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CHAPTER 4

OF MEN AND GODS

PERSONAL PIETY: ATTEMPT AT DEFINITION

Encountering deities they recognized by tangible signs in the world, the Egyptians organized highly institutionalized cults to satisfy the gods and goddesses and thus make it possible to maintain the precarious equilibrium of the cosmos and the world. These cults and their rituals were carried out above all in the framework of the temple, which sheltered the effigy of the god. They were the monopoly of the pharaoh, who delegated his duties and powers to a clergy made up of specialists. Excluded from the temples, the Egyptian people played no role in this system, except for the minimal degree of implicit adherence to the cosmic order: the tacit consensus of all of society, which caused the temple to be recognized by all for what it was, that is, an instrument necessary to the functioning of the world. Ordinary private persons did participate, though indirectly and incompletely, in the life of temples. This participation, however, could not suffice to nourish the hopes of every individual for a religious life, for a relationship with the deity or the deity's perceptible manifestations. It is not a matter of presupposing that each individual felt and expressed the need for religious expression, but of affirming that Egyptians sought to maintain a relationship with their deities in ways other than that of the institutional cult.

There is a problem of terminology, one that goes far beyond a simple question of vocabulary. For a long time in the past and recently again, scholars opposed an official or even royal religion to another one that was called "popular," or even the "religion of the poor." To take only the second of this pair of terms,

its approximative character is evident. As for the first, in French, at least, "popular" has a somewhat pejorative connotation that placed the term in opposition to that which is refined and recondite, so that it has a highly social connotation. In Egypt, unless one was a priest attached to the service of a god and his temple, one was excluded from the institutional cult. But can we call the religious aspirations of a government official "popular"? And what can we say about the "religion of the poor," given that the latter, who were without financial means, are excluded from the sources we are in a position to use, not because they lacked religious sentiment, but because they were unable to leave material traces of it? Although manifestations of individual piety take us down to a lower level of the social scale, we nonetheless never reach its bottom. Peasants and cowherds are, with rare exceptions, conspicuous by their absence, yet did they not also call on their gods?

Besides the official cult, or rather, the cult that was institutionalized according to strict norms, we encounter evidence of personal piety, by means of which each individual attempted to express his relationship with the divine by other means, ones that did not proceed through the machinery of the temple. These means of access to the divine, however, were parallel to those of the institutionalized cult but did not stand in opposition to them, as certain analyses of "Egyptian religions" would have us believe. According to these analyses, as opposed to the official religion, which was sustained by elaborate and complex rituals and learned theology, and which was reserved for a chosen elite capable of rising to spiritual spheres, there was a simplistic religion intended for the ignorant and stamped by superstition and magic. Summed up in these somewhat schematic terms, we are apparently dealing with two religions, and we can scarcely make out what they have in common. Closer analysis, however, shows that nothing could be farther from the case. Just as the official cults and rituals were not made up of a heterogeneous assemblage of plural religions, so there were not two religions, side by side with but ignorant of one another, one a royal religion and the other of popular origin. These were different vehicles for approaching the divine, intended to respond to all human demands and needs, and they drew their material from a common substrate: the deities invoked are basically the same, both inside and outside the temple, and the ways in which Egyptians acted with regard to their deities were not radically different. There was no declaration of faith common to all, because the very basis of polytheism did not impose such a declaration, but rather a general consensus to adhere to certain concepts that were implicitly shared by all.

Personal piety, or personal devotion, seem to be the best available terms to express the relation of the single individual to the divine, insofar as he was a person and not an element of a social and political collectivity. But behind the expression "personal devotion," there is hidden no vague pietism or purely emotional relationship that would have put the individual and the god into contact.

While personal piety was not institutional in character, for it was practiced outside the framework of the temple, it was nonetheless codified, and it obeyed norms accepted by all, norms that were the obligatory mediators in the man/god relationship. To draw an opposition between a ritual formalism of the temples and an independent and autonomous religious practice, one not subject to common rules, would be to project modern notions, ones linked in particular to Christianity, onto an ancient religion. The individual called on the deity by himself and on his own behalf, unlike the priest, who acted in the name of the pharaoh in order to maintain the cosmic and terrestrial order; but each of them did what he did within defined frameworks that were accepted by all. Moreover, neither of these two facets of religious activity could substitute for or replace the other; each had a distinct role, and they were not interchangeable.

Thanks to the abundance of texts preserved to us notwithstanding the ravages of the millennia, it is possible to paint a relatively precise picture of what the temple cults were, and to delve, albeit with an only approximate understanding, into the theology of one or another deity, and to reconstruct, at least roughly, one or another myth. But what of personal devotion? Can we render a faithful image of the practices of individuals? Obviously not, because we can glimpse them only through the evidence that has come down to us, which certainly represents only a tiny percentage of all that once existed, a much smaller percentage than what we can attribute to the major monuments, and especially because these pieces of evidence—stelae, ostraca, amulets, and ex-voto objects—reflect only a small fraction of the religious behaviors of individuals. Inscribed or uninscribed, they are but the visible remains, bearing witness to an infinitely greater mass of religious behaviors that have fallen into oblivion without leaving a trace.

There are two reasons for this state of affairs. The first, which is sociological, has already been noted. In Egypt, in every respect, the bottom of the social ladder is not, or is practically not, represented. A guard at a temple gate had only a subalternate rank in the personnel attached to that edifice, but at least he was endowed with a higher social status than that of a herdsman or launderer, though even the latter can be encountered on a poor-quality stela. Our vision of personal devotion is thus a matter of false statistics. Though they left no traces of themselves, the majority of the Egyptian people certainly did not any the less visit the places “where the people pray” and attend the processions of the gods on festival days, or seek interpretations of their dreams, or have recourse to the aid of a magician.

Notwithstanding the primacy of the text in Egypt, we must not conclude that something not consigned to writing did not exist. Quite the contrary, from the remnants that have come down to us, we can infer that similar things were done by a much larger number of individuals without their having sought to commemorate them in any way whatsoever.

The second reason has to do with the very essence of the religious act. Not every prayer, whether of praise or entreaty, addressed to a deity was carved on a stela; a special occasion was necessary for that, and we often do not know the reasons behind it. Religious practices surely occurred much more frequently than what we know through pieces of evidence that mention them or are the tangible signs of them. Because the creation of such evidence was not necessary in the eyes of those who were immersed in this religion, not everything that was done in the domain of the religious left a trace, hence our difficulty in assessing such matters as the frequency of prayers. Absent a codification imposed by divine law or by a clergy responsible for the faithful, we do not know whether individuals, in imitation of the usages of the daily cult in the temples, had a daily rhythm of prayer or whether, on the contrary, there was a certain freedom in this domain. Analyzing evidence for personal devotion, we can glimpse a certain number of the ways in which *homo religiosus* conducted himself and attempt a reasonable deduction regarding the validity of this practice for all of Egyptian society, though our picture will nonetheless remain somewhat impressionistic. We can shed some light on the crucial stages in the life of a person, but his daily life will remain blurred.

There is another pitfall in the way of our knowledge of personal piety. We have already seen that the specific forms assumed by the nonfunerary, official cult in the Old Kingdom and even in the Middle Kingdom are difficult to determine for lack of evidence, both in quantity and in explicitness. The situation is even less favorable in the case of personal devotion, of which there are rare traces prior to the New Kingdom, with the exception of onomastic evidence, which is of course present in all periods; this rarity once led scholars to consider personal devotion to be a phenomenon that arose in the New Kingdom, specifically, after the Amarna Period, though with some pre-Amarna precursors. According to them, the reasons for the rise of this phenomenon were the dissatisfaction of simple individuals in the face of the official cult, from which they were excluded; a need for direct communication with deities, especially to ameliorate life's afflictions; and a search for a personal salvation that was not taken into account by the official cult.

But what about earlier? Did Egyptians not feel the same need for a protective, consoling divine proximity, or might their need lie concealed behind the opaque screen of the social and political institution that was put in place at the beginning of history? Recent analyses, such as those of the British Egyptologist John Baines and of Hellmut Brunner before him, indicate that there was indeed an individual piety prior to the New Kingdom, though very few traces of it have been preserved to us and perhaps were never produced in abundance. Even in early periods, Egyptians had recourse to divine intervention to explain and justify their acts, for example, Ankhtifi, a notable at Moalla in Upper Egypt during the First Intermediate Period, or Sinuhe, the hero of a famous story, who was in ex-

ile in the Near East during the reign of Senwosret I. There is no doubt that magic was already practiced, and scholars think that Egyptians made use of divine oracles even before their first written attestations, which date to the New Kingdom.

Still, it is certain—and this needs to be emphasized—that there was political and social, and consequently religious, change from the period of the Old Kingdom down to that of the New Kingdom. We may assume that already in the oldest periods, there was more individual practice than can be discerned in the preserved evidence. Nevertheless, in the Old Kingdom, the pharaonic institution, which was highly centralized and hierarchized, and whose political status blended with the religious, remained recently founded and rested on a solid basis, leaving scarcely any place for individual expression in its tightly woven social network. Yet already, men such as Hardjedef or Heqaib were deified and could serve as intermediaries between the terrestrial realm and that of the gods, if only for the benefit of the social elite. It was not until the notion of monarchy was rethought by the ideologists of the Middle Kingdom and until this same monarchy experienced the stinging reverses of the first two Intermediate Periods that the individual acquired the status of a person vis-à-vis the divine otherwise than in the shadow of the king, though without in the process destroying the social consensus.

It is thus not false to say that the New Kingdom, especially after the Amarna Period, and then the later periods of Egyptian history, mark a turning point in the evolution of personal piety; that rapport with the divine, which made a more visible irruption into the lives of individuals, experienced change; and that the divine power of salvation weighed more heavily in favor of humankind. We must examine more closely this transformation in human/divine interaction, while taking care not to make it into the sign of a passage from immanence to transcendence in the Egyptian concept of the divine.

PERSONAL PIETY AND INSTITUTIONS

Before analyzing the content of personal piety—what type of relations existed between men and gods, and which gods—we must shed light on the means by which it was expressed, given that the frameworks of institutional religion were in place and functioning.

THE TEMPLE: WITHIN AND WITHOUT

At first glance, the functioning of a temple, the house of the god that sheltered his effigy and where the daily cult or that of festival days was rendered to him by specialists, excluded the presence of anyone who was impure and unauthorized to carry out these ritual acts. The holy of holies, the naos that sheltered the statue

was, without exception, the domain of the first prophet of the god. But further away from the naos, the sacred, and thus the separated, nature of the spaces diminished and the interdiction became less formal. According to a text of Ramesses II, the hypostyle hall at Karnak was "the place of acclamation by the people." Penetrating beyond the pylons and the forecourts, the people were allowed to come as far as the first columned hall and associate themselves, at least from a distance, with the sanctity of the temple. In the same vein, in the court of the temple of Luxor, we find mention of "the place of supplication," where the requests of men were heard. Still, late texts at the temples of Esna and Philae, among others, indicate that access was closed to foreigners, called "Asiatics," who doubtless were viewed as the incarnation of impurity in this period.

These forecourts or courts were also the place where private people who were not necessarily members of the temple personnel had the possibility of leaving their statue and thus participating indirectly in the life of the sacred edifice. This usage became more widespread from the New Kingdom on.

But the place par excellence where people could come from everywhere at any time was at the doorways or gates of the edifice or of its enclosure wall. More than mere points of passage between the building and what lay outside it, they represented the boundary between the domains of the sacred and the profane, the contact points between these two spheres. The very name often given to them is revealing: "god X, worshiped by the people." The eastern entry to the temple of Karnak, the "upper door of the house of Amun," around which an exterior chapel was built, was reserved for devotees who did not have access to the temple; there, they invoked "Amun who hears prayers," along with the successive kings who had occupied themselves with construction work in this area of Karnak, Tuthmosis III and Ramesses II. Eventually, the door was open "to all" by Ptolemy VIII, "who answers prayers," the last king to work in this area. Similarly, at Memphis, the crowd could render an extramural cult to Ptah "who hears prayers" near a basin whose wall took the form of a niched façade, resembling the wall of the city, which was put there for that purpose. The text carved on it greets Ptah "at the base of the great rampart, for it is the place where requests are heard."

Colossal statues, along with smaller ones, flanked the doors of pylons and came to play an important role in individual devotion. Particularly revealing is the example of the Tenth Pylon at Karnak, built or at least decorated by Haremhab, which was located at the extreme south of the temple and gave access to the *dromoi* that connected the residence of Amun to that of Mut and to the temple of Luxor. In the courtyard there, along with royal colossi, were found scribal statues belonging to the vizier Ramesses before he became king and inaugurated Dynasty 19, and to Amenhotep, son of Hapu, who had lived under Amenophis III and gained great fame before later being deified. The texts carved on Amenhotep's statues clarify their function:

O people of Karnak who desire to see Amun, come to me, I shall transmit your entreaties. I am the intermediary of this god, (just as) Nebmaatré (Amenophis III) designated me to transmit the words of the Two Lands to him.¹

In the middle of the kilts, where these texts were carved in bas relief, these statues bear marks of wear caused by the rubbing of the hands, thousands of times over, of the faithful of Amun, a gesture that crosses religions: touching or embracing a statue of God or of a saint, relics or consecrated objects, or the scrolls of the Law. The Cairo Museum has two other statues of this type, perhaps from the forecourt of the temple of Mut, whose owners offer to intercede with their mistress on behalf of the faithful.

Egyptians could come not only to the doorways of the temples, and even enter them, thus impregnating themselves with the sacred character that emanated from them, they could also find a sympathetic ear for their prayers, for here, the gods assumed a form capable of hearing prayers from outside the temple. Statues of intercessors or intermediaries were supposed to aid the faithful by facilitating communication.

In the Ptolemaic Period, the only period from which we have explicit evidence of this phenomenon—though it probably existed earlier—the doorways played yet another role. In all the major temples, we find a *rut-di-Maat*, “door of rendering justice,” the term *Maat* here being taken in its most restricted and strictly juridical meaning. A text from the temple of Edfu declares that “It is the place where the requests of all litigants are heard, where the weak and the powerful are judged so as to distinguish justice from iniquity.”² It is highly revealing that human arbitration between litigants occurred in the very confines of the sacred perimeter, with the result that it was thus placed under the influence of the gods.

CHAPELS AND ORATORIES

In descriptions of the Egyptian religious landscape, it is too often forgotten that besides the gigantic temples such as Karnak, with their solid clerical organization and their ties to the state, numerous oratories, chapels, and pilgrims’ stations dotted the villages and the countryside or were located at the boundary between the cultivated fields and the desert. It is impossible to draw up an accurate list of them: these were small affairs, often just light mud brick constructions with only their doorways sometimes made of stone, and most of them have undoubtedly disappeared, with certain of them known only by a chance mention in a text. The situation in the Ptolemaic Period is more explicit,

¹ Translation based on that of J. Yoyotte, *Les Pèlerinages*, Sources orientales 3 (Paris, 1960), p. 43.

² E. Chassinat, *Edfu*, vol. 8, *Mémoires de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale* 25 (Cairo, 1933), pp. 162–63.

and certain small towns in the Faiyum had scores of oratories consecrated to deities, each with his or her specialization. Unless we suppose that this period witnessed a heretofore unknown proliferation of local chapels, something that has not been proved, we can retrospectively deduce that a more or less comparable situation already prevailed in earlier periods. Moreover, there is evidence that this was so.

The village of Deir el-Medina on the west bank of Thebes, which was home to the workmen who constructed the royal tombs, has revealed a profusion of chapels dedicated to deities of the local pantheon: Hathor, mistress of the West; Ptah; Meret-seger, "she who loves silence," personification of the Theban mountain; and Amenophis I and his mother, Queen Ahmose-Nofretari, both of whom were deified. Other gods were "imported," such as Thoth the moon, and Satis and Anukis, goddesses of the First Cataract, while a constellation of Syro-Palestinian deities—Reshep, Haurun, Astarte, and Qadesh—were also at home in this small community.

In the Late Period, at least, on the occasion of his travels between Luxor and Medinet Habu every ten days, or perhaps only on the occasion of more important festivals, Amun of Opet followed a processional route, "the route of Amenope," along which stood a number of bark stations where a cult was rendered to him, undoubtedly in the presence of the faithful. Also on the west bank of Thebes, but a little further to the north, in the bay of Deir el-Bahari, an old chapel of Hathor, undoubtedly excavated into the rock in the Middle Kingdom, was restored by Tuthmosis III and became the center of a "popular" cult where "the people of the nome of Thebes, both rich and poor" gathered together. There, people left *ex-voto* gifts of a great many small objects of piety: scarabs, rings, female statuettes with shapely figures, Hathor heads, and amulets of various sorts.

Moreover, Egyptians generally had a certain predilection for places that were already "old" in their eyes, charged with historical prestige or with a mythological aura; such places could also become the destination of a pilgrimage, if only a local and occasional one. The Memphite region on the border of the western desert was particularly rich in sites displaying these characteristics. At Saqqara, the pyramids of Kings Djoser and Teti, who became intercessors with the major deities, received visits that were commemorated by stelae or graffiti. Further to the north, at Abusir, in the disused funerary temple of Sahure, there was a Dynasty 18 representation of the goddess Sakhmet that became the object of a popular cult down into the later stages of Egyptian history under the name Sakhmet of Sahure. The old building was transformed into a veritable chapel that grew in size over the centuries and was administered by a clergy.

These reuses and reinterpretations of a preexisting statue for new purposes find a striking confirmation in the cult addressed to the Great Sphinx on the plateau of Giza. Beginning with Dynasty 18, the Sphinx was known as Horus-in-

the-Horizon, Greek Harmakhis; closely associated with him was the Syro-Palestinian god Haurun, who took on his form and his epithets. Brick walls built at least as early as Tuthmosis IV protected his open-air temenos, and into these walls devotees set scores, even hundreds, of votive stelae. Chapels erected during Dynasties 18 and 19 flanked Harmakhis, and he was the goal of a pilgrimage that often included the kings themselves, on the occasion of their frequent stays at Memphis. We can easily see how, once it was cleared of the sands that encumbered it, the colossal statue of this hybrid being, visible to all, with the pyramids as its backdrop, could only be an object of astonishment and admiration. In a parallel development like that at Abusir, a small chapel abutting on a subsidiary pyramid east of that of Cheops found itself reused. It became the cult place of the goddess Isis, who was called, beginning in Dynasty 21, "mistress of the pyramids," that is, the tutelary goddess who extended her protection over the Giza plateau. Here, too, the evidence testifies to a cult that attracted the favor of ordinary private people. At the site of the chapel, archaeologists have found stelae and libation basins, as well as deposits of faience rings, all of which are characteristic of this kind of cult place.

From the site of Qantir in the eastern delta, where the city of Pi-Riamsehe once stood, we have nearly a hundred stelae, the so-called Horbeit stelae. They bear witness to an important cult of royal and divine statues in one or more chapels, though we are hard put to describe these chapels and statues for lack of archaeological remains. In any event, these various cult centers, which must have been much more numerous in antiquity than those for which we have evidence, reveal an intense religious life that was in no way limited to a few central institutions. We always find the same specific material: stelae, basins, ex-votos in the image of the god, or small objects of piety. Thus, at Abydos from the Middle Kingdom on, there was an accumulation of hundreds of commemorative stelae dedicated to Osiris by devotees who were not buried there, in the immediate surroundings of his temple.

We must also mention, though with some reservation, the graffiti to be found on the many floors, terraces, and walls of temples. Their examination shows, for instance, that in the temples of the Karnak enclosure, they are often the work of members of the lower clergy of the temple, who took advantage of their situation, with the result that they do not indicate the presence of outsiders in the edifice.

The social range represented is highly significant: it runs the gamut from high court officials, via scribes, soldiers, and local notables, down to various groups of artisans. The many uninscribed objects, mass produced and of rather poor quality, lead us to believe that persons of even more modest extraction, who could purchase only cheap objects to dedicate, nevertheless had access to these sanctuaries. The poor state of preservation of these sanctuaries and the absence of texts mentioning the cult that was carried out in them make it difficult for us to know exactly how they functioned. We may nevertheless suppose that access

to them was less restricted than in the major temples, and that lay people had a better chance of entering their sacred perimeter.

WHEN GODS LEFT THEIR TEMPLES: FESTIVAL PROCESSIONS

Sanctuaries both great and small sheltered an image of the god, nearly always hidden in a naos, notable exceptions being the Great Sphinx (figure 8) and the colossal statues set up in front of the gateways of temple enclosures. Aside from his prophet, private persons had no access to the god, and they had to be satisfied with participating in the sacred character of these places by approaching their entrances or penetrating only into the first courtyards, where they could contemplate the bas-relief images of the deity. Nevertheless, under special circumstances, the wish to "see the god" so often expressed in prayers found its satisfaction. While the daily cult unfolded unseen in the penumbra of the holy of holies, the god did go out into the open air on the occasion of the major solemn festivals that were often only annual. These were the occasion of manifestations of joy, and the participants included not only court officials and members of the clergy, but also the entire population of the area and sometimes people who came from further away. Temple reliefs and the legends that accompany them, the festival calendars of the Ptolemaic temples, and the accounts of Herodotus enable a rather precise description of these occasions of rejoicing.

From the Middle Kingdom on, at Abydos, which became the cult center of Osiris, and where a reliquary contained the head of the god, major gatherings of people occurred annually at the beginning of the inundation season. The god was carried with great pomp in his sacred barque, which was flanked by that of his wife Isis, from the holy of holies of his temple to his tomb, which was located in the desert in a place called Poqer. Standard bearers, servants laden with offerings, and lector priests accompanied him, escorted by the crowd of pilgrims. The god's death and triumph were commemorated, after which he was taken back to his home. Busiris in the delta, the other city of this dead god, must have had a similar festival. Thebes was the stage for many processions of the great god Amun (figure 9), when he traveled with pomp from Karnak to Luxor, that is, to the Opet temple (called "Southern Harem" in Egyptian), in a portable barque carried on a litter and was then transported in an actual ship on the Nile, and when he crossed the Nile to visit the way stations in the holy places of the Theban necropolis and the funerary temples of the deceased kings on the occasion of the Beautiful Festival of the Valley. Another specific form of Amun of Luxor, Amenope, traveled, at least theoretically, at the beginning of each ten day period from his temple in the city to the west bank. Once a year, Hathor of Dendara sailed upstream on the Nile to Edfu to join with Horus and consummate their marriage during the festival of the Goodly Reunion. At Memphis, it was Ptah-Sokar who was dragged around his temple on a sledge. On such occasions, the

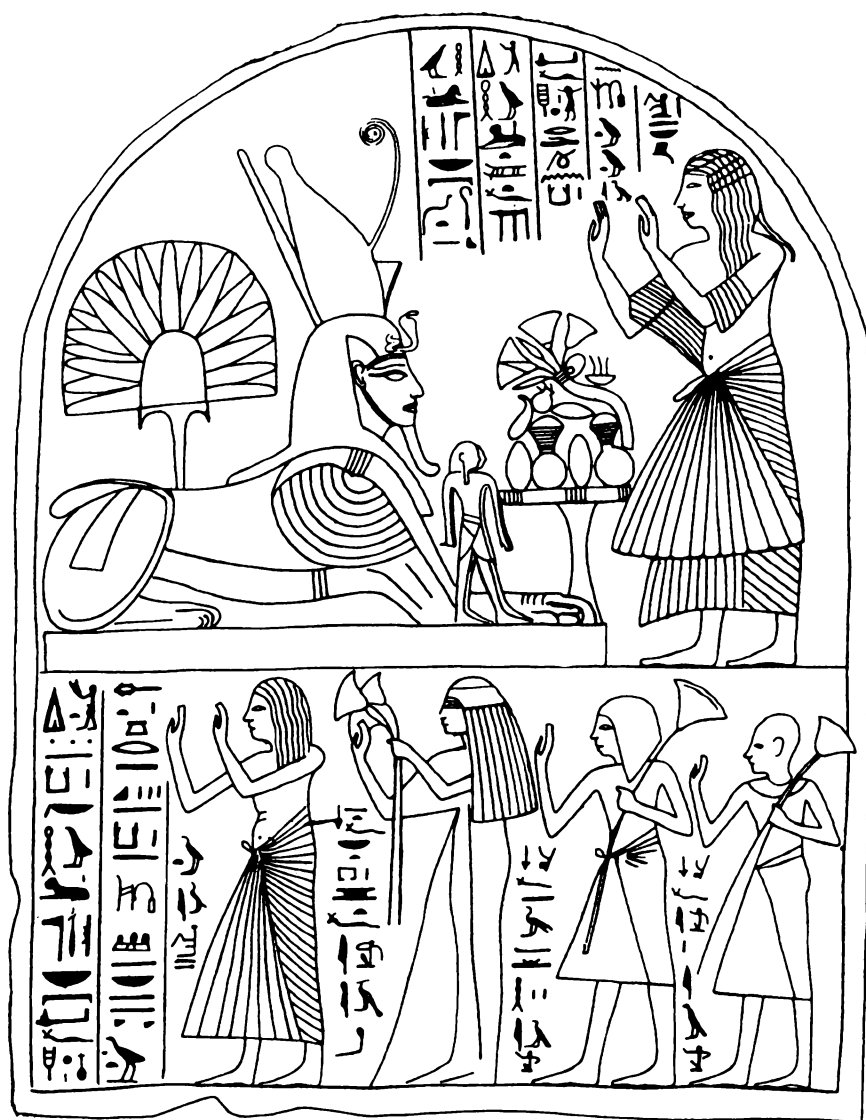


FIGURE 8. The scribe Tutuia worshipping the Great Sphinx of Giza under his name of Haurun (Dynasty 18). From S. Hassan, *Le Sphinx: Son histoire à la lumière des fouilles récentes* (Cairo, 1951), p. 97, fig. 35.

“sacred staffs” that were effigies of the god’s power were displayed. As for the statue itself, the representations of barques with their naos often hidden by a large veil lead us to think that the statue was not directly visible to the crowd that was gathered on the riverbanks and along the processional route. This is a question that has sparked controversies among Egyptologists, and it cannot be definitively settled, in my opinion, for lack of absolutely explicit representations or texts. Was there a moment when the statue was removed from its naos, or when at least the doors were opened? Perhaps: at such times, ordinary private persons would have been present at what the Egyptians called the “revelation of the face.”

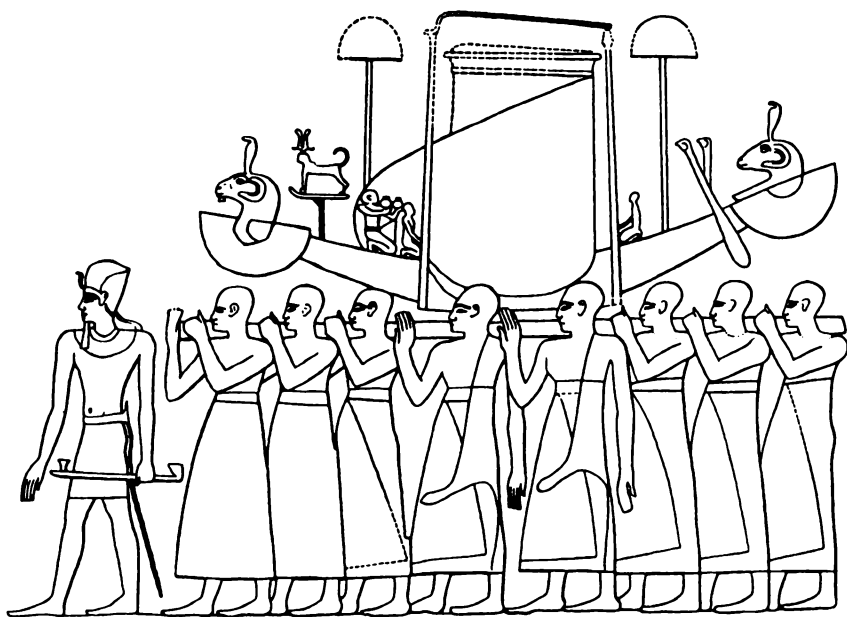


FIGURE 9. The processional barque of Amun, depicted on the red granite chapel rebuilt by Philip Arrideus, Karnak. From A. Piankoff and N. Rambova, *Mythological Papyri: Egyptian Religious Texts and Representations*, vol. 5 (New York, 1957), p. 18, fig. 1.

Whatever the case, these were occasions for the faithful and onlookers alike to rejoice and to feast; at Edfu, bread, beer, and haunches of beef were distributed to the “men of the city, who spend their time drinking, taking pleasure before the august god, rubbing themselves with unguents, and loudly playing the tambourine in the company of the women of the city.”³ Similarly, at Esna, the population was exhorted to display their joy during one of the festivals of Neith:

³ E. Chassinat, *Edfou*, vol. 5, *Mémoires de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale* 22 (Cairo, 1930), p. 127.

"May women and men make festival! May this entire city make shouts of joy, and may no one find sleep until sunrise! May Esna be in festival!"⁴

At Luxor, the beautiful reliefs of the colonnade of the temple, which were carved under Tutankhamun and Haremhab, enable us to be present as the Opet festival takes place.

Herodotus, who was witness to them in the middle of the fifth century BCE, gives us a colorful account of the festivals of Bubastis, Busiris, Sais, Buto, and Pa-premis. According to the historian, the festival of Bubastis in honor of the goddess Bastet attracted a goodly portion of the population of the delta,⁵ who flocked to the city in heavily laden boats to dance and drink. Sais was aglow with light on the night of the Festival of the Burning Lamps. Though the Greek historian liked to wallow in picturesque observations, many of his details have been verified by actual Egyptian texts.

Whether or not the face of the god was revealed to those who had come running to gaze on his passing, these festivals were major moments in the liturgical calendar and also in the communal life of the Egyptians, who on the occasion of processions were accorded the privilege of closely approaching the divine objects: statue, barque, sacred emblem.

Yet another manifestation of the divine was accessible to ordinary people, especially in the later stages of history, when the cult of sacred animals developed on a large scale. At Edfu, when the Horus falcon was enthroned for a year on the occasion of the coronation festival, he was presented to the crowd at the gate of the temple enclosure. We also know that the burial of the Apis bull, whose mummy was taken from the embalming house at Memphis to the Serapeum on the plateau of Saqqara, was the occasion of manifestations of grief on the part of the inhabitants of the region—just as his enthronement had been surrounded by joyous demonstrations—as evidenced by autobiographical texts on stelae from the Serapeum.⁶ These practices were not limited to these few particularly famous examples, for many sanctuaries of middling size included a sacred animal stockyard among their outbuildings.

ORACULAR PRACTICES

On the occasion of these outings of the divine statue, people often made inquiries of the god according to oracular practices; the latter became ever more popular from the New Kingdom down to the Roman Period. Far from being confined to serious political decisions concerning a royal succession or a military expedition, the oracles were called on to resolve the most banal problems that came up in everyone's existence. How to find a lost object? Is it a good time

⁴ Esna, 207, 22; S. Sauneron, *Esna*, vol. 3 (Cairo, 1968), p. 37.

⁵ Herodotus, *Histories*, book 2, chaps. 59–63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, book 3, chapters 27–29.

to leave on a trip? To get married? Will this illness be cured? Is the accusation of theft true or not? Representations on stelae or on the walls of temples in the form of elaborate graffiti, as well as ostraca (pieces of pottery or splinters of limestone) on which questions were written enable a rather precise reconstruction of how oracles worked. The best-known oracles are those rendered by Amun of Karnak, often on the Opet festival, and by the deified Amenophis I in the workmen's community of Deir el-Medina; on many occasions, the latter was approached without necessarily waiting for him to leave on procession.

The person requesting an oracle stood before the litter borne by the priests, on which the naos of the god rested. The question was posed directly or through a priest. According to whether the litter—moved by divine force, it was believed—moved forward or backward, the answer was positive or negative. The question was thus usually brief. The request was sometimes made in writing on an ostrakon, with different answers on other ostraca. In the rubbish dump of Deir el-Medina, into which the archives of the entire village had been thrown, archaeologists recovered ostraca with only the word “no” written on them. But we do not know how or just when the god or his representatives chose the response they wished to give. Later, in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, clerics had recourse to another procedure that undoubtedly was felt to be effective by the confident faithful: the divine statue was pierced with holes through which the voice of the priest, who was hidden behind it in a secret room, emanated.

If this simple system enjoyed a certain favor, it is because it responded to needs that could not be satisfied otherwise. The answers were formulated clearly and simply, just like the questions. The procedures were quick, certainly quicker than those of human justice, whose dilatoriness was excoriated by the Eloquent Peasant of a popular tale. In certain cases, litigants did not hesitate to appeal to oracles precisely because a human tribunal would not hear their case. In the face of the venality and corruption of human authorities, equity was expected of the divine.

The oracle was not confused with justice, however, because its decision did not entail inevitable execution. It could happen that if someone was not satisfied with the response of one god, he could go and consult another one. The individual was free to act or not, depending on the response he received. Two questions need to be asked regarding the workings of oracular practices. According to what criteria were the priests led to choose a favorable or unfavorable response? Nothing in the texts tells us. Moreover, the questioners could not have ignored the fact that the answer came to them through human intermediaries, yet they never called the system into question: not because of naiveté, but because they believed that through the divine image, notwithstanding the fact that it was manipulated by men like themselves, they were addressing themselves to a superhuman power and thus had the possibility of establishing a direct communication with the divine.

Since we have evidence of oracles only beginning with Dynasty 18, scholars

have posed the question of whether they existed in earlier periods. Some are of the opinion that the New Kingdom, especially after the Amarna episode, was characterized by the development of personal piety, by a need that would thenceforth be expressed by an individual relationship with the divine, and that oracular practices were just one of a number of expressions of this phenomenon. Abandoning an ethos that kept them at a remove from the gods and their will, Egyptians were thus led to ask them directly about the circumstances of their lives. But this explanation neglects the fact that after the response of the deity, individuals were entirely free to act or not to act. As some evidence, albeit scanty, suggests, oracles existed prior to the New Kingdom, though on a small scale, with the result that the New Kingdom does not mark a rupture, but only the moment when the process was accelerated.

THE CLERGY AS INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

By definition, a temple was a closed place, the house of a god, the receptacle of his effigy and his *ba*, isolated and protected from the outside, profane world by its enclosure wall. Only the clerical personnel, from the prophets down to the guards according to a defined, hierarchical gradation, had access to it, provided they conformed to the indispensable requirements of purity.

Nevertheless, the barrier between these two worlds was not as impenetrable as it might seem at first glance. Lay people could not only come to the doors, but even pass through them and enter the first courtyards. The oratories that must have abounded in the countryside and at the desert edge were undoubtedly more accessible to ordinary private persons than the home of the dynastic Amun. And, in particular, the gods left their retreat and were carried around on festivals that were days of rejoicing. These festivals were the most favorable occasions for putting questions to the statue, and often enough, the priests were called on to play a determining intermediary role.

But the influence of the priests on the life of the population was not limited to strictly religious matters. If we consider the temple personnel—all the sacerdotal classes, both specialists and auxiliaries—we arrive at a relatively large number of individuals. Although the office of first and second prophet of a god was often hereditary, *de facto* if not *de jure*, any layperson could perform the functions of a doorkeeper, sacrificer, or even lector-priest, provided he was competent to do so. In the case of lector-priests, literacy was indispensable. All these men who daily entered the temple nonetheless lived outside it, just like other groups of professionals, for they were in no way consecrated to the god. Moreover, because of the system of phyles, or “priestly groups,” which were four in number and which succeeded one another on a monthly basis in carrying out the cult, the members of the clergy served only three months a year, leading “civilian” lives the rest of the time.

Although the arcana of the rituals and theology were not revealed outside the

temple, this constant coming and going between the sacred domain and the profane world certainly had its consequences. Those without access to the temple undoubtedly received bits and pieces of information, and rumors surely circulated. However small it might have been, clergy and scribes could have divulged, outside the temples, some bit of the knowledge handed down in the "houses of life." Moreover, if this communication did not exist, if the world of the temples was hermetically sealed, we would not be able to understand how it was that ordinary people addressed their prayers to the very gods who were worshiped in the temples. The general population might not have participated in the thoroughly codified functioning of the temple, but they were not entirely ignorant of what went on in them.

MAGIC

THE NOTION OF MAGIC

In their relations with the invisible, ordinary Egyptians remained outside the system of the temple and did not participate, directly at least, in its functioning. But they had other ways of entering into contact with deities; among them, magic played a prominent role.

The word *magic* is heavily laden with negative connotations that have long rendered it difficult for scholars to find an approach to the topic that is not founded on a *prioris* that mask its reality. Common sense immediately associates magic with sorcery, in the Christian tradition of Satanism. But in particular, we run up against two concepts that have had their disciples in the field of history of religions. One is that magic preceded genuine religion, that it was religion's prehistory, a theory upheld by the members of the school of James G. Frazer. The other is that magic is an avatar of religion, a degraded form of it that leads to the most aberrant superstitions; the positivist school and, in Egyptology, Adolf Erman, were ardent adherents of this view. But there have also been scholars who have acknowledged that the notions of magic and religion are in no way opposed to one another. It would be better to propose the hyphenated term *cult-magic*, reserving for the word *religion* a vaster range of meaning that covers the totality of human behavior vis-à-vis the invisible, including both cult and magic. Cult and magic are not antithetical concepts; rather, they both have their roots in the same common substrate, that of a certain concept of the world and its workings, as we find it in Egyptian texts. In reality, various aspects of the cult rendered in the temples were closely related to, or even intermingled with, what we are about to define as magical practices. In both cases, the officiant or magician sought to intervene in the functioning of a world subject to invisible forces and, to cite Philippe Derchain's apt phrase, to "tame the imaginary."

Roughly speaking, in the framework of the cult, the officiant followed a cod-

ified ritual in an attempt to maintain the presence of forces and to maintain the order of the world just as it was, in its unstable precariousness. In the framework of magic, he attempted on behalf of a client to manipulate hostile forces that were also an integral part of cosmic reality. It is this double, complementary aspect that has often led scholars to make an overly radical distinction between the official cult carried out on behalf of the entire group and magic, with its private and individual character. Yet, as in the case of execration rituals, magical processes were often intended to be effective for the collectivity, and not just for an individual. Like the officiant, the magician was a man of action who put his powers to work against other, maleficent powers, whether divine or human, living or dead. This action took place outside the framework of the natural order and the laws of causality, but it did not any the less answer to a logic of its own. It was used as an extraordinary means when ordinary methods were judged to be inappropriate, ineffective, or simply insufficient. The relationship between medicine and magic, two domains that were closely interwoven, is a probative example of this phenomenon.

The driving force behind any action of this type was a supernatural energy called *heka*, with which the gods were endowed by their very essence, with the result that they could be described as being “of powerful *hekau*” or “with many *hekau*.” In the Pyramid Texts, the cannibal pharaoh has no other means of appropriating some of this *heka* than to devour several gods. But humankind was not deprived of it, as we learn from the text of the Instruction of Khety for His Son Merikare: “God has given *heka* to men as a weapon capable of frustrating the normal course of events.” And the magician knew how to make use of it.

METHODS AND MEANS OF MAGIC

The practice of magic was above all oral. It was a matter of pronouncing the required formulas to destroy what one feared or to obtain what one wanted. The ability to do this was directly linked to the effective, active power of words, which were not related in an abstract and arbitrary manner to what they expressed, but were an integral part of it; hence the importance of knowing a name, which made it possible to have power over the one who bore it. In a mythological tale, Isis, who was famous for her artifices, affirms that thanks to a stratagem, she knows the true name of Re, which will enable her to manipulate him as she wishes. Conversely, the destruction or mutilation of a name was an infallible means of making its bearer, once deprived of it, incapable of doing harm. Thus, criminals were “debaptized,” and actual or potential enemies were saddled with dire names. Finally, conjurations depicting gods often included mythical allusions that added to their effectiveness, for the magician thus proved that he was ignorant of nothing in the god’s story.

To know and to say. Knowledge that was in principle secret, that was not sup-

posed to be revealed. But a notation on one papyrus demonstrates that this knowledge was not confined to a few initiates, and that it could be divulged: "Whoever uses for himself the formula borrowed from this book will find himself in the presence of the august god."⁷

As is to be expected in Egypt, oral practice was backed up by written texts. Collections of conjurations—medical and magical treatises—and charms written on ostraca or on papyri that were worn rolled up as talismans, were innumerable from the New Kingdom down to the Roman Period, to the point that we still lack a systematic inventory of those in museum collections or a complete publication of these documents.

The recitation of charms was in all likelihood accompanied by a certain number of ritual gestures that on the whole we know rather badly, for there was never a systematic repertoire for the use of magicians, or, at least, one has yet to be discovered. In certain cases, the recitation was done over the remedy that was to cure someone who was ill or over an image of an animal or a deity.

Only the rites of execration are relatively familiar to us, both from the discovery of objects used in the ceremonies and from late texts in temples or on papyri that detail the course of the procedures. Execration was the most radical means of destroying hostile powers, whether divine and cosmic powers, with Apopis assuming various animal forms—hippopotamus, oryx, tortoise—or human powers—the dead, rebels, or foreign enemies. In this case as well, use was made of an image of an animal or a crude figurine of a prisoner with his hands tied behind his back, made of wax (they melted and disappeared), of fired clay, or of stone; the names of enemies were carved on these pieces. The conjuration was recited, and then the image was mutilated before throwing it into the fire. Admittedly, there were variations between the usages of the Old Kingdom and those of the Ptolemaic Period, according to whether the rite was carried out inside a temple against a cosmic power or outside the temple against other men; but the principle remained basically the same.

In stories, magicians are capable of astonishing feats that contributed to the popularity of this literature but surely were not encountered in the daily practice of magic. Written in the Middle Kingdom, Papyrus Westcar, whose story takes place in the prestigious reign of King Snofru, the founder of Dynasty 4, relates some highly remarkable events. So that a female rower can recover a jewel that fell into the water, the magician who is called to the rescue separates the water of a pleasure lake into two parts, superposing one on top of the other. When the object is recovered, he returns the water to its original state. Though the reasons for the acts are entirely different, we cannot help recalling the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews fleeing Egypt. Moreover, according to the biblical text, Moses had participated in a sort of contest with Egyptian magicians in the

⁷ Translation based on that of S. Sauneron, *Le Monde du sorcier*, Sources orientales 7 (Paris, 1966), p. 33.

presence of Pharaoh, until they admitted their defeat, powerless as they were before a skill greater than theirs. Such contests were common among magicians, as we can see in one of the tales from the Demotic chronicle of Setne-Khaemwas. These experts also knew how to make figures of wax and bring them to life, and how to replace severed heads and restore life to the beheaded. At heart, these wonders do not astonish us, accustomed as we are to reading the *Thousand and One Nights*, Charles Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose*, or the story of the Golem. But this personage of uncommon talent was not the one to whom sick persons or those hounded by fate turned. This personage was a literary and imaginary figure who was undoubtedly based on everyday reality, but idealized via fiction and the marvelous.

Objects were tangible aids to magical power and effectiveness. First of all, there were amulets, mass-produced by the thousands, which were not only intended for the postmortem support of the dead, but also served to protect the living. Magicians dealt with amulets only occasionally, pronouncing an appropriate formula over them. For the most part, their shape, their material, and their mythological referent sufficed to make them, once they left the hands of the artisan who made them, an effective phylactery that was worn around the neck, the wrist, or the ankle, or over the heart. Among them, special mention must be made of the highly popular stelae depicting Horus on the crocodiles, depicted full front, his hands full of serpents and a Bes figure above his head. This representation is accompanied by incantations against serpent bites and scorpion stings. Some of these *cippi* were so small that they served as amulets, but other, larger ones were independent monuments or were part of a group that included a statue.

These statues, called healing statues, are remarkable; they were used more and more from the end of the New Kingdom on. They depicted men who were especially known for their piety; an example from Dynasty 30 is Djedhor of Athribis, who repaired the temple of the god Khentekhtai, which had been devastated by invasions, and who was called "the Savior." The appearance of these statues is remarkable: the body, with the exception of the face (but not the wig) and the hands, is entirely covered with inscriptions that are conjurations against serpents and scorpions. Poured onto the statue, water was sanctified by running over the protective spells, which conferred magical power on it. The water, which was undoubtedly intended to be drunk, was collected. The person who drank it thus swallowed the magic, both literally and metaphorically.

THE CATEGORIES OF MAGIC

Often intended to protect against illness by means of intimidation, threat, or coercion, magical practices ran a gamut ranging from prophylaxis to counter-magic. In the category of defensive charms, there were practices that were preventive (to prevent miscarriage, headache) or prophylactic, especially against

the bites of serpents and scorpions, which the Egyptians feared. There were also formulas against bad dreams and others to afford protection from immanent dangers to the workings of the universe. Prevention was needed against the ravages of Apopis and against the risks that were run during the five epagomenal days at the end of the year. We can perhaps add the hemerological conjurations, the calendars of lucky and unlucky days. The earliest such calendars contain only the notation “good” or “bad”; others add a mythological allusion explaining the dangerous character of a certain number of days on which it was prudent to refrain from doing anything. The widespread practice of wearing amulets was also a form of prophylaxis.

Formulas of productive magic are relatively rare. They were nevertheless used in the domain of medicine, especially to facilitate and hasten the birth of a child. Men had recourse to charms to attract a woman they had their eye on: “Cause that so-and-so, daughter of so-and-so, seek me out, as a cow seeks its fodder, as a servant seeks her children, as a shepherd seeks his flock.”⁸ There were also charms that enabled an abandoned woman to regain her husband.

Sometimes, a magician had to pit his conjuring skills against those of one of his colleagues. Texts clearly attest to the existence of countermagic: “We shall protect him from the magic of a Syrian, from the magic of a Nubian, from the magic of a Libyan, from the magic of the people of Egypt, from the magic of an enchanter or a sorcerer, and from every possible form of magic.”⁹

The most violent magic of all was the destructive magic effected by the exorcism rites already described. Certain texts give detailed descriptions of how this form of magic was carried out:

You will depict every enemy of Re and every enemy of Pharaoh, dead or alive, and every proscribed deed he might dream of, the names of their father, their mother, and their children—every one of them—being written with fresh ink on a sheet of unused papyrus—and their (own) names being written on their chest, they themselves having been made of wax and bound with bonds of black thread; they will be spat on, they will be trodden with the left foot, they will be struck with a knife and a lance, and they will be thrown into the fire in a blacksmith’s furnace.¹⁰

THE MEN OF MAGIC

For ordinary situations in daily life, persons were supposed to be able to recite a magical formula suited to the situation. In all other, more serious cases, they had recourse to the paid services of a specialist, who needed to be literate in order to make use of the collections of spells at his disposal. These were the *hekau*, those

⁸ Translation based on that of *ibid.*, p. 41.

⁹ Translation based on that of *ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁰ Papyrus Bremner-Rhind 26, 2–4.

who were guardians of *heka*, and *sau*, dispensers of *sa*, magical protection. Physicians, as well as the priests of Selkis, the scorpion goddess, were also practitioners of magic, for medicine and magic were in no way incompatible. Rather often, we find mention of “lector priests,” ritualists with their rolls of papyrus, who staffed the “houses of life” attached to temples, where contemporary knowledge was elaborated in all its forms, knowledge that could be used outside as well as inside the sacred enclosure.

We are poorly informed regarding the preparation required to pronounce a conjuration, which was perhaps accompanied by a specific rite; the texts have little to say on this subject. It is possible that only a few things were done: a simple purification, ablutions, or in exceptional circumstances, a sacrifice. But the very content and wording of the formulas shed light on the power attributed to magicians. Let us leave aside the magicians of the stories, which do not offer an actual image of the social and historical reality of Egypt. The peasant seeking assistance from a specialist in his village surely did not ask him to reattach the severed heads of his cattle or fowl.

When a magician recited a conjuration, he would admonish and intimidate the gods. He had power over them and over the order of the world, and in case they did not act according to his will, he threatened that most feared of all calamities, a return to chaos: “The sky will no longer exist, the earth will no longer exist, the five days that complete the year will no longer exist; the sun will no longer shine, the inundation that comes at its time will no longer rise.”¹¹

What conferred such power on him was his assimilation to the gods themselves. In the formulas, he often intervenes in the first person, affirming, “I am Horus” or “I am Thoth.” In analyzing magical texts, scholars have perhaps taken this assertion of consubstantiality of man and god too lightly, seeing in it only a standard formula. But in the logic of this system, the magician could take effective action against the gods only if he was of the same nature as they. We must ask—though without being able to supply a response—whether this might have been something rather like shamanistic possession. A story by Dio Cassius about Marcus Aurelius’s wars in central Europe describes the miracles worked by a certain Harnouphis, an Egyptian magus who used his artifices to cause rain to fall, just as a rainmaker in the world of shamanism would have done.

One text, this one Egyptian, reveals that the magician entered into direct contact with the deity, leaving the human time of history and entering that of the gods:

I have rinsed my mouth, I have taken in natron, and I have mingled with the Ennead of gods; in the evening, I have lain down in the bosom of Horus, and thus I have heard what he was saying, while he held in his hand a viper of one cubit, as

¹¹ Papyrus Leiden I 348, verso 2, 5–8.

evil as a viper of a dozen cubits! It was thus that I was instructed in the words [that have been used forever, going back to the time when Osiris was still alive.] Thus, I now slay a horned viper of one cubit, I being Horus instructed in words.¹²

In magic, in a double way based on the reality of the invisible world and the possibility of human intervention in that reality, the individual put himself into a state of direct relationship, whether passive or active, with the world of the gods: passive for the one who benefited from the conjuration that was supposed to relieve his ills or simply prevent them, active for the one who pronounced it, adorning himself with the name and the qualities of a deity. In the latter case, the barrier between the real world and that of the imaginary was abolished.

PERSONAL PIETY IN THE COURSE OF A LIFETIME

The relationship between man and the divine realm was not limited to visits to temples and chapels, to the spectacle of solemn processions, to consulting oracles, and to magical practices. Quite the contrary, all these were manifestations of devotion that marked a break with the banality of everyday life, testifying to a desire to participate, whether closely or from afar, in the life of the gods as it was codified by their priests. But in this everyday world, day after day, there was exerted the beneficent or maleficent power of a crowd of deities who were immanent in it. Though the Amun of the theologians might well have been a *deus absconditus* who nevertheless listened while he remained unseen, it was also true that meteorological phenomena, the Nile inundation, harvests, and above all, sickness and health, and life and death depended directly on deities who formed a colorful pantheon with whom the Egyptians were familiar. Despite the gap between the institution of the temple and what lay outside it, the rest of the world was peopled by these deities, whom we sometimes refer to as “minor” and to whom Egyptians submitted themselves, performed acts of allegiance, and requested their aid, throughout their lives.

BIRTH

Obviously, birth was particularly subject to these parahuman forces. It was a fearsome moment in the lives of women, many of whom died in childbirth, while infant mortality was also quite high. This moment of passage thus took place under the auspices of propitiatory deities who were supposed to facilitate the course of events and assure the health and safety of the mother and her newborn child. Meskhenet was the personification of the birthing bricks on which the woman

¹² Prophylactic statue of Ramesses III; translation based on that of Sauneron, *Le Monde du sorcier*, p. 38.

in labor crouched to give birth according to a tradition that is still very much alive in Africa. This goddess would also come to represent the (good) fortune of the child, along with Shai, destiny, who is mentioned more and more often from the New Kingdom on, and his female counterpart, Renenutet. In scenes depicting a royal birth, the happy ending of a theogamy between the king and Amun in the New Kingdom, the young prince who was fashioned by the potter god Khnum on his wheel is also surrounded by the protection of *Kas* and their female counterparts, *Hemsut*. From an earlier date, Papyrus Westcar relates the birth of the children of Rudjedet, three future kings of Dynasty 5. In the tale, it was Isis, Meskhenet, and Heqet, the frog goddess who was spouse to Khnum, who attended to the proceedings: "They went in to Rudjedet, and then they closed the room with themselves and her (in it). Isis placed herself in front of her, and Nephthys behind her, and Heqet hastened the birth." Even in ordinary households, Egyptians invoked the goodly Taweret, the gravid hippopotamus and guarantor of an easy birth, along with Bes, the grotesque and mischievous dwarf who warded off the evil eye.

The ugliness of these last two deities seems to have guaranteed their ability to ward off dangers and evil spells. Numerous amulets bore their image, and wearing them was recommended. Over the cradle of the newborn bent the seven Hathors, fairies of a sort who might well also have been sorceresses. In the Tale of the Doomed Prince, scarcely had the prince been born when "the seven Hathors came to announce to him what would be his destiny; they said: 'His death will come from a crocodile, or from a serpent, or from a dog.'" They did not put curses on people, for they were not mistresses of individual destiny, but they did announce the circumstances.

Sterility was a condition that was borne sorrowfully, and all the deities of fecundity were invoked against it: Bes, Taweret, Hathor, and Min. At the entrances to the houses of Deir el-Medina, the villagers deposited so-called concubine figurines, as well as ithyphallic statuettes or ex-voto phalluses, all of them intended to remedy this incapacity. The Doomed Prince himself was born only after his father had long begged the gods to grant him a son; the story does not tell us whether girls had already been born.

THE NAME

No recourse was too extreme to favor a birth and surround it with maximum protection, both for mother and child. If conditions were auspicious, it remained to choose a name for the newborn child; this was often the prerogative of the mother, the act of naming thus redoubling her natural childbearing function.

Naming was not simply a matter of attributing civil status to a child, choosing among the names that were traditional in a family or among those that were currently fashionable, though such influences could have been at work to a limited extent, especially in the latter case. For the Egyptians, giving a name was

something much more important, for the name was an integral part of the reality of things and of the personality of living beings, not just an empty and arbitrary signifier. Along with other elements, such as the *ba* and especially the *ka*, with which it sometimes merged in the later stages of history, the name was one of the constituent elements of the human person. To name was not merely to designate, but also to cause existence. To suppress a name, or to transform or mutilate it, as could be done in cases of political conflict or rebellion, was to attack the entirety of the person and to endanger his wholeness. Thus, a name could not be chosen lightly. If we examine the onomastic evidence from all periods, it results—though too impressionistically, for there has never been a global statistical analysis—that theophoric names are extremely frequent, whatever form they took, and that they changed from one period to another. This persistence of the divine in personal names is incontestable evidence for individual piety throughout the history of Egyptian civilization. In every period, gods and goddesses were a part of the names that people bore, and this seems to have been true for every level of society.

Theophoric names could simply be, though this was relatively rare, the names of deities or those of persons who were deified after their death. More often, they included divine names in various semantic formulations that corresponded to different functions. Many were propitiatory or apotropaic: “May deity X grant old age” or “May deity X ward off the evil eye.” Others expressed a theological statement that had no reference to the bearer of the name: Nykauphtah, “Ptah is provided with *kas*,” or were a divine epithet: Nebut, “the Golden One,” referring to Hathor. Some names indicated that the deity had responded to prayers: Pedubaste, “The one whom Bastet gave.” “Deity X has granted that he lives,” very popular from the Third Intermediate Period on, refers to the oracular practices that were already frequent in the New Kingdom, but which were translated into the onomasticon only a little later. To this brief summary, we must add local ties, whether familial or professional, to a particular deity, and the related, widespread custom of giving a son the name of his father or especially his grandfather and of giving a daughter the name of her mother or grandmother. Thus, in many cases—but not all, for there were also basilophoric names (personal names containing the name of a king), various nicknames, and onomatopoetic names—from the time of their birth, individuals were linked to a particular deity by their names.

DEATH

In the decisive life stages that were placed under the sign of the divine, we make a quick leap from birth to death. It does not seem, at least from the sources we have, that this seal marked other moments of existence. We know of no rite of passage from childhood to adolescence, or from youth to adult age, that might have taken on the aspect of an initiation in which the gods had a role to play. As

for marriage, it was recognized by the simple fact of the cohabitation of the couple, and in the later stages of Egyptian history, it was sanctioned by a contract dealing with the property of each of the spouses. But aside from this juridical ratification, which had not always been in existence and was not obligatory, we find no particular religious ceremony that marked its occurrence—as opposed, for example, to what was done in ancient Greece, where entry into the state of matrimony was a major component in the organization of society. In Egypt, while the institution of marriage undeniably contributed greatly to social cohesion, it remained a strictly private matter. It was only the moment of death that revealed the presence of deities around this feared event, whose means were known to some from the moment of birth, as in the case of the Doomed Prince of the story. The chapter that follows is devoted to the Egyptians' concept of death from both the phenomenological and the religious point of view. Death was a fundamental given around which they organized their perception of life and imagined possible modes of survival beyond death. Here, I shall only mention the huge crowd of demons who were believed to be messengers of the major powers, charged with spreading calamity, terror, and death among the living. Pictured as serpents, but more often as men with an animal's head (Seth, crocodile, bull), and always armed with knives, they roamed in bands, often of seven or multiples of seven, and had strange names whose meaning we do not always understand. Among them, the best known are the emissaries of Sakhmet, the redoubtable lioness; called her "seven arrows," they were capable of spreading epidemic and death. Nekhbet of el-Kab in Upper Egypt boasted of these same sinister exploits, which had to be combated by the recitation of litanies of appeasement addressed to this dangerous goddess. Wearing an amulet representing the goddess and her acolytes could confer effective protection, and such amulets were also offered to her at New Year's. The gods, who perhaps disdained stooping to such lowly deeds, thus had at their disposal an impressive army of knife-wielding genies who posed a perpetual threat to the lives of human beings. Finally, we must stress that like the processions of gods, burial—but not the mummification rituals that preceded it and were entrusted only to specialists—was an opportunity for lay people to be present at the unfolding of ritual acts. Funerals, which we find represented in tomb scenes, and most especially the Opening of the Mouth ritual that was performed on the mummy before it was lowered into the funerary vault, were public. The entire family, along with a cortège of mourning women, were present and listened to the recitation of the funerary liturgy; often, it was the son who officiated on behalf of his father.

DOMESTIC CULTS AND FAMILIAR DEITIES

Between birth and death, the cycle of life was not punctuated by other points at which the gods played a role, as in an initiation or a consecration, nor did Egypt-

tians go to see the gods in their temples or chapels on a daily basis. Nevertheless, gods and goddesses were not absent from the daily lives of ordinary people.

In the countryside, the harvests were placed under the patronage of Renenutet, the Thermouthis of the Greeks, who was also the consort of Shai, "destiny." Along with her son Nepri, "grain," she was the patroness of granaries, and she had many oratories throughout Egypt. Certain trees sheltered a deity, and we may especially cite the goddess of the sycamore, who dispensed fresh water and provided the deceased with offerings.

The houses of the living were also marked by the presence of familiar deities, with whom the Egyptians rubbed shoulders daily. It is difficult to establish a general state of the question regarding these deities, for many houses were entirely destroyed in antiquity or in the modern era, and even at present, few of those that are preserved have been systematically excavated. But the example of Amarna, and even more so, that of Deir el-Medina, notwithstanding the special nature of each of them, offer us a wealth of information that enables us to draw a picture of religious life in the home. It is probable that these are not exceptional cases, and that there were similar practices elsewhere in Egypt. The houses of the necropolis workmen mostly consisted of two rooms. The first room, which served as the entrance and was thus the obligatory place of passage, was provided with an altar intended for the domestic cult, which was strictly linked to fecundity, along with figurines of Bes or ex-voto propitiatory statuettes that could be either feminine or masculine. In this same entrance were the "lares," busts of ancestors to whom a cult was also devoted, and the stelae of the *akh iker*, "the glorified excellent ones." Thus the continuity and permanence, without which the Egyptians could not conceive their social organization, were present. In the second room, which was larger and used for all sorts of purposes, a domestic cult was rendered to Amenophis I and his mother, Queen Ahmes-Nofretari, to whom "false door" stelae were consecrated. There were also naoi sheltering statues of domestic deities, such as Taweret, Renenutet, or Ptah, who were popular in the village, along with utensils indispensable to religious practice: grills for meat offerings and libation basins.

Outside the ambit of the temples, in the intimacy and the relative humbleness of their homes, Egyptians devoted a private, individual cult to their deities. The main protagonist was undoubtedly the head of the family, but all must have participated. We are little informed regarding the details, but at least, considering the objects that have been preserved to us, the cult conformed to a code similar, albeit simplified, to that of the temples: offerings and libations that accompanied a prayer or a hymn of praise.

In addition to this material, we should note that from beyond the framework of Deir el-Medina, we have a mass of amulets in the form of miniature statuettes representing a deity, amulets in the form of a prophylactic object, and phylacteries containing a charm to be suspended around the neck. These objects, which

we encounter in large quantity but often out of their original context, are far from belonging inevitably to funerary equipment. They were worn by the living to protect themselves from all the ills that threatened them. A certain number of late bronzes in the form of a god or goddess seem also to come from private homes.

DREAMS AND ONEIROMANCY

On both ordinary days and solemn occasions, whether the latter were linked to their personal lives or to external events of a religious sort, the Egyptians maintained close relations with the divine realm. There was also a state, that of sleep and dreams, that seems to have been for them a privileged moment of contact with the domain of the invisible. Sleep, though temporary, was associated with the idea of death. During sleep, the irreversible flow of time, time that was a mode of creation, was put between parentheses. During the hours of sleep, one returned to a world of the unorganized, of the disorder that could prove dangerous for the individual, which explains why the headrests that supported pillows were often decorated with the representation of a protective deity and bore a prophylactic text.

Egyptians dreamed, and the place they accorded to dreams in their literature shows clearly that they ascribed an important role to them, believing that they exerted a genuine influence on the course of their lives. Their texts do not enable us to analyze clearly what was, for them, the nature of dreams, though etiological notations indicate that the origin of certain dreams could be explained by alimentary or erotic reasons and not exclusively by the will of the gods.

On the linguistic level, the word *reset*, “dream,” is derived—curiously enough, from our point of view—from a root expressing the idea of wakefulness, which led, in the ancient texts, to certain plays on words and ideas. But semantically, this fact offers us little clarity, for this “wakefulness” after falling asleep—would the sleeper have been awakened?—was certainly different from ordinary wakefulness. It was then that deities could manifest themselves, whether for good or for ill, hence the usefulness in the latter case of magical formulas for protection against bad dreams.

Dreams were often premonitory. The literature—the royal chronicles and the pseudohistorical texts of the “royal novel” genre—offer us examples that were always easy to understand, with the result that the pharaoh only rarely, as in the case of the Kushite king Tantamani, had need to appeal to a specialist in oneiromancy (dream interpretation) to explain them. We thus see that the gods manifested themselves openly to the king or an heir apparent, their son on earth, announcing the future fulfillment of a promise, usually the granting of the kingship as reward for the devotion he displayed on their behalf. But it could also be a matter of the successful conclusion of an uncertain battle or a divine command

that the king restore abandoned cults or temples. This tradition of the historical or pseudohistorical dream, which extends over a long period from Amenophis II to the Ptolemies, could well be no more than a literary fiction, as in the story of the princess of Bakhtan, or a political one, as in the case of the stela of Tuthmosis IV at Giza. But it is nonetheless true that it enables us to penetrate into the world of Egyptian dreams and the use that was made of them. As was the case with oracles, in dreams, divine power and will were directly revealed to the king, who was in a position to encounter a god.

Ordinary mortals also dreamed, but according to the documents that have come down to us, they dreamed differently. We know these dreams chiefly from "dream books," the oldest of which was written in the Ramesside Period, but which, from its vocabulary and style, seems to go back to the Middle Kingdom. The later ones were written in Demotic in the Roman Period, and we can clearly see their filiation with the texts of the New Kingdom. These "keys to dreams," as they are also called, do not offer explanations, but rather, simple pronouncements of the type, "if a man sees this in a dream, it means that . . .," to which is added the evaluation "good" or "bad." The dreams are always premonitory, at least those which constitute the material of these dream books. We thus cannot deduce any general theory of dreams and their relationship to the situations experienced in a waking state, or the role of recollection. We are dealing with an encoded system, and the coding is so very much cultural that often the link between the dream and the stated outcome escapes us completely. Nevertheless, we can call attention to certain principles that emerge clearly enough. One principle is that a dream was not meaningful in and of itself, but according to the person of the dreamer. That is to say, one and the same dream would have a different meaning according to whether the dreamer was a man or a woman. Two other main categories are to be seen in this lists: "men of Horus" and "men of Seth," the latter category being comprised of harmful persons, including redheads.

The dreams themselves are sometimes listed by type: sexual unions dreamed of by a woman, the animals she dreams she gave birth to, a man's dreams of beer, and what he saw or heard. We understand that some explanations are based on wordplay, assonances that led to association of ideas, while others are based on symbolic correspondences: thus, the serpent, image of Renenutet, the goddess of granaries, symbolized abundance of goods. We also find the use of contraries: what will happen is just the opposite of the content of the dream.

These collections were not in circulation among the population, who would not have been able to read them; rather, they served as *aides-mémoire* for specialists who were consulted. These specialists were scribes of the "house of life" or chief lector priests whose existence is attested not only by Egyptian texts, but also by Greek texts and by the Bible, which reports the famous dreams that Joseph interpreted for Pharaoh.

The aspirations conveyed by these texts are the same as those we find else-

where: to reach an advanced age in good health, to increase one's goods, to life without quarrel or lawsuit, and to occupy an advantageous social position. A systematic study of the content of dreams would reveal more of the mental constructions of the Egyptians, but to date, this area has been scarcely touched on. We note, however, that in contrast to royal dreams, gods, at least gods mentioned by name, are rarely present. Sexual relations are attested frequently, for men as well as for women, and these relations are frequently abnormal: incest and especially bestiality, the latter not necessarily being a portent of a dire event. Must we see in such dreams a repressed individual trying to express himself or herself freely? We should bear in mind, however, that the animal can be an image of a deity, and that the notion of bestiality need not come into play in such a case.

If a woman has relations with her husband, she will have sorrow;
 If a horse unites with her, she will be violent with her husband;
 If an ass unites with her, she will be punished for a great fault;
 If a goat unites with her, she will quickly die;
 If a ram unites with her, Pharaoh will be full of kindness toward her;
 If a Syrian unites with her, she will cry, for she will allow a slave to unite with her.¹³

Women also gave birth to a number of animals:

If she gives birth to a cat, she will have many children;
 If she gives birth to a dog, she will have a boy;
 If she gives birth to an ass, she will have an idiot child;
 If she gives birth to a crocodile, she will have many children.¹⁴

It would also be useful to inventory the foods, the clothing, the types of gestures made, and the words spoken, in order to complete the image of Egyptians dreaming, or rather, as they are represented dreaming, with great freedom in this coded system. What we have seen at the very least reveals that nothing was banned in the realm of the imaginary or in its expression.

The dream books serve to explain dreams that occurred naturally. But there was also the practice of inducing dreams in places of incubation attached to temples, which became widespread during the Ptolemaic Period, perhaps, it is thought, under the influence of the Greeks. Incubation opened a vast field for oneiromancy, and from that time on, full-time priests, scribes, and laypeople attached to oratories reserved for incubation and to sanatoriums devoted themselves to it. People often went to such places and spent the night in order to consult the god and implore a cure, or for a child in cases of sterility, though the

¹³ Translation based on that of S. Sauneron, *Les Songes et leur interprétation*, Sources orientales 2 (Paris, 1959), p. 37.

¹⁴ Ibid.

questions posed could be about other subjects as well, such as the construction of a temple.

Induced dreams greatly resembled oracular practice in that a response was made to a specific question. It was no longer a matter of entering every dream that any individual might happen to have into a global system of interpretation. At Canopus, at the Serapeum of Memphis, at Abydos (where the dwarf god Bes reigned from that time on), at Dendara, and at Deir el-Bahari, people came to dream in the subsidiary buildings of the temple and to receive interpretations of dreams in which the deity of the place manifested himself.

MODES OF HUMAN-DIVINE RELATIONSHIP

We have defined what must be understood by personal piety and analyzed the means by which it expressed itself at the margins of temples, through magic, and in daily life. It now remains to study how and why persons established a relationship with the world of the invisible, what they sought there, and what they found.

WHAT GOD?

The first question that arises is that of knowing what deity was addressed by an individual in search of a direct relationship with the sphere of the divine. In the course of their lives, in major events such as birth, or common and repetitious ones such as harvests, Egyptians placed themselves under the protection of deities, ones that were minor in the constellation of the Egyptian pantheon but nevertheless known for their effectiveness. They in no way limited themselves to these minor figures, however. Any of the gods could be the object of the prayer of a simple layperson, and they could hear his request. There was no opposition, or even separation, between the official dynastic pantheon and the minor figures linked to popular devotion. The evidence at our disposal belies the artificial disjunction that some scholars have introduced into the study of religion. As we know, most of this evidence dates to the New Kingdom and to the first millennium BCE. On statues, stelae, ostraca, and papyri, and also on scarabs, we frequently encounter Amun, Re, Ptah, Thoth, Hathor, and Meretseger, the goddess of Deir el-Medina, as well as foreign deities such as Reshep, Astarte, and Qadesh. Amulets are in the form of these same deities. An individual could also appeal to a local god, his city god, whom he of course venerated. Sometimes, the deity remained anonymous: "my god," the one whom a person chose for himself or to whom he was attached by his theophoric name or by family tradition.

Even in purely personal prayers, these deities receive their classical epithets, making them cosmic powers that were in principle inaccessible to mere mortals.

Thus, on a group statue belonging to the royal scribe Amenemope and his wife, now in Berlin, we read:

O my god, lord of the gods,
 Amun-Re, lord of the thrones of the Two Lands,
 extend your hand to me, save me!
 Arise for me, let me live!
 You are the unique god who has no equal.

It is undeniably the same Amun who was at home at Karnak and who had the power to inspire terror who is implored here. His power is not ignored, but to it are added qualities that make him sensible to human suffering. Amun was thus a savior god, as Thoth and Ptah could also be. From the New Kingdom on, in addition to these gods who had been around forever, or nearly forever, there spread the cult of a young god, a form of Horus who bore the name of Shed, "savior," and who was especially venerated at Deir el-Medina. Still, he had no monopoly on soteriological qualities.

In order to save humankind, the gods were first of all attentive to prayers and entreaties. The texts abound in mentions of the epithet "who hears prayers." Amun could be unknowable and invisible to individuals, but he nonetheless heard their requests. And what is more, this same epithet that stresses the "hearing" of the god is to be found in the most official theological texts of the Ptolemaic Period, removed from any context of personal devotion, an additional proof that we are dealing with one and the same divine being. Re, the "august god, the beloved, the merciful," was the one "who hears the entreaties of the one to cries out to him, who comes at the voice of the one who speaks his name."¹⁵ The god became the shepherd, the pilot, the one "who guides men on all the paths," and "the father of the one who has no mother, the husband of the widow." A compassionate god, he also had a social role to play: he was the defender of the poor and the oppressed. Amun, the "judge of the poor man," was the honest magistrate who assured the triumph of the cause of the humble in the corrupt tribunal of human justice. It should perhaps be stressed that paradoxically, Osiris and Isis, whose fortunes would rise from the Third Intermediate Period on, and who were par excellence the pair of divine saviors and redressers of wrongs, had a somewhat separate place in personal devotion. Egyptians possessed a vast number of statuettes and amulets in their image, and they erected chapels of Osiris the savior in the temenos of Karnak, but the prayers they addressed to these deities were limited in number.

A person would address a savior god saying, "o my god," or "my master" or "my lord," the use of the possessive indicating a relationship that was both indi-

¹⁵ Translation based on that of Barucq and Daumas, *Hymnes et prières* (Paris, 1980), p. 127.

vidual and mutual. The devotee himself was the god's servant; one of the words used, *hem*, was the same word that served to designate a "prophet of the god," *hem-netjer*.

WORLDLY REQUESTS

The basic wishes of Egyptians, the ones that reflected their aspirations—to live prosperously and in good health to the age of 110—can occasionally be found in personal prayers but are much more frequent in the basic funerary formula, "offering that the king makes to the god X for the *ka* of so-and-so." This formula often accompanies the wish itself.

When an Egyptian formulated a specific request, invoking a deity directly, he could ask for the love of the object of his desire. In such cases, it was Hathor who intervened:

I shall implore her; she hears my prayer
and sends me my mistress.
She has come to see me,
something great has happened to me.
I rejoiced, I was in joy, I experienced fulfillment,
for it was said, "See, she is here."
Before her as she came forward, the youths bowed down for great love of her.¹⁶

Cases of blind persons imploring a god are not rare, as in this prayer addressed to Thoth: "You have made me see the darkness that you created." We must differentiate such cases from those in which blindness was the punishment inflicted by a god on someone who had committed a sin. When a blind person asks to see the god, there is an ambiguity as to whether it is a matter of recovering sight or of being able to contemplate the god in a more metaphorical sense, though Amun was indeed called "the physician who heals the eye."

A great many requests make reference to justice; this seems to have been a sore spot in the functioning of Egyptian society, one that left much to be desired in the opinion of litigants. Having only limited confidence in human tribunals and their diligence and integrity, persons had no recourse other than to appeal to an incorruptible and equitable god before whom all individuals had the same rights. Certain prayers that served as exercises for schoolboys over the centuries are eloquent in this regard:

Vizier of the poor (i.e., Amun),
who does not accept an iniquitous gift,

¹⁶ Papyrus Chester Beatty I; translation based on that of S. Schott and P. Krieger, *Les Chants d'amour de l'Égypte ancienne* (Paris, 1956), p. 64.

who does not declare himself in favor of the one who produces evidence
and does not look at the one who makes a promise.
Amun judges the land with his finger,
and he speaks to the heart.
He discerns the guilty,
whom he sends to the brazier,
while the just man is for Amenti.
Amun, lend your ear to the one who is alone at the tribunal,
when he is poor and without riches,
while the tribunal robs him of silver and gold
for the scribes of the mat,
and of clothing for the bailiffs.”¹⁷

The general sentiment that emanates from these texts is one of the abandonment, affliction, and misery of the world, against which the individual is powerless. His only remedy and consolation are recourse to the god, whose power is thereby all the greater. For the one who cries out from the depths of his misery, he is the vizier, and “lo, the poor man is justified.”¹⁸

In a bad year, the god was supposed to restore the order of the seasons:

Come to me, Amun,
save me from this year of misery!
The sun—lo, it no longer rises.
Winter has arrived in the middle of summer.
The months—lo, they turn backwards,
The hours are confused.¹⁹

The god cured illnesses; even more, he could prolong the duration of a lifetime, which was in principle fixed at birth: “He prolongs a lifetime, and he shortens it. He adds to the duration fixed by destiny on behalf of the one whom he loves.”²⁰ And as the ultimate manifestation of his omnipotence, he “saves the one who loves him, even if he is (already) in the *Duat* (the realm of the dead).”²¹

From this series of assertions there emerge certain traits of the Egyptian mentality, or at least, the Egyptian mentality from the New Kingdom on, though their extent and impact are difficult to evaluate exactly. From their prayers, we have the impression that individuals turned willingly to their god, who was accorded a certain transcendence. At the same time, we shall see that in texts with ethical content—the instructions and the wisdom literature—there is a parallel devel-

¹⁷ Translation based on that of Barucq and Daumas, *Hymnes et prières*, p. 253.

¹⁸ Papyrus Anastasi II, 9, 1.

¹⁹ Appeal to Amun; translation based on that of Barucq and Daumas, *Hymnes et prières*, p. 254.

²⁰ Hymn to Amun, Papyrus Leiden I 350, chapter 70.

²¹ Ibid.

opment confirming that from the Old to the New Kingdom there was indeed a general change in the concept of this earthly life in Egyptian thought. This change does not simply reflect the emergence of a personal devotion that supposedly was not expressed earlier: moral texts of an entirely different origin reflect a similar spirit. We are perhaps to see the emergence of an individualism that was limited at the beginning of history and gradually asserted itself. The individual was not merely an element of a group that was firmly cemented by an implicit social consensus, but rather a singular being who defined himself as such. The foundations of society, however, were never challenged. The ethic of action and its corollary, immanent requital in the here and now, was neglected but never entirely abandoned.

We may end by wondering whether, intrinsically linked to this feeling of singularity, there was a sentiment of the solitude of man in the world, who suddenly became conscious of himself and found no remedy except in divinity, which was *a priori* posited as existent.

APPROACHING THE DIVINE

Persons in distress who appealed to their god did not content themselves with imploring his aid, whatever form it might take. Another aspiration came to light, one that was detached from the contingencies of the world, but which was perhaps not unrelated to the feeling of affliction. The individual wished to draw closer to the powers of the invisible world, as expressed by the ad nauseam repetitions of the wish to "see the god," to "see his beauty" or "his perfection." If the god heard someone, the latter would boast of having seen him, notwithstanding the fact that texts of a theological nature often state that the god was hidden from view. Acquaintance with the divine was accomplished through the organ of sight rather than by that of hearing, unlike the God of the Bible, who was invisible by his very essence.

What, then, are we to understand by "seeing the god"? Doubtless, first of all, it was to contemplate him via his images: cult statues, temple reliefs, sacred animals. To "see the king" in the exercise of his divine office was much the same matter. We may also mention natural phenomena, such as the appearance of the sun disk each morning or the annual rising of the floodwaters. In Egyptian theology, images were not the god himself, but rather the intermediaries via which he revealed himself to human eyes; images participated in the divine by means of the suitability of the representation to what was represented.

"How good it is to see your beautiful visage each morning, more beautiful than that of any (other) god, without equal."²² How far need we go in interpreting this expression, whose literal meaning, explicit in the texts, is unequivocal? Did the Egyptians see a god beyond the images? This is obviously not a question for

²² Prayer inscribed on a statue of a prophet of Amun; Cairo *Catalogue général*, no. 42208.

Egyptology or the history of religion. We can reply to it only by pondering the reality of incommunicable mystical experience, in whatever religious framework it might occur. There is another expression that frequently appears in the texts of prayers: to “follow the god,” which doubtless has the concrete meaning of participating in the cult, following the procession of the deity, but which also has a larger and more metaphorical sense: to conduct one’s life in accordance with divine will. Indeed, was it not the god “who guides men on all the ways”?²³

HUMAN ENCOUNTER WITH THE DIVINE

When an Egyptian had recourse to a deity, how did he comport himself? His gestures were those of prayer. For the rest, the stelae often depict a faithful man standing before his god in an attitude of adoration. The vocabulary used was quite varied: praises, acclamations, but also joy and exultation. Prayer was a manifestation of the individual’s joy at encountering his protector, as in the prayer of Pairi, a man who is blind but nevertheless desires to see his god, whether physically or metaphorically:

My heart (desires) to see you;
my heart is in joy, Amun, protector of the poor.

Prayer expressed a relationship of interdependence between deity and worshiper. The latter was not only the one who loved his god, but also the one whom the god loved, as often expressed by the formula, “the god loves the one who loves him.”

In this relationship, which was based on trust, a new attitude manifested itself. A person could declare himself culpable, a sinner, knowing that his merciful god would pardon his faults. In a certain number of cases, he acknowledged a precise sin for which he experienced the effects of divine punishment. Often, it was bearing false witness that was the cause, so it was believed, of blindness:

I am a man who swore falsely by Ptah, lord of truth.
He made me see darkness in (the light of) day.
I shall thus proclaim his power
to the one who does not know it and to the one who knows it,
to the little and the great.
Watch out for Ptah, lord of truth!
He caused me to become like the animals in the street,
and I was in his hand.
He made me a spectacle for men and gods.
I was like (?) a man
who had done something abominable to his lord.
Just is Ptah, lord of truth, towards me!

²³ Hymn to Amun, Papyrus Leiden I 350, chapter 90.

He taught me a lesson.
Be merciful to me,
and I shall see your mercy.²⁴

In other cases, there is simply an allusion to faults in general that a person has committed and for which he begs divine clemency: "Do not punish me for my many sins."²⁵

Human existence was not burdened by an original sin whose weight was borne by each individual, as in Christian theology. An individual was accountable only for his own acts, but in a way that differed radically from the declaration of innocence in the Book of the Dead. Actually, the two phenomena coexisted, and one and the same person could admit his misdeeds and also affirm that he had committed none. This fact did not result from incoherence in Egyptian thinking, nor can we accuse such people of insincerity. This apparent contradiction is explained by the entirely different contexts. During his lifetime, a person addressing a god whose pity he sought was ready to admit his errors, especially if he believed he was experiencing punishment for them and could thereby alleviate it. But once deceased, a person had need, by affirming that he had submitted to the order of Maat, to use all the magical power of words in order to triumph at the moment of the weighing of souls in the Judgment of the Dead.

There are texts that lead us to think that certain individuals went further in their devotion to their god. There is the case of Simut, surnamed Kyky, who gave all his goods to Mut—his name already suggests that he was a devotee of this goddess—though less mystical reasons, such as a desire to disinherit his family, might have led him to this act:

There was once a man of Southern Heliopolis, a true scribe in Thebes, Simut, his name from his mother, surnamed Kyky. His god instructed him and made him knowledgeable in his learning; he had placed him on the path of life to protect his body. The god recognized him from childhood, he assigned (him) abundance and prosperity. Then he meditated regarding himself to find a patron. He found Mut at the head of the gods; Shai and Renenutet were in her hands, the duration of life at her disposal, the breath of life under her jurisdiction, all that occurs under her command.

He said, "Lo, I give her all my goods and all my acquisitions, for I know that she is useful to have seen, that she is efficacious, (she) alone. She has suppressed anguish for me, she has protected me at a difficult moment, she has come preceded by a gentle breeze when I called her name. I was a miserable man of her city, an indigent vagabond of her city."²⁶

²⁴ Stela British Museum 589; translation based on that of Barucq and Daumas, *Hymnes et prières*, pp. 408–9.

²⁵ Prayer to Re-Harakhty, Papyrus Anastasi II, 10.

²⁶ Translation based on that of P. Vernus, *Revue d'égyptologie* 30 (1978): 144.

Another inscription, written on an ostrakon, also shows how persons sometimes surrendered themselves entirely to divine providence:

I have abandoned yesterday and today into the hands of Amun; I have found myself well, my condition stable; I have assured myself a happy state of being until I end my existence; I have given myself entirely to him; it is he who grants the landing.²⁷

Here, the terms are too vague to enable a precise interpretation, but we feel we can see the signs of a man who has consecrated himself entirely to his god, abandoning his own will and perhaps giving himself over to contemplation.

Contemplation, meditation, ecstasy, mystical experience: these are terms that scarcely appear in studies on Egyptian religion, which is usually qualified as ritualistic and formalistic. But by their very nature, these are experiences that are difficult to convey in discourse, for they have no outward, tangible manifestations. Recently, Philippe Derchain has shown how, in two obscure passages from the Coffin Texts, we can discern the conditions and signs of contemplation. No doubt close examination of other texts would enlarge our perspectives on the dimension of meditation, which the Egyptians had no reason to be ignorant of and which has probably remained unrecognized until now because of an overly superficial reading of the texts. At the very least, we know that drunkenness played a role in certain festivals, particularly those of Hathor, to produce a state perhaps something like that of a trance.

Personal devotion drew its resources from the same religious substrate as the official cult of the temples and took up its themes and codes. Undoubtedly becoming ever more widespread over the course of time, it expressed the needs and the aspirations of the individual in a world peopled by divine powers that offered an answer to care and anguish.

THE CONDUCT OF LIFE

DEVOTION AND ETHICS

What we call personal devotion expresses human anxiety and the need to establish a privileged relationship with the world of the invisible and the imaginary, which is the permanent horizon of a human life. Analysis of the ways in which it manifested itself shows that far from being confined to exceptional occasions, piety could reveal itself in the humblest and most common aspects of daily life. But in all cases, it is placed under the sign of the divine, of the possible and desired intercession of a deity at a given moment in the life of an individual. The

²⁷ Translation based on that of G. Posener, in Vernus, *Revue d'égyptologie* 30 (1978): 131.

Egyptians existed in a world inhabited by the very gods who are frequently said to be "distant."

Vast though its field of deployment may be, however, we cannot limit ourselves only to the concept of devotion if we hope to take into account all the aspects of human relationships with the invisible. There is another, larger register that enables us to understand the Egyptians' image of life in this world. It is that of ethics, as we are accustomed to calling it, or how to comport oneself in life, how to adopt, according to some imperative, a conduct in the face of a particular situation in an organized society. There can be no mistake about it, devotion and ethics quite often overlap. There was no religious level of prayer and cult and another, unrelated, profane level that included the other aspects of existence. "Moral" texts show that Egyptians did not just turn to their god at every moment of their existence, but that they also recognized ethical duties linking men in an imperative manner, at least on the level of principles, whose application was a function of the liberty and the capacity of each individual.

These texts are a precious source for evaluating what the Egyptians considered to be a suitable attitude in life; beyond that, we can even attempt to discern what, for them, was the meaning of existence. They were written in great number, in the form of instructions and wisdom texts, beginning in the earliest periods of history. This fact is a measure of the importance ascribed to them in a society in which the handing down of knowledge and expertise was essential to maintaining its cohesion. Quite unlike the area of devotion, we have written evidence stretching from the Old Kingdom to the Roman Period. Such a length of time implies an inevitable development of thought, not only in the expression of ethical thought but also in some of its foundations, a development that can be set in parallelism with that of piety. Aside from wisdom texts, the Egyptians also expressed moral concepts in autobiographical texts, in which we encounter the same themes, but expressed in a more succinct manner. Moreover, these texts, which also appeared from the Old Kingdom on, had a precise function. Carved in tombs, on stelae, or on statues of private persons, they are a post-mortem testimony that a particular man lived in conformity with the ethical principles of his day. They assure the living and the gods of his merit. They did not serve to transmit an instruction in morality from one living being to another; rather, they attested to its application. Later, we shall study these epitomes of life and morality in detail within their framework, which is that of man in the face of death.

THE ORDER OF MAAT

There is agreement that properly speaking, there was no philosophy in Egyptian discourse, at least in the meaning given to the term in the history of Western thought since Plato: an independent discipline that treats, according to its own methods, clearly defined topics such as metaphysics, logic, and ethics. Moreover,

we also cannot speak *stricto sensu* of religion, which is supposedly a reserved area opposed to other, secular ones, such as politics or even ethics. This caution, which is only apparently a paradox, was already noted at the beginning of this work. But it is perhaps apposite to recall it as we turn to an analysis of the central concept of Maat.

The word *Maat*, which has long been translated as “truth,” “justice,” has been the object of much reflection and analysis, for scholars have sensed that it was at the heart of Egyptian thought. We know that Maat was manifest in the world since the cosmos was instituted, and that it was consubstantial with the cosmos. For this reason, scholars today prefer to recognize in it a notion of the order of the world as applied to such diverse areas as cosmology, social order, individual duty, and postmortem destiny. The basic, penetrating studies by Jan Assmann have lent new focus to this vast concept and its varied implications. With regard to Maat as applied to social order and its correlate, individual conduct, we can follow the thread of a veritable thematization of the concept through the series of what we call the wisdom texts and, *a contrario*, the texts dealing with the inversion or absence of Maat and the accompanying disorder and negation of values, such as the Complaints of the Eloquent Peasant, the Prophecy of Neferti, and the texts of the genre known as “pessimistic” literature.

ACTING IN ACCORDANCE WITH MAAT

The principle of an order to be respected, that of Maat, was the veritable foundation of the Egyptian civilization organized around the central institution of pharaonic power. The relationships of individuals with the king and with one another were based on this postulate. It constituted the framework of the social fabric, which was extremely coherent in the Old Kingdom and then called into question after its fall, during the First Intermediate Period. The Old Kingdom was a period when the life of the individual, his future, and his duty were above all governed by a social relationship based on reciprocity, and it was only slowly that a more individual, and perhaps more solitary, concept of a person emerged. From the Old Kingdom to the Middle Kingdom, some texts that are quite different in nature but are all based on the societal Maat enable us to reconstruct this notion and the duties of an individual who was subject to such an ethical law.

It has often been written that the wisdom texts were utilitarian in nature, that they advocated a somewhat Prudhommesque, petty-minded, petit-bourgeois morality: knowledge of how to behave at table, comporting oneself according to one's station before superiors, not committing excesses, sticking to the rule of “all things in moderation.” Without really knowing what is hidden behind these vague terms, scholars have claimed that higher moral aspirations are absent. This is doubtless a misreading of the texts that have come down to us, which are difficult to understand or even to approach. There is indeed the question of table manners, but this is in no way surprising or particularly trivial if we bear in mind

that every last action in life was subject to a social code that recognized no difference between the material and the spiritual. The Egyptians did not find it necessary to write, on the one hand, a treatise on the social graces like those studied by young people at the beginning of the twentieth century and, on the other hand, a separate moralizing book on charity.

Scholars have also misunderstood the more strictly doctrinaire passages that represent the very underpinning of the ethical system. The first requirement was to act and not be lazy. This exhortation occurs in a context of reciprocity, as the texts often insist: it is the one who acts for whom action will be taken. In one of his complaints about the inactive intendant who does not hasten to correct the injustice done to him, the Eloquent Peasant proclaims:

A goodly act returns to its place of yesterday,
for it is commanded to us:
Act for the one who acts
so as to commit him to remain active.
That means, to thank him for what he has done.²⁸

The pessimistic texts, such as *The Dispute between a Man Weary of Life and His Ba*, deplore the disappearance of this philosophy of action. "One does not remember yesterday, one no longer acts on behalf of the one who has acted nowadays." Despite developments in thought, this sentiment still occurs in funerary inscriptions of the Late Period, where it is admirably summarized:

How good it is to act for the one who acts!
Happy is the heart of the one who acts for the one who has acted for him.²⁹

In addition to this solidarity, which inserted the individual into a closely woven social network, there was another, no less strong solidarity between the present and the past, which the Egyptians called "yesterday." On this solidarity depended the maintenance of the social order and its values, in the sense of a civilization sustaining itself by its collective memory. This is why, in political and historical texts that mention disorder, the authors stress that the past has been forgotten:

Lo, one fights on the battlefield,
for yesterday is forgotten.
Nothing succeeds for the one who no longer knows the one he knew.³⁰

²⁸ Translation based on that of J. Assmann, *Maât: L'Égypte pharaonique et l'idée de justice sociale* (Paris, 1989), p. 39.

²⁹ Translation based on that of Assmann, *Maât*, pp. 38 and 41.

³⁰ Instruction of King Amenemhet I; translation based on that of Assmann, *Maât*, p. 39.

Reference to the past is often an obligatory theme in Egyptian texts in search of an archetypal model in the hope of reactualizing it in historical time; perhaps comfort was drawn from a certain nostalgia for better times, a nostalgia that could only grow when political difficulties took an unbearable turn. Based on this nostalgia, it was easy for commentators to insist in these texts on the conservative side of the Egyptians, who preferred a rigid society to one that was in flux. This is not false, but in the framework of an ethical discourse, we should doubtless seek another dimension on which, when all is said and done, our own society could usefully meditate. A civilization without a past, which has forgotten yesterday, is without culture, without ties, and thus without direction and literally insane. In such a society, perhaps everything is permitted. Is this not what, using words from the discourse of their own time, Ipuwer says in his lamentations, or the Man Weary of Life in his dialogue with his *ba*?

If the individual is faithful to the past, if he maintains the bond of acting for others, he will be able to overcome egotism and greed and renounce insensitivity. His own personal, familial, and social success will occur within the framework of a relationship of solidarity with others, without which his success would be empty. Maxim 19 of the Instruction of Ptahhotep perhaps best summarizes this commandment, which is far from the petty mindedness that has been too often attributed to this text:

If you desire that your conduct be perfect, stand apart from such an evil. Beware of an act of greed, for that is a serious, incurable illness that cannot leave room for intimacy; it demeans fathers and mothers, and brothers from one and the same mother, it embitters the sweetness of friendship, it distances a friend from his master, it separates spouse from spouse. It is an "extract" of all that is bad, a "coating" of all that is blameful. But the man who conforms to Maat, and who proceeds according to its steps, will endure. He will be able to make a testament from that. But the greedy man has no tomb.³¹

ETHICS AND KNOWLEDGE

Attaining or approaching this state of perfection advocated by Ptahhotep and his later emulators was not granted out of hand to every individual. We do know that the greedy person, the egoist, never attained it. But the Egyptians believed that a person could progress on the path of Maat through apprenticeship. This learning was the very *raison d'être* of these "instructions," as they were called by their authors, whether they were a king addressing his son, as in the case of Khety and Amenemhet, or a man addressing his son, who is either anonymous or identified, as in the case of Ptahhotep, or later Khety (in the Satire of the Trades) and Ankhsheshonqy. These texts took their place in the line of literary and sapiential

³¹ Translation based on that of Assmann, *Maât*, p. 53.

testaments in which a man who has reached old age hands down his knowledge to his son, and via him, to future generations. This transmission took place because of the need for social memory. It was far from being a literary topos void of meaning, for certain texts were regularly recopied from the Middle Kingdom down to the Saite Period, as in the case of the Instruction of Khety and the Satire of the Trades.

After drawing up a frightening list of the ravages of age, Ptahhotep begins his discourse, “teaching knowledge to the one who does not know it, and the rules of perfect words; these will be most useful to the one who will listen, but something harmful to the one who transgresses them.” At the other end of history, Ankhseshonqy, this time in a literary fiction, wrote the instruction he intended for his son on shards while in detention in the jails of Daphne.

To the words of introduction at the beginning of these texts, there correspond those at the end, “See, I have told you what can be useful to you, and which is mine. Act now in conformity with what has been set before you.” Thus ends the Instruction of King Khety for his son Merikare. The Instruction of Amenemope ends similarly: “Consider these thirty chapters; they inform and they educate . . . They make the ignorant into a well-advised man.” The individual could learn—with the exception, says Ptahhotep, of those predestined by the divine to remain bad, “the insane one who will not listen”:

There is no one who will act for him, he considers knowledge as ignorance, and the useful as harmful. He does everything that is odious to the point of being blamed for it every day. He lives on that of which one dies. His pernicious nourishment is talk.³²

This apprenticeship and this transmission of knowledge are accomplished by speech and listening. Ptahhotep subtly constructed the last hundred verses of his instruction on this theme:

It is useful to listen for a son who listens, because everything that is heard enters into the one who listens, and the one who listens becomes a man who is listened to.

If listening is good, speech is good, and the one who listens possesses something good. To listen is useful for the one who listens, listening is better than anything that exists, for it results from it that love will be perfect.³³

Conversely, the leitmotif of one of the songs of the Man Weary of Life—“To whom can I speak today?”—conveys the distress and solitude of man in the face of the meanness, the falsity, and the greed that have obviated the possibility of

³² Instruction of Ptahhotep; translation based on that of Assmann, *Maât*, p. 46.

³³ Translation based on that of Assmann, *Maât*, p. 43.

dialogue. While the relationship with the divine was established first of all by sight, "seeing the god," the relationship with other men, neighbors in this world, occurred through hearing and language. A society in which people acted according to Maat, or at least in which they were supposed to act according to Maat, was based on language that was spoken, and what is more, that was heard. From the New Kingdom on, the true sage distinguished himself by silence.

BAD CONSCIENCE

Following Maat pertained to the ethical code of human action, which does not mean that the divine was absent from the instructions. Most often, it occurs in the anonymous form "the god," which has sparked many explanations on the part of commentators on these texts. Except for some cases in which the term explicitly designates the king, we must again stress that this is a generic term, as suggested by Georges Posener: a generic divine being and not a monotheistic god sensed or known by the authors of the wisdom texts. It goes without saying that it was the duty of a person who acted according to Maat to render a cult to this god and erect monuments to him, "for the god knows the one who acts for him," as the Instruction for Merikare puts it. In the same vein, the idea of divine retribution is to be found in Ptahhotep: "Do not set fear among men, or the god will punish you with the same . . . Do not allow the fear of men to manifest itself; it is the will of the god that should manifest itself." "Act for the god—he will do the same for you" is again affirmed in the Instruction for Merikare. Nevertheless, this reciprocal interaction of man and god in no way undermined freedom and the human necessity to act.

Beginning with the Instruction of Any, which dates to Dynasty 18, we see a slow but ever more perceptible development that continues through the instructions of Amenemope and Ankhsheshonqy and Papyrus Insinger. Scholars have drawn a parallel, doubtless correctly, between this phenomenon and the development of personal piety, at least as it was expressed at that time: a search for a direct relationship with a deity whose beneficent intercession is requested. The instructions were always based on the concept of acting according to Maat, but from that time on, Maat depended directly on a personal god, as Amenemope teaches: "As for Maat, it is the great gift of the god, he gives it to whom he pleases." As a consequence, the formula "the one who acts is the one for whom action will be taken" was transformed into "the one who acts, it is the god who rewards him." Individuals would continue to act on behalf of others, to be sure, but this action would not receive an automatic response and would not necessarily be followed by consequences. Man would act in direct dependence on his personal god, who bestowed his favors according to his will. From that time on, the individual was in the hand of his god: "all good fortune is from the hand of the god" (Ankhsheshonqy 20, 6). "There is no true protection outside the work of the

god" (Insinger); each chapter of this last Egyptian wisdom text ends in the refrain, "The luck and fortune that comes, it is the god who sends them."

From this subjection of the individual to a personal god in whom he placed his confidence, there emerged no assurance regarding life in this world. Indeed, quite the contrary. It was because the individual had become conscious of his solitude, of the precariousness of his existence, that he attempted to draw closer to the divine. Already, Ptahhotep had said: "One does not know what can happen, even the one who (thinks he) knows tomorrow"; but later, this uncertainty regarding the future weighed more heavily on human destiny. Nothing is ever acquired, asserts Any:

One man is rich, another is poor; but food remains for the one who makes two shares of it. And last year's rich man can be a vagabond this year. . . .

When last year's watercourse has drained away, another is here this year; vast seas become arid expanses, while last year's riverbanks become (watery) depths. A man has only one way of existing.

It is perhaps in a well-known passage from Amenemope that we find the clearest expression of the sentiment of human frailty: "Man is clay and straw. The god is his creator. He destroys and builds each day. He makes a thousand poor men through his will; he makes a thousand men into chiefs when he is in his hour of life" (XXIV, 13–18). And again: "The god is always in his perfection; man is always in his weakness" (XIX, 14–15). The Egyptians always considered man to be the creation of the gods, but here he is but a wisp of straw in his finitude and his lack. He will continue to act, however, but with lucidity and detachment vis-à-vis the consequences of his action.

FREEDOM AND EVIL

In any culture that reflects on the human condition, especially one that believed in a world peopled with divine presences, the problem of human freedom will arise. If such freedom exists, it is exercised in the framework of an ethical law that in Egypt was embodied in the principle of Maat. The attitude of the individual with regard to Maat was a subject with which the Egyptians were greatly preoccupied. In the face of this imperative, whose application was the sole means of maintaining the cohesion of the world and of society, as well as the means of making a man into a true person vis-à-vis his fellow man, each individual remained free to act or not to act, to act in conformity with this principle or contrary to it. The term "freedom" *stricto sensu* does not appear in the Egyptian vocabulary, but the notion certainly existed, if only vaguely conceptualized. Were there no restrictions on this liberty, at least in the final stage of Egyptian thinking, when we are told that man was in the hand of the divine? Without doubt,

but it was not necessarily granted to act, and thus to choose. The consequences of his acts could escape him, but not the decision to undertake them. It was not an external force or will that caused him to act. There was not, properly speaking, a predetermination or predestination, and with the exception of the insane, the individual was responsible for his actions. This freedom was exercised within the framework of the human—that is to say, the mortal—condition.

In this regard, the Tale of the Doomed Prince can be envisaged as an apology for this condition. The seven Hathors predict that the child will die by a crocodile, a serpent, or a dog. When all is said and done, man must die, even if he does not know in advance just how, and when the young man in the tale grows up, he decides to depart and live his life instead of remaining shut up, as his father wishes.

If the individual enjoyed freedom, albeit a limited one, this implies he could do evil, for evil was there, and in their prayers, individuals acknowledged that they were guilty of sin. It was only too easy in Egypt, as elsewhere, to infer the existence of evil from injustices, social disorder, sickness, and death. Humans had even gone so far as to rebel against Re, who nearly massacred them but changed his mind and gave them a second chance. There was no theodicy in Egypt, and responsibility for the existence of evil could not be imputed to the gods. As early as Coffin Texts spell 1130, the creator god affirms: “I made each man equal to his neighbor. I did not command them to do evil, (but) it was their hearts that transgressed what I said.” There remains the open question of why evil existed. The gods had not willed it; humans committed it, but they did not bear responsibility for it from the moment of their birth; they were not sullied by it by their very nature. Egyptian texts are not particularly clear on this subject; like death, evil was an inherent part of creation. Only the cosmogony of Esna depicts the birth of Apopis, the incarnation of evil, but without really explaining it. Though Apopis was driven back toward the exterior when the cosmos was organized, he nonetheless remained present and threatening, a possible virtuality that often was actualized.

THE HUMAN CONDITION

Recommending action in conformity with Maat, while attributing an ever greater place to divine will, recognizing the existence of evil in the world and their responsibility for it—from this information, can we get an idea of the Egyptian assessment of the human condition? In all this people’s literature, only the Man Weary of Life, in his dialogue with his *ba*, longs for death as an end to and deliverance from a life he can no longer bear. The theme of the uselessness of life also permeates the Admonitions of Ipuwer, but in a specific pseudohistorical context. If the order of things is overturned, man no longer has his place in it. Many individuals must certainly have been driven to despair, as revealed in

a negative injunction in a maxim of Ankhsheshonqy: "In misfortune, do not prefer death to life out of despair." The leitmotif of the brevity of life otherwise occurs often in harpers' songs, which urge individuals to profit to the fullest extent possible from the present moment that was granted to them, for they did not know what the morrow would bring. But existence was not necessarily considered as absurd; only disorder in the world could seem senseless.

In a rather abrupt manner, the same Ankhsheshonqy affirms the triumph of life, which continues after death: "No one turns away from life because of the death of another." Egyptians thus kept on going until the end of their destiny, ineluctably.