast-lists of the First Intermediate period and the Middle Kingdom referred to the celebration.⁴⁶ By the Twelfth Dynasty, however, its importance seems to have lessened, in that it tends to be infrequently mentioned. By the Eighteenth Dynasty, the "Procession of Min" was abandoned as a component in the standard feast arrangements. It appears that Min's procession did not belong to the workmen's annual observances at Deir el-Medineh in the Nineteenth through the Twentieth Dynasties.⁴⁷ Noteworthy is its absence in Neferhotep's funerary calendar of roughly the same date.⁴⁸ Even though the religious events mentioned in that tomb are focused on Osiris, the mention of the Renenutet Feast (day 1 of the 9th civil month) is striking.

Given the gradual disappearance of the "Procession of Min" from the private feast-lists, as well as its importance within the cultic world-order of Medinet Habu and Esna, one may very well ask whether the temples had taken upon themselves the organization of an

⁴² Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions*, vol. 5, pp. 182 and 201.

⁴³ Sauneron, *Les fêtes religieuses d'Esna*, pp. 21–22.

⁴⁴ Parker, *The Calendars of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 34–35; and R. Krauss, *Sothis- und Monddaten* (Hildesheim, 1985), pp. 142–44.

⁴⁵ Helck, "Die 'Weihschrift' aus dem Taltempel des Sonnenheiligtums des Königs Neuserre bei Abu Gurob," *SAK* 3 (1977): 47–77. The reconstruction of the text presented by him can be challenged, since the

architectural layout is not dealt with.

⁴⁶ See my *The Private Feast Lists of Ancient Egypt*, chaps. 2 and 5.

⁴⁷ Helck, "Feiertage und Arbeitstage in der Ramessidenzeit," *JESHO* 7 (1965): 136–66.

⁴⁸ R. Hari, *La tombe thébaine du père divin Neferhotep (TT 50)* (Geneva, 1985), pp. 41–55 and pls. 28–41; see also Helck, "Feiertage und Arbeitstage in der Ramessidenzeit," p. 140.

originally agricultural festival.⁴⁹ Or to put it another way, given the existence of a major rite of renewal in which the king was the primary actor, this age-old celebration appears to have become “captured” by the great temple institutions of the day. I do not wish to be misunderstood as advocating the interpretation that the public orientation of this celebration was extremely minor. After all, as Assmann has stressed, the Min feast was characterized by exoterism rather than a hidden esoterism.⁵⁰ But the question must be raised concerning its temple appropriation.

No one would deny the key role of the Pharaoh in the festival nor the antiquity of its rites. Indeed, the “Procession of Min” undoubtedly was Predynastic in origin and hence considerably more archaic in outlook than the grand New Kingdom celebration of Opet.⁵¹ Yet this festival persisted not only over centuries—but over millennia—and in a context that appears to have been exclusively cultic. Consider the situation of Min’s hoary rite of harvest played in temples not belonging to his cult: it demonstrates just how localized and encapsulated the official New Kingdom religion was. Granted its public orientation, the fact still remains that in a sense the celebration of harvest was now part and parcel of the temple religion and not at all associated with the harvesters themselves. In other words, the existence of the Min feast in a temple-based setting indicates that the official religious institutions of the Nile Valley were, in effect, of highest priority. The event no longer had much of its original local or popular basis.

The difficulty in analyzing the religion of Pharaonic Egypt outside of the cult centers remains a major obstacle to our appreciation of what exactly the common religion of the inhabitants was. Whereas it is easy to view the daily cultic life of any Egyptian temple as opposed to that of the masses of Egyptians, it is not so simple to deal with the public activities of the temples of the land. Research into private religion has been hampered by the dearth of both massive monumental undertakings and textual evidence.⁵² The latter is, at best, stereotyped in outlook and formalized in setting as it is in speech. By and large, modern scholars have concentrated their efforts on the Ramesside period if only due to the large number of extant votive stelae and the like. These limitations impose dangers of overemphasis and risks of ignoring other aspects of monumental cultic religion. Baldly put, I believe that the more public and participatory aspects of ancient Egyptian religion had been gradually absorbed by the temples.

The festival of Min provides an example of this development. Assmann himself is at pains to emphasize the point that by the New Kingdom and later, the architecture of the temple had become limited to what can only be described as “Festarchitektur.”⁵³ Hence he added that this implies that the procession festivals had risen to an enormous importance in the core of Egyptian religion. This meant that the king as main actor, “and not only the people,” participated. According to Assmann, these celebrations became the most impor-

⁴⁹ Parker, *The Calendars of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 47–48, provides useful data on this feast during the Greco-Roman period; Krauss’s later study is referred to in n. 45 above.

⁵⁰ Assmann, “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest,” pp. 112–13.

⁵¹ See my article “Notes on the Ancient Egyptian Calendars,” *Or.*, n.s., 64 (1995): 17–32.

⁵² The work of A. I. Sadek, *Popular Religion in Egypt during the New Kingdom* (Hildesheim, 1987),

is disappointing.

⁵³ See Assmann, *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur* with his “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest,” pp. 109–11. It is very important to compare at this point the comments of Kemp, *Ancient Egypt*, pp. 65–83 and 185–97. They provide a useful (archaeologically and economically oriented) counterbalance to the overt emphasis on a philosophical-theological understanding of ancient Egypt.

tant medium of royal representation. Through this change over time, the results for royalty led to a sense of “history as festival,” to reuse Hornung’s felicitous phrase; the feast itself turned into a royal activity, i.e., it was political.⁵⁴

This interpretation allows us to view the transmutation of one-sided religious events as something more complex. A procession festival thereby was not merely a reflection of a simple agriculturally based ritual, but instead a public demonstration of the role of the monarch in the divine world. Although this perspective most certainly occurred centuries earlier, it cannot be ignored that such temples as Karnak or Luxor played a key role in the maintenance of the Pharaoh’s political and divine aspects. The public did not have any official role to play in the proceedings except that of mere observers, even though the purpose of events such as that of Min was to reinforce the harnessing of fertility with kingship. Here, then, is the nub of the question of ancient Egyptian religiosity. Procession festivals had a far more popular side to them than did the daily temple-based services. Nevertheless, the public was excluded from direct participation in these carnival-like festivities which went on outside of the temple.

In the Middle Kingdom temple archives from Kahun and Illahun a similar situation is reflected.⁵⁵ The daily life of the clergy appears to have been insular in that not much interaction between “town and gown” can be found in those documents. Granted, the temples in the region were not massive state ones, akin to Amun’s at Karnak. (Note that this is a major difference between the institutions of the New Kingdom and those of earlier times.) Such displays of effervescence served as a means of status (or rank) consolidation among the participants, not the onlookers. The Opet festival itself was a good occasion during which the Pharaoh could advance the careers of his trusted officials; the same may be said for the Heb Sed.⁵⁶ For the viewing rank and file, on the other hand, festival processions took on the atmosphere of a carnival rather than a fertility rite. In fact, since the Min celebration was set within the 9th civil month, the exact calendrical significance had been lost; indeed, in comparison to our Easter, for instance, this feast had lost its original agricultural setting.

It is unclear just how deep the religious feelings of the ordinary Egyptians were with regard to this celebration. There was none of the local flavor that one can see, for example, in the processions and ceremonies of the Middle Kingdom nomarch of Assiut, Djefahapy.⁵⁷ At that earlier time, the local governor—who was also the high priest of the main temple of the nome—had instituted observances for himself at key calendrical points, such as New Year’s Day, the solemn Wagdy Feast, as well as a “First Fruits” celebration.⁵⁸ From the detailed contracts that he had drawn up, one can see that there was interaction of the local

⁵⁴ E. Hornung, *Geschichte als Fest* (Darmstadt, 1966).

⁵⁵ S. Quirke, *The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom* (New Malden, England, 1990), pp. 155–75; and U. Luft, *Die chronologische Fixierung des ägyptischen Mittleren Reiches nach dem Tempelarchiv von Illahun* (Vienna, 1992). Baines, “Practical Religion and Personal Piety,” p. 92, also observes the “small scale of temples in pre-New Kingdom times” and adds that “it renders religious action in and around the temples still less accessible.”

⁵⁶ Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals: Enactments of*

Religious Renewals (Leiden, 1967), pp. 96–123; E. Hornung and E. Staehelin, *Studien zum Sedfest, Aegyptiaca Helvetica* 1 (Geneva, 1974); and Murnane, “The Sed-Festival: A Problem in Historical Method,” *MDAIK* 37 (1981): 369–76.

⁵⁷ See my article, “A Redistributive Pattern at Assiut,” *JAOS* 105 (1985): 7–20; and Kemp, “How Religious were the Ancient Egyptians?,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 5 (1995): 39–41.

⁵⁸ M. Gilula, “An Offering of ‘First Fruits’ in Ancient Egypt,” *Tel Aviv* 1 (1974): 43–44.

clergy with the provincial head. Just as with the local temples at Illahun and Kahun, one has the impression of a closely knit community only partially involved with the regional temples and then only in special circumstances. Owing to the compact community in the Fayyum area as at Assiut, however, it is not unreasonable to view the concomitant religious observances as involving the locals themselves; the Pharaoh, his entourage, and the administrators of the country were all absent.

In contrast, the Opet and Min festivals were something both qualitatively and quantitatively different. Parallel to these events was the well-known Heb Sed, at which every well-known or influential member of the tiny Egyptian elite appears to have been present. That ceremony was complicated and involved quite a number of publicly viewed events. Both from the numerous private references as well as from the many detailed scenes, it is not hard to visualize the involvement of scores of participants and viewers. The whole ritual centered upon the king's renewal of power.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, questions can be asked concerning the physical center of activity, the depth of religious feeling, and the effect of it all upon the public. I feel that here, as well, the more exclusive nature of the event has to be stressed. True, the rejuvenation of the Pharaoh, as in the celebration of Min, affected the entire country because the sacral kingship was reconfirmed and the land's leader reinvigorated, but what, precisely, was the connection of such an event with the religious life of Egypt if not a limited one? Not very many people actually saw it, and fewer could actively participate. (Most certainly, the number of viewers inside a temple remained small despite the public nature of the ensuing processions.) In essence, these performances were akin to the elite dramas of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France or the court concerts of the Baroque and Rococo. They were enacted for the few even if their purpose referred to the entire Nile Valley. Equally crucial were the political ramifications of attendance: who was present and who participated at which events in the entire drama would have to be worked out by the Pharaoh and his close advisers; not everyone holding a rank in the bureaucracy of Pharaonic Egypt was invited.⁶⁰

Thus one must consider the limited nature of these religious observances and place them in a broader social context; they were not simply mere displays to a nonparticipating public.⁶¹ Moreover, it is unclear where, exactly, these events took place. Most certainly, the king could not participate in all of them, and we must assume that, excluding his personal role at Opet (Thebes), he rarely was present during such religious holidays as Min. In the Valley Feast of the New Kingdom (and earlier), the Theban triad made its annual periplus from East to West, ending up at Deir el-Bahari.⁶² As this ceremony was expanded in the New Kingdom due to the construction of numerous mortuary temples on the west side of Thebes, the portable barks of the three Karnak deities rested in those local temples whose cult was for the divine Pharaoh (dead or alive).

B. Kemp remarks that this event "was the occasion for families with relatives or ancestors buried in the Theban hills to make their own journey to the family tomb, to have a

⁵⁹ Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals*, pp. 97–106; C. C. Van Siclen, "The Accession Date of Amunhotep III and the Jubilee," *JNES* 32 (1973): 290–300; Kemp, *Ancient Egypt*, pp. 213–17; and J. Gohary, *Akhenaton's Sed Festival at Karnak* (London and New York, 1992).

⁶⁰ Assmann, *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten*

und Israel, Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, Themen 52 (Munich, 1991), discusses the intertwining of political and theological aspects of Egyptian society.

⁶¹ Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual," pp. 104–8.

⁶² Kemp, *Ancient Egypt*, pp. 210–13.

meal there, and to stay overnight.”⁶³ In other words, some of the local populace followed a religious practice of celebration similar in spirit to that of the official cult of the Theban triad in that they visited their family tombs, just as Amun (and his family) traveled to the mortuary temples of his sons, the Pharaohs. Such similarity of purpose should make us realize that various levels of religious feeling could exist simultaneously and be similar in nature. Identity, however, cannot be inferred from similarity. From the extant data no parallel can be drawn between the Opet festival and the actions of the onlooking populace.

If by the New Kingdom the temple hierarchies in the Nile Valley had become a significant component in the economic as well as the religious life of the country, and positions within the priesthood were valuable offices to obtain, then the closed nature of the associated religious performances makes reasonable sense. Indeed, one might ask whether there was an increasing exclusiveness on the part of these corporate bodies. There was a rapid, major alteration in the political-theological constellation at this time, a development that many of the royal inscriptions reveal.⁶⁴ The temples appear to have expanded their spiritual basis by the mid-Eighteenth Dynasty, and by this I do not mean simply that their religious orientation had changed. Temples, after all, were the main repository of astronomical investigations; likewise, they were centers of theological innovations, and as such they made significant alterations in the relation of the Pharaoh to the sun god and the entire solar cult itself.⁶⁵

In a remarkable Late Amarna prayer, a certain Pawah complained in a scribbled graffito to have been unable to “see” his traditional gods in operation.⁶⁶ He was a *wab* priest and scribe of the temple of Amun. As his language and subtle metaphorical presentation indicate, Pawah argues that he was denied association with the religious life of his day owing to the dominance of the heretical Aten cult at that time. If we exclude his covert agenda, his piety still remains. What did it mean to this man to involve himself in religion, and what did his religiosity consist of? From his brief lamentation, the reader clearly is made aware of the importance of seeing. Assmann, in a recent and revolutionary reanalysis of Pawah’s statement, has provided a deep look into the effects of the Aten heresy upon one relatively well-off member of ancient Egyptian society at the close of the Amarna period. Stressing the “ocular” aspects of the words of Pawah, Assmann concluded that the “blindness” which the author emphasizes is not real but, rather, metaphorical. Pawah has been denied his association with the traditional gods; he can no longer view them. This religious aspect is noteworthy for what it does not say as well as for what it stresses. At first, it may be argued that Pawah is not interested in any personal attachment towards his gods other than viewing them; after all, the emphasis is on the festival aspect of revelation. This is too simple an interpretation, however, one that does harm to the concept of deep religious experience even though it cannot be denied that Amun’s “revelation” is specifically connected to a religious celebration. Pawah wants to view Amun “when his neck receives garlands,” i.e., during a procession feast, probably the Valley Festival.⁶⁷ Furthermore, one

⁶³ Ibid., p. 210.

⁶⁴ Assmann, “State and Religion in the New Kingdom,” pp. 71–82.

⁶⁵ Idem, *Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom: Re, Amun and the Crisis of Polytheism* (London and New York, 1995).

⁶⁶ Idem, “Ocular Desire in a Time of Darkness: Ur-

ban Festivals and Divine Visibility in Ancient Egypt,” *Torat ha-Adam* 1 (1994): 13–29.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 14, 16, 19–20, and his study “Der schöne Tag: Sinnlichkeit und Vergänglichkeit im alt-ägyptischen Fest,” in W. Haug and R. Warning, eds., *Das Fest*, Poetik und Hermeneutik 14 (Munich, 1989), pp. 3–28.

cannot overlook his role in the religious hierarchy of the Late Amarna period. As a servant of Amun, and not a mere wealthy landowner of Thebes, Pawah's participation at religious events was assured, even though his god was in abeyance owing to Atenism.⁶⁸ Once more, then, the implications of religiosity apply to the priestly elite.

The regularity in the cult of the traditional gods of Egypt had been interrupted, and as a result individuals such as Pawah were sundered from their ongoing association. Previously, the unquestioned stability of the country had existed with an expectation of permanence.⁶⁹ Questioning would have been a revolutionary act, but nothing was queried because a radical alteration was inconceivable. Suddenly, the opposite came to pass. Through the promulgations of Akhenaton, all now was open to question; permanence was lost. Hitherto the accepted ethoi or conglomeration of social maxims—the Middle Kingdom literature is replete with such “teachings”—had been self-evident. The concept of duty was paramount among the bureaucracy and, one supposes, equally understood and never challenged among the priesthoods. The prevailing ethic of responsibility was the hallmark of the pre-Amarna schism. One acted through internal motivation in an effort to equate the personal standard of morality with the accepted code of behavior. Owing to this socialization, there was no question of loyalty, which can become a dilemma when all is open to argument, when everything is, so to speak, placed on the chopping block of history.

The revolutionary phase of Egyptian religion, the so-called Amarna period, opened all sectors of thought to reevaluation simply because the preexistent social behavior implied a basis of universality. Now came the antithesis. One had to submit to the new faith, to the Pharaoh, and to his beliefs. Such acceptance implied loyalty, itself a rigid requirement of any revolutionary.⁷⁰ Hence, the concept of duty disappeared and with it the concomitant motivation of responsibility, hitherto the pride of any individual's career. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, was stressed, if merely because it was the logical outcome of the new ethos of loyalty. Individualism, ironically, decreases in periods of swift and radical change, since a person must now accept the new faith and belong to a new social order with a self-conscious group identity. Akhenaton was not content merely to allow his followers to practice their new religion; they were required to do so.⁷¹ History, as well, was banished: Akhenaton's moral claims involved a quest for absolutes. Assmann remarks that the “Amarna revolution reveals itself as a counter-movement, directed against the beginnings of individual religiosity and its idea of ‘taking God to heart’, of ‘knowing God’.”⁷²

Such a policy has to entail an overt denial of nuances and therefore a rejection of contingency. It also leads to a far different religious outlook. The demand of loyalty and group solidarity is secured with a harsh but necessary cement: all must now follow the new faith. The Aten's high priest, Akhenaton, may have been at the pinnacle of the sun god's earthy creations, but all belonged to the sun and all must therefore worship him. Such implications have been fathomed by D. B. Redford in his lengthy analysis of the heretic Pharaoh

⁶⁸ J. von Beckerath, *Chronologie des ägyptischen Neuen Reiches*, Hildesheimer Ägyptologische Beiträge 39 (Hildesheim, 1994), p. 46, provides an improved chronological discussion of this graffito.

⁶⁹ H. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812–1822* (Boston, 1957), pp. 191–94, has an excellent abstract

analysis of this situation.

⁷⁰ Assmann, “Die ‘Loyalistische Lehre Echnatons,’” *SAK* 8 (1980): 1–32.

⁷¹ Redford, *Akhenaton: The Heretic King* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 175–79 and 232–35.

⁷² Assmann, “Ocular Desire in a Time of Darkness,” pp. 24–25.

without, however, these generalized political-theological aspects having been overly stressed.⁷³

Religiosity, then, is not something that exists independent of the prevailing social ethos. Pawah was interested in regaining his sight: as Assmann has proved, this means that he wished to see his gods again. What, then, was this “sight”? Clearly, the writer was not referring to sudden manifestations of his deity such as would occur at oracles. These were few and far between and, in fact, served to ally the political sectors of the land with the theological ones (or vice versa).⁷⁴ Nor could Pawah be referring solely to the great festival of the day, such as an excited onlooker in the streets of Thebes might have witnessed. Taking into consideration his importance and the location of the graffito—in the chapel of Pairi at Thebes (TT 139)⁷⁵—I feel it is not unwarranted to interpret Pawah’s ocular desire in the simplest way: namely, he wished to see his deity (or deities) as he was used to doing, that is, he longed to be a member of the regular clergy and participate in all of the cultic activities to which he had been accustomed.

In Pawah’s case, the twin poles of political obedience may be seen to operate if we change the word “political” to “religious.”⁷⁶ One might claim to be obeying the religious norms for one’s self-interest, one’s own good. This pole implies that one legislates one’s religion for oneself. Therefore, one exists as an autonomous entity. It is not difficult to recognize the concept of duty and of responsibility at this point, the self-motivation being the attempt to equate the personal ethic with the accepted standard or ethos. Otherwise, one might claim to be obeying someone else. In the second case, one ends up by giving one’s obedience for all time, atemporally, so to speak. This pole must by nature avoid consideration of each and every case that might arise. Akhenaton’s religion provides a good example of the demand of loyalty and thereby the requirement of obedience. Earlier in Egyptian religion, however, the association between the individual and the cult was quite different. Then, as Pawah wished, his relationship to the age-old deities of Egypt was one that had a basis in duty, and his intimate desires were connected to viewing his god. This was one kernel of his religiosity, not, perhaps one with which some of us would feel comfortable—indeed, many would demand more—but one that a conservative Egyptian in that age of revolution may have felt.

It is Assmann’s claim that cult religion must be separated into the two categories of daily ritual and the procession festivals.⁷⁷ While adhering to this first-level explanation of the year’s activity at the temples, I do not think that the limited participation of the Egyptian people in the latter proves a high degree of popular religiosity. Even in the earliest festival calendar that has come down to us, Niuserre’s from his sun temple, the enclosed nature of the ceremonies is evident. If we follow Helck’s restoration of the fragments of Niuserre’s inscription, then the main events in the Fifth Dynasty were as follows:⁷⁸

⁷³ Redford, *Akhenaton: The Heretic King*.

⁷⁴ Assmann, “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest,” p. 108; and M. Römer, *Gottes- und Priester-Herrschaft in Ägypten des Neuen Reiches*.

⁷⁵ Assmann, “Ocular Desire in a Time of Darkness,” pp. 12 and 19.

⁷⁶ Idem, *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten und Israel*; see also C. Schmidt, *Political Theology: Four*

Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1985), pp. 54–56.

⁷⁷ Assmann, “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest,” pp. 105–22.”

⁷⁸ Helck, “Die ‘Weihinschrift’ aus dem Taltempel des Sonnenheiligtums des Königs Neuserre bei Abu Gurob,” 47–77.

- (1) New Year's Day (Thoth 1)
- (2) Wagdy
- (3) Thoth
- (4) Sadj-Feast (?)
- (5) Clothing of Anubis
- (6) Local Re feast
- (7) *W3h-^ch*
- (8) *šspt-itrw*
- (9) Sokar
- (10) Local Re feast
- (11) Second New Year's Day
- (12) Brand feast
- (13) Local Re feast
- (14) Local Re feast (?)
- (15) Min
- (16) Local Re feast

While the organization of the remainder is less evident, the calendar began, as expected, on the day 1 of the opening civil month and coursed through the year. Although local celebrations for the sun god Re occurred, the divergence between Niuserre's sun temple events and those recorded at Medinet Habu were relatively few. This is crucial, as we can see just how effective the Egyptian temples were in controlling the major religious events in Egypt. Once more it can be asked just how involved the populace was in such religious events, especially since many of Niuserre's celebrations were based on rejuvenation and the like, for example, the two New Year's Days, the festival of Min, and even Sokar. Considering the limited physical size of the temple, its relatively small contingent of priests, and its modest economy, one has the impression that public involvement was extremely limited.

This conclusion applies to the great festivals of the Old through New Kingdoms. Parallels exist in the Greco-Roman period. Fairman, in his judicious analysis of the temples of Edfu, Dendera, and Kom Ombo, arrived at similar conclusions.⁷⁹ "It is clear that for the majority of people there was no direct contact with either daily service or with many festivals, and no participation in any intimate or sacred rites," he opines.⁸⁰ At the New Year's ceremony, Hathor and her associated deities were ushered out of the holy of holies and put on display only for a privileged few.⁸¹ The processions and ceremonies remained within the temple even though some of the elite could witness them in the Outer Hypostyle Court at Dendera. Whereas the Festival of the Sacred Falcon did involve a ritual procession that took place outside of the Edfu temple, the climax of the ceremony occurred in the Temple of the Sacred Falcon. Furthermore, as with Opet in the New Kingdom, the main performances were of a restricted nature. The sacred drama of the Festival of Victory was likewise for limited company, if only because most of the action was set at the Sacred Lake within the precinct of Horus's temple at Edfu. Only the lengthy ceremony of the Sacred Marriage—I use Fairman's rubric for the event—involved a broadly based public perfor-

⁷⁹ Fairman, "Worship and Festivals in an Egyptian Temple," pp. 165–203.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

mance.⁸² Various stopovers were included in this feast, notably Thebes, Komir, and Hierakonpolis, where the mayors actively involved themselves.⁸³ I agree with Fairman in recognizing this event as having incorporated two distinct sections: the Sacred Marriage and the Festival of Horus of Behdet, the latter associated with Osiris and the cult of ancestors.

In no way did Fairman ignore the public aspect of the processions, concerning which Assmann has noted further historical and religious ramifications. In fact, the English scholar made it clear that the various free meals and rejoicings would always accompany such emergences of the god from the temple walls.⁸⁴ In pre-Amarna times, petitioners would write prayers on ostraca and lay them before their god moving in procession in order to help them through various personal tribulations.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, those wishes for divine aid did not involve an inward vision of the knowledge of God; the piety, if it existed, was not of a confessional sort but, rather, one directed to the image itself—the “seeing” of the statue was considered to be of paramount importance for the hoped-for cure.

Reference to the Amarna period can again form a worthwhile antithesis to this not very deep (philosophically speaking) religious act. Akhenaton made it clear that only he was able to fathom the extent of the Aten, even in the night. True knowledge of the sun disk was reserved solely for his son, the living Pharaoh. If it is correct, as Assmann appears to feel, that Akhenaton reduced “the people to an experience of mere physical vision,”⁸⁶ then it follows that he merely confirmed, perhaps in a far stronger and reductionist way, the implications of Egyptian religion (or at least of the religion which constituted the formal and regularized backbone of the elite temples).

Now if the revelation of a god through a procession is physically represented, then the connection of state with clergy is all the more linked.⁸⁷ Unlike the cult activities of a temple, the triumphal processions are visible manifestations of the presence of the deity concerned. The king, whether he appeared or not, was also represented, as a glance at the standard great festivals on the temple walls of Edfu, Esna, or Dendera reveals. There was a continuum from the grandiose New Kingdom processions such as Opet. State and Church were one. The individual who did not belong to the priesthood, or who was not a great official of the country, could only watch the god’s performances, only on certain days of the year and only with the hope of having his personal difficulties lessened. The rhythm of events connected to the subsistence agriculture of the Nile Valley was orchestrated by the temple with the Pharaoh theoretically conducting but in effect absent.

Food presented to the deity on feast days constituted a benefit for the priests.⁸⁸ As J. J. Janssen’s studies of the New Kingdom economy have shown, however, the amounts exceeded what temple officials could consume.⁸⁹ In his words, “we have to conclude that at

⁸² Ibid., p. 196.

⁸³ D. Kurth, “Die Reise der Hathor von Dendera nach Edfou,” in R. Gundlach and M. Rochholz, eds., *Ägyptische Tempel—Struktur, Funktion und Programm* (Hildesheim, 1994), pp. 211–16.

⁸⁴ Fairman, “Worship and Festivals in an Egyptian Temple,” p. 202.

⁸⁵ Assmann, “Ocular Desire in a Time of Darkness,” p. 25; and G. Posener, “La piété personnelle avant l’âge amarnien,” *RdE* 27 (1975): 195–210.

⁸⁶ Assmann, “Ocular Desire in a Time of Darkness,” p. 24.

⁸⁷ Idem, “Frühe Formen politischer Mythomotorik: Fundierende, kontrapräsentliche und revolutionäre Mythen,” in D. Harth and J. Assmann, eds., *Revolution und Mythos*, p. 62.

⁸⁸ Kemp, *Ancient Egypt*, p. 193.

⁸⁹ Janssen, “Prolegomena to the Study of Egypt’s Economic History during the New Kingdom,” *SAK* 3 (1975): 139–47, 170, 180–82; idem, “The Role of the Temple in the Egyptian Economy during the New Kingdom,” in E. Lipiński, ed., *State and Temple Economy in the Ancient Near East*, vol. 2 (Leuven, 1979),

festivals, apart from the actual priests and the other regular temple personnel, a considerable number of people from outside the community received a share in the gifts of the gods.⁹⁰ Numerous Deir el-Medineh ostraca indicate that certain items were sent to the necropolis workmen, for example, head of cattle designated for the Opet festival.⁹¹ Additional, though fragmentary, ostraca record brief lists of processed foods—breads, cakes, and the like—regularly presented to a deity on certain grand occasions. These offerings were later distributed outside the temple. Janssen concludes: “This means that part of the population of the West Bank of Thebes was incidentally provided with food by the temples.”⁹² Merchants sold other surplus on behalf of the temples, however.⁹³

The workmen did not participate in the cult celebrations. At best, they could only view the deity when it moved in procession and—on rare occasions—petition the god. Helck’s study of absenteeism at Deir el-Medineh has implications for an analysis of private religion.⁹⁴ By the Ramesside period, one day out of ten was a “week-end” for state workers (the Egyptian week being comprised of one decade); yet with increasing frequency the days preceding and following the tenth also became nonworking ones. Helck cited the strong influence of the local religious holidays in contrast to the official state festivals.⁹⁵ The local religious events lasted several days, whereas the major feasts at Karnak afforded only enough free time to see the processions (see Assmann’s corroborative observations regarding the public revelations of the gods).

The private feast-lists provide indirect clues about the involvement of the average Egyptian in the nation’s celebrations. Various offerings were established by the deceased’s relatives for such events as New Year’s Day, Wagdy, and the like.⁹⁶ Of course, family members did not need to visit the tomb in order to take part in a religious celebration in which the deceased would also be involved. After all, one could have established a mortuary contract to provide the revenue to hire someone to supply food for these festivals. In either case, the religious involvement of the Egyptians would have been of a more personal nature, somewhat like our visits to cemeteries on holidays. In other words, the religious component was not public, nor were the living actively involved with the specific deity whose festival was then celebrated. One may hypothesize, however, that many Egyptians viewed the god during the procession and then went to the grave(s) of their ancestors for a private religious ceremony. If so, and there is some evidence to support this contention, the temple-based event still remained a show of public recognition of the specific god; the private religious attitude was separate.

But the growth of the temples had created a barrier between privately organized shows of religious feeling and the official ones. Those banquet scenes, so well represented in the private tombs of Thebes, though they took place at the apex of the state-organized Valley Feast,⁹⁷ had developed out of an earlier private activity depicted in the traditional offering

pp. 505–15; and idem, “Die Struktur des pharaonischen Wirtschaft,” pp. 73–75.

⁹⁰ Idem, “The Role of the Temple in the Egyptian Economy during the New Kingdom,” p. 514.

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 513–15.

⁹² Ibid., p. 515.

⁹³ A useful survey is that of idem, *De markt op de Oever* (Leiden, 1980), especially pp. 23–24.

⁹⁴ Helck, “Feiertage und Arbeitstage in der Ramessidenzeit,” and now Janssen, “Absence from Work by the Necropolis Workmen of Thebes,” *SAK* 8 (1980):

127–50.

⁹⁵ Helck, “Feiertage und Arbeitstage in der Ramessidenzeit,” pp. 140, 156–66.

⁹⁶ H. Kees, *Totenglauben und Jenseitsvorstellungen der alten Ägypter* (Berlin, 1980), pp. 121–22; Assmann, “Der schöne Tag,” pp. 4–5, as well as “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest,” pp. 111–13; see also Kemp, “How Religious Were the Ancient Egyptians?,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 5 (1995): 27–28, 32.

⁹⁷ Assmann, “Ocular Desire in a Time of Darkness,” p. 19.

scene.⁹⁸ The atmosphere was set by the melancholy songs of the blind harper, who stressed that “beauty” allowed perception of the deity.⁹⁹ Religious feelings were completely introspective. The banquet was an intimate occasion for preoccupation with mortality and the attempt to recapture the mood of one who was not normally concerned with death.

A major festival involving the concept of death was Sokar.¹⁰⁰ There is little doubt that this event was celebrated independently of temple activities, for its age-old connections to the cult of the dead remained a part of Egyptian religion. Sokar was agriculturally based in the Osiris myth, but to those lengthy rituals of the lamentation, embalming, interment, and resurrection of the deity was appended the overt dogma of the rise of Horus to the throne of Egypt.¹⁰¹ In Sokar, the theological principle of the father-son constellation is made to apply to royalty by encompassing the death of the king and the succession of his heir.¹⁰² There is little doubt that this event was celebrated independently from the temple ceremonies, as its age-old connection to the cult of the dead remained part of Egyptian religion.

The Sokar feast concluded with the erection of the Djed-pillar on the first day of the second season, after the death of Osiris at the end of the previous month. The theme of the son who sits upon the throne of his father is repeated in the Heb Sed, and a Djed-pillar is raised then too.¹⁰³ The jubilee of the king's rejuvenation was political in nature, however; that is, it referred to a specific occurrence in present time. Sokar is a prime example of the multidimensional character of Egypt's major feast. In Egyptian society, no clear differentiation was made between the theological aspects of the state and the political, and various events during a given feast might emphasize one aspect or the other.

The Procession of Min, for example, reflected an archaic agricultural rite, then apparently circumscribed to a temple-based performance, with more than a few overtones of royal accession if not that of coronation. Helck pointed out that the Heb Sed consisted far more of a public performance and demonstration than did other celebrations. A number of nonroyal dignitaries were present, and rewards to officials were frequent at the close of the ceremonies.¹⁰⁴ Onlookers, albeit not from the mass of the populace, could be involved as more than spectators. The purpose of the festival was rooted in the (then) here and now, repeating an old and persevering rite but one that had as its focus a living being, the Pharaoh.

What, then, of the calendrical significance of these festivals? Here we reach a tangled, but not difficult, knot to untie. All of these religious events were organized by principles that were at variance with the daily life of the Egyptians. No matter how ecologically based such celebrations were (such as, for example, New Year's Day and the Min Feast), the system of dating did not work in harmony with the agricultural rhythm of the peasants. Rather, it was drawn up and applied by the intelligentsia and set in a state-organized template, the one which we label the Civil Calendar.¹⁰⁵ Clearly, and this point is what has confused many Egyptologists, such a calendar was rarely in tune with the natural processes of the Nile

⁹⁸ Idem, “Der schöne Tag,” pp. 4–5 and 16–17.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 15: Amun's contenance.

¹⁰⁰ G. Wohlgemuth, *Das Sokarfest* (Göttingen, 1957); G. A. Gaballa and K. A. Kitchen, “The Festival of Sokar,” *Or.*, n.s., 38 (1979): 1–76; and now C. Graindorge-Hérbil, *Le Dieu Sokar à Thèbes au Nouvel Empire* (Wiesbaden, 1994).

¹⁰¹ Neheb-Kau: Assmann, “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest,” pp. 111–12.

¹⁰² Idem, “Das Bild des Vaters im alten Ägypten,” and Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals*, p. 83.

¹⁰³ Gaballa and Kitchen, “The Festival of Sokar,” pp. 73–75; with Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals*, pp. 83, 116–17.

¹⁰⁴ Kemp, *Ancient Egypt*, pp. 212–13.

¹⁰⁵ My article, “Notes on the Ancient Egyptian Calendars,” presents an analysis of its various origins.

Valley. The inundation, for example, was irregular, but the Civil Calendar moved steadily through the (solar) year, and only rarely did the two events come close to each other. The three civil seasons were all artificial, conveniently drawn up to comprise four months of thirty days apiece. Here, as well, the auspicious commencements (the first day of Tybi = Neheb-kau) or the first day of Pachons (beginning of the season of harvest) no longer lay near, let alone coincided with, their original subsistence agricultural determinants. Further disparities applied to the cycle of lunar-based events, although it could be argued, for a typical Egyptian, that any day in a lunar month could easily be determined. My point is not that the temples were the main bodies of intellectual pursuits such as calendrics but, rather, that any original linkage was lost between the reason for a festival and the calendrical date of its occurrence, and it must have been clear to most Egyptians that the temple-regulated feasts rarely took place at their “expected” time. The Civil Calendar originated in the needs of the expanding unified state of Egypt, especially regarding taxation but also with respect to other bureaucratic purposes, for example, simple daily bookkeeping. By imposing this device, however, the state reorganized the religious system and jettisoned the hitherto accepted norms, thereby producing the oft-cited “oddity” of Egypt’s religious year. In no way could the festivals be connected with their original causes.

It could be argued that such a development is common to all civilizations. Moving Christmas to 25 December is always cited. Lengthy and often tedious means of determining Easter in the medieval world replaced the controversies in late antiquity concerning its occurrence. The Carolingian decision to change the Marchfield to 1 May is the best parallel, for the original cause (beginning of spring) was soon lost. (Note that this switch was state-sponsored as well.)¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the later determination of key Christian events was based on an attempt to preserve, as closely as possible, the original dating. With the imposition of the Egyptian Civil Calendar, all went awry after about four to five decades of its use.¹⁰⁷

Even more perturbing, though ultimately less important, was the explicit limitation of the various festivals that could be recorded. In the Medinet Habu calendar, for example, the detailed list of religious celebrations concluded, rather unexpectedly, in the 9th month of the year. That there were over ninety days to go (three months and the five epagomenal days) is a fact frequently overlooked. The reason for this curtailment is self-evident, namely, that the available space on the southern exterior wall was used up.¹⁰⁸ From a modern viewpoint, such a decision to cut the presumably “official” and public proclamation of the year’s key festivals appears irrational. Since the “real” temple listing was conserved on a papyrus roll (or rolls) and kept in the temple’s archives, however, the hieroglyphic proclamations must have been intended for a broader base of readers than the temple initiates who were able to check and even revise the master record. It was the emblazoning of the document, its overt *apologia pro vita templi* that mattered, not its intrinsic accuracy or completeness. In addition, as with many large and quite high inscriptions, one can raise the question whether the viewer could even see it well enough to read it at all.

The same, in fact, might be said for the various religious calendars of the Greco-Roman period (for example, Edfu, Dendera, and Esna). There, as A. Grimm, among others, has ob-

¹⁰⁶ L. White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 3–4, 12–13.

¹⁰⁷ Parker, *The Calendars of Ancient Egypt*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁸ Schott, “The Feasts of Thebes,” pp. 89–90.

served, one grouping of religious “processions” may not correspond accurately to the second detailed listing of these feasts themselves.¹⁰⁹ How, then, can we implicitly rely upon other Egyptian texts written on stelae or carved on the walls of various religious edifices? According to S. Quirke, the role of chance is to be remembered: much has been lost, and how much has survived may simply be dependent upon the temple-building choices of one Pharaoh.¹¹⁰ The hyperemphasis on *Ideengeschichte*, as is all too often practiced by some modern Egyptologists, runs afoul of the basic parameters of ancient Egyptian civilization. I prefer to follow Quirke at this point with respect to the remarkable study of Traunecker on “wall theology.”¹¹¹ The latter scholar, attempting to explain various changes in Egyptian religion and theology, focused on the desire to fill those temple walls with various scenes and inscriptions. Such “open space” supposedly generated a self-awareness on the part of Egyptian theologians and priests to draw up new or at least more developed and complex systems of religious interpretation. In this manner, Traunecker argued, new creative intellectual perceptions came to the fore. It is interesting that the opposite—the absence of detailed speculative thought—can be seen in the Medinet Habu calendar. All too often the space left blank seems to determine what can fill it and therefore the size and shape of the monument affects to no small degree what is to be written on it. Indeed, as modern computers have shown, it is the sudden freedom of new material (temple walls in the Egyptological case) and their relative accessibility that can provoke a new direction in thought, a different thrust in ideas.

Comparisons between the confraternity of Egyptian priests and their corporations and medieval churches in Western Europe fall apart because there was no standard liturgy practiced by the inhabitants of Egypt on a regular basis. The religion practiced in the temples of the Nile Valley was not accessible to the populace, who thus had no influence on the timing. Such practices can perhaps be linked to the lack of mysticism in ancient Egyptian religious thought or at least the avoidance of the esoteric. This characteristic of the negative religion has most recently been discussed by Assmann, who notes the absence of mystical patterns in our normal sense of the phrase.¹¹² Instead, he remarks, the sense of ancient Egyptian “mysteries” rested upon a far more narrow definition, one not connected to secret societies or recondite lore. They actually depended upon the simple and overt act of participation in the cult, in a role which Assmann denotes by the phrase “unio liturgica.”¹¹³ Hidden texts that were supposed to be recited by the “king” in his tomb (but were actually spoken by various priests) appear, first painted, then carved, in the royal tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty. Assmann described those Underworld Books as “Staats-Kabbalah,” thereby explicitly recognizing the link between state and clergy.¹¹⁴ Once more the horizontal bond between these two bodies formed a union that excluded the laity. Practiced

¹⁰⁹ See Grimm, *Die altägyptischen Festkalender in den Tempeln der griechisch-römischen Epoche*, pp. 367–425 and 443–46. There is no clear understanding of the dynamics involved, however. Note also Alliot, *Le culte d'Horus à Edfou au temps des Ptolémées*, vol. 1, pp. 205, 239–40.

¹¹⁰ Quirke, review of Assmann, *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten*, *JEA* 80 (1994): 219–32. I am also dependent upon him for some unpublished comments at this point.

¹¹¹ Once more I am indebted to Quirke's detailed

analysis of this situation; see also C. Traunecker, *Coptos, hommes et dieux sur le parvis de Geb* (Leuven, 1992).

¹¹² Assmann, “Unio Liturgica: Die kultische Einstimmung in götterweltlichen Lobpreis als Grundmotiv ‘esoterischer’ Überlieferung im alten Ägypten,” in H. G. Kippenberg and G. G. Stroumsa, eds., *Secrecy and Concealment*, Numen Book Series 65 (Leiden, New York, and Cologne, 1995), pp. 37–60.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 52–53, n. 42.

religion, as a result, was select, and its esoteric nature depended not upon the preservation of a mass of hidden tractates known only to a few cognoscenti, but upon the effective boundary between the corporate bodies and the state with the people of the land.¹¹⁵

Owing to this dichotomy, it is incorrect to draw parallels between the religious institutions of the Nile Valley and those of the churches of Europe, especially during their predominance in the Middle Ages. The economic aspects of both may have been similar, but their purposes were totally different and their audience not the same. In many ways, it is more fruitful to compare Egyptian temple religion with late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century listeners of chamber music, who belonged to the aristocracy. When subscriptions replaced court patronage, the number of listeners remained a wealthy few. Similarly, one might refer to the "classical" plays of Corneille and Racine, as this phase of French drama was instituted for an elite. If esoterism means practice (in rites, reading spells or liturgies, and the like) as well as limited participation (of an audience of listeners or viewers), then the temple religion of Egypt can be identified with that term. A whole corpus of New Kingdom sun hymns, especially those of the Eighteenth Dynasty, was, on the other hand, exoteric.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, if we refer solely to the cultic religion of Egypt, then, as Assmann concludes, there was neither mysticism nor esoterism *per se* until those texts spread beyond their cultic setting and became a "literature" of a group of initiates. One has to wait until the Greco-Roman period to see its effective rise.

Egyptian temple religion remained, for the most part, a series of performances for the elite. From time to time massive processions were organized, but the participants in such festivities were few. The personal connections of Egyptians to these temple gods were limited indeed, and one cannot but feel that the grandiose procession feasts were more of a carnival time for the locals than a demonstration of piety.¹¹⁷ Ceremonies of rejuvenation and renewal they were, but in no way do they provide evidence for what we commonly call religiosity. The more personal aspects of such state celebrations as the Valley Feast or Sokar cannot be denied, but even here the family participated indirectly, either at the local ancestral tomb (or tombs) or in private feasts. The official cults continued to be corporate bodies cut off in an intellectual sense from the rank and file of Egyptians.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 48, 51–56.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

¹¹⁷ M. M. Bachtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cam-

bridge, Mass., 1968), presents the well-known analysis of the social role of the carnival in peasant society.