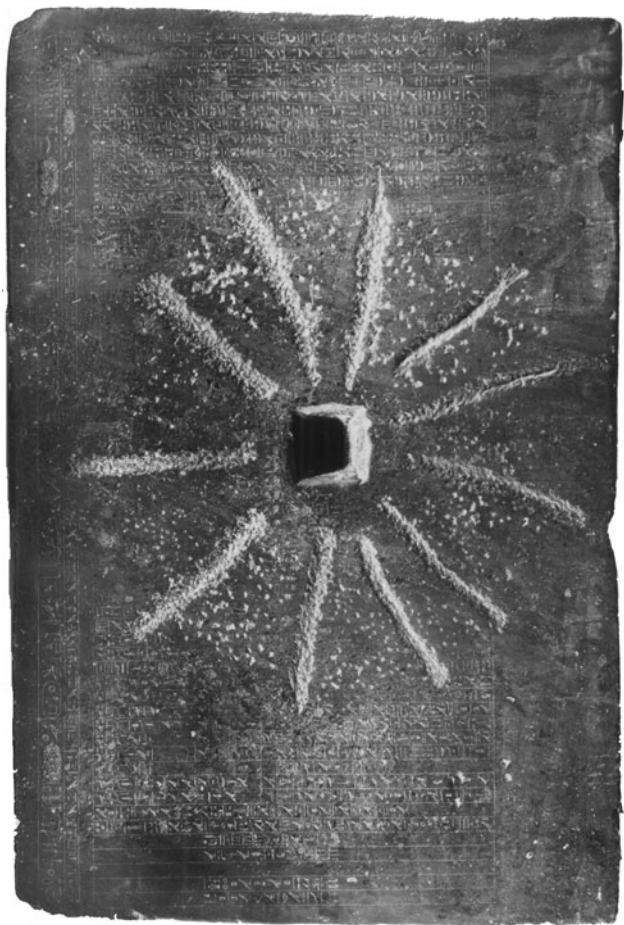


Chapter 4

The beautiful moment: creation myths

The Shabaqo Stone in the British Museum has been of intense interest to Egyptologists and theologians since its inscriptions were first translated in 1901.¹ This stela is named after King Shabaqo (Shabaka) who had it made in the 8th century BC (Figure 4). The stela was retrieved from a village built over the ruins of the temple of Ptah at Memphis. For many years the basalt stela was used as a lower grindstone, so parts of its hieroglyphic inscription have been obliterated, which is ironic because the purpose of this monument was to preserve on stone the contents of an ancient worm-eaten scroll.

The text from that scroll is now known as the Memphite Theology. It is a major source for two important areas of Egyptian myth: cosmogony (creation accounts) and the mythology of Osiris. Parts of the original text seem to have been lost by the time it was copied and damage to the stone has destroyed other sections. This shows how random the survival of sources for Egyptian myth can be. It would be wrong to think that we have a complete knowledge of the subject. At any time a new discovery could overturn previous ideas.



4. The Shabaqo Stone in the British Museum

The Memphite Theology

The Memphite Theology contains not one but several creation myths. This very diversity has made the Egyptian creation story less well known than it should be. The Memphite Theology was originally dated to the early 3rd millennium BC because its language seemed to be even more archaic than that of the Pyramid Texts. Scholars interested in tracing the origins of monotheism were excited by the Memphite Theology because it seemed to provide a very early example of a transcendent deity who used the power of his intellect to create the world. Theologians lost interest in the text after it was argued that the whole thing had been written in the 8th century BC and given a false history. Most Egyptologists now believe that the creation account in the Memphite Theology was actually composed around the 13th century BC, a period when there was particular interest in creator deities. Shabako's scribes may have rewritten the Memphite Theology in a very archaic style to give it greater authority.

Shabako was a Nubian king who had forcibly reunited Egypt under his rule. His dynasty were particular worshippers of Amun-Ra as creator sun god. They revered and enriched the temples of Amun at Karnak and Ra at Heliopolis. With this stela, Shabako tactfully honoured the claims of Ptah and his priesthood, while promoting a text that harmonized Memphite mythology with that of Heliopolis. It is a striking example of religious and cultural sensitivity from the 8th century BC.

So, what happens in the Memphite Theology? This profound text is not easy to interpret. The inscription is a mixture of poetry and prose, third-person narrative, and speeches put in the mouths of deities. It can be divided into four main parts. The first describes how King Shabako restored the ancient text and gives him a divine role model in the form of Ptah-Ta-Tenen as uniter and king of Upper and Lower Egypt. The second part is similar to a surviving Middle Kingdom script for a royal ritual. It traces the history of kingship to

the great debate over who should succeed the murdered god Osiris as ruler of Egypt. The first decision of Geb and the divine tribunal was to make Seth ruler of Upper Egypt, 'the place where he was born', and Horus ruler of Lower Egypt, 'the place where his father was drowned'. Their second was to unify the country by making Horus sole king.

In typical Egyptian fashion, the text then goes backwards to the death of Osiris, the father of Horus. Rather than a linear narrative, we are presented with a series of events together with their origins and consequences. These momentous events are located in and around Memphis, so that the victorious Horus can be identified with the Memphite god Ptah-Ta-Tenen. The third part of the inscription describes how Ptah created the world, while the fourth part alludes to a mystical union between Ptah and the resurrected Osiris. The cosmogony is well worth looking at in more detail.

The First Time

The Memphite Theology links Ptah with a whole series of deities who represent elements of the primeval world. These deities, 'who came into existence in Ptah', include Ptah-Nun and Ptah-Naunet, the male and female aspects of the dark, watery chaos of the primeval ocean. The potential for intelligent life was inherent in this ocean but was not realized until the spirit of the creator attained awareness. The list is damaged but it probably continued by linking Ptah with Ta-Tenen, 'the Rising Land', since elsewhere in the Memphite Theology, Ptah is identified with Ta-Tenen, the deity 'from whom everything emerged'. The rising of the first mound of land above the primeval ocean was one of the great events of the era known to the Egyptians as the 'First Time'. The mound provided a place in which the creator could come into being.

At Heliopolis, this primeval mound was associated with the sacred *ben-ben* stone, represented in temple architecture by obelisks such as Cleopatra's Needle. An alternative primal event is evoked by the

Box 6

CREATION IMAGERY

PLACES AND THINGS OF THE FIRST TIME:

Primeval ocean

Primeval marsh/reed thicket

Primeval mound

Primeval lotus

Cosmic egg

Potter's wheel

Willow tree

PRIMEVAL BEINGS:

Frogs and snakes (the Ogdoad)

Snake (Amun-Kematef, Atum, Neith)

Black bull (Amun, Ptah)

benu bird/phoenix (Atum, Ra, Osiris)

Falcon (Horus the Elder)

Goose – 'the Great Cackler' (Amun)

Ibis (Thoth)

Crocodile (Sobek-Ra, Penwenti)

Cow (Mehet-Weret, Hathor, Neith)

Sun child (Ra, Nefertem)

Moon child (Khonsu, Thoth)

Eye of Ra (Hathor, Tefnut, Bastet, Sekhmet, and others)

Hand of Atum (Hathor, Nebethetepet, Iusaas)

Seed goddess (Hathor)

The Heh gods – supporters of the sky

last deity in the list, Nefertem, ‘who is at the nose of Ra’. Nefertem was the god of the primeval lotus (or water-lily). The sweet-scented blue lotus was imagined rising above the primeval ocean and opening its petals to reveal a golden child. This was ‘the beautiful moment’, the very first sunrise when the creator became manifest as the youthful sun god.

In creation myths from other areas, images peculiar to local deities were used to convey the unknowable beginnings of life (see Box 6). The first act of creation might be a shining bird finding somewhere to perch in the middle of the primeval ocean or a goose known as the Great Cackler laying the egg from which the sun would hatch. Egyptian cosmogonies usually list several, apparently contradictory, primal events. The Egyptians do not seem to have regarded their creation myths as literally true. They are more like highly charged metaphors, drawn from the natural world.

Creative acts

The creator was now ready to create, but what were the means of creation? Again, more than one answer to this question is given in the Memphite Theology. When speculating about the beginnings of life, the Egyptians used the models of creativity they saw around them: the sexual acts that produced people and animals, the seed-sowing that produced crops, and the powers of the mind and the hand that produced objects. Ptah was the patron deity of artists and craftsmen, but the creation account begins by linking him with Atum of Heliopolis, who created ‘with his semen and his fingers’.

Passages in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts describe how Atum became lonely in the primeval ocean. He acted as both father and mother by giving himself an erection, taking his ‘seed’ into his mouth, and spitting out the first divine couple, Shu and Tefnut. Some versions imply that the pleasure experienced by Atum in the sexual act was a vital part of the creative process. This may seem a shockingly primitive myth, but it was illustrated in graphic detail in

papyri placed in the tombs of high-ranking priests and priestesses. The androgynous nature of the creator was sometimes made clearer by personifying the hand of Atum as a goddess who united with his penis to create life.

The Memphite Theology restates the myth by using link words centred on the mouth. Atum used his mouth as a womb but the parts of the mouth could also represent the power of divine speech. The Egyptians believed that the intelligence controlling the body was located in the heart. In the Memphite Theology, Ptah is said to bring deities, people, and animals into being by devising them in his heart and naming them with his tongue. In other sources these powers of the creator are personified as the gods of insight/creative thought (Sia) and command/authoritative utterance (Hu). The 'divine words' of Ptah can, like hieroglyphs, make thoughts real. It was this more intellectual method of creation that led to comparisons between the Memphite Theology and the famous start of St John's Gospel – 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God'.

The Memphite Theology does not deny the truth of the creation myths of Heliopolis, but it supersedes them by stating that Atum was acting as the heart and tongue of Ptah. A creation text of the Graeco-Roman Period gives Ptah a similar position in the cosmogony of Hermopolis which centred on the mysterious primeval beings collectively known as the Eight (the Ogdoad). Ptah brings the Eight into being by three means: taking thought (intellectual), fashioning eggs (craft), and fertilizing the primeval marsh with his seed (sexual). He then causes the union of the Eight which transforms them into the One: the creator god Amun.

The creation of humanity is not given any particular emphasis in the Memphite Theology. This is probably because the standard myth of the origins of humanity was firmly linked with Ra. One version has humans originate from the tears shed by the solar child when he was separated from his mother, and deities from his

laughter when they were reunited. In Mesopotamian myth, humans were created as short-lived drudges to do the work of the lesser gods on earth. In Egyptian myth the creation of humanity seems more accidental, but serving the gods became a part of humanity's function.

The Memphite Theology stresses that Ptah created the moral and social order, including the concept of religion as it was to be practised by people. This primarily meant the adoration of statues which the *kas* (life-forces) of the gods would enter as bodies. Ptah also invented the crafts, such as sculpture, which humans could use to imitate his creative power. As both creator and ruler, Ptah continued as the controlling intelligence of the world like the unseen heart in the body. The gods Horus and Thoth were to embody his powers of insight and command in the age when the gods ruled Egypt.

The imperfections in the created world were not denied. The brief fourth section of the Memphite Theology reverted to the terrible tragedy of the drowning of Osiris but showed how this was transformed into something positive. Horus ensured that his father entered the secret realm where the gods of death and life could unite. The composite deity Ptah-Sokar-Osiris presided over the regeneration of the dead who were buried in the cemeteries of Memphis. In the realm of the living, the power of the creator, acting through Horus, was handed down to generations of gods and kings ruling Egypt from Memphis.

Creation myths and temples

Two German scholars who worked on early editions and translations of the Memphite Theology disagreed on what kind of text it was.² One thought that it was the rather garbled script of a mystery play with explanatory glosses. The other thought that it was a coherent theological treatise, though he acknowledged that the speeches it contained might derive from dramatized myths

performed in temples. Creation myths were a medium for philosophical speculation, but this could be secondary to less abstract motives.

On one level, the Memphite Theology can be seen as a classic validating myth. It justifies the continued existence of institutions such as kingship and the priesthood by giving them divine origins. When national identity is under threat from outside forces, as it was in the 8th century BC, such myths become particularly important. The public display of this creation myth to the educated elite had the effect of acknowledging the crucial importance of the temple of Ptah and its priesthood. A cynic would take the Memphite Theology as a piece of propaganda designed to lure government funding away from competing temples. This may have been one of the text's purposes, but to view it only in this way would be to overlook the transformative role of Egyptian myth.

The Memphite Theology, whether it was read aloud or inscribed on stone, was thought to have the power to influence reality for the better. Creation narratives could help to remake the world in the divine image. The passage about creation from St John's Gospel is one of the readings for Christmas Day in many Christian churches. The creation of the world and the birth of the saviour of that world are presented as parallel events. In Egyptian ritual, an account of creation is often paired with the triumph of the creator sun god, or his representative the king, over the forces of chaos. Creation myths could be set in stone without fear because they were purely positive narratives that celebrated the founding of *maat*, the divine order.

As in many other ancient cultures, creation myths were intimately bound up with the architecture and function of cult temples. In some early Egyptian temples the main feature was a mound of sand. This almost certainly represented the primeval mound where the first act of creation took place. Later temples incorporated mounds, or single obelisks, or raised the floor of the sanctuary where the god's statue was kept to above the level of the rest of the building.

Temple texts do not treat such features as symbolic reconstructions, but as the actual place of creation. The fact that most major temples made the same claim was no more disturbing to the devout than the idea that the one God can be present in the bread and wine during communion services in thousands of different churches. All sanctuaries were, in a sense, the same place.

Other creator deities

The principal deity of a temple was often equated with the creator. This meant that local deities of both genders achieved the status of creator deity. To establish this status, a creation myth might be recited or acted out during a temple festival. In the temple of Horus at Edfu, creation began with the subduing of a primeval marsh and a celestial falcon perching on a reed. In the temple of Khonsu at Karnak, Khonsu was identified with a ram-headed snake who fertilized the cosmic egg.

Egyptian Myth

Where a temple had two principal deities, both could be given creation myths. At Esna the separate creative powers of the ram god Khnum and the goddess Neith were celebrated in hymns. Khnum made life with his sexual power, by releasing the Nile flood that caused crops to grow and by crafting bodies on his potter's wheel. Creation was thought of as happening both in the past and the present, since new lives continued to come into existence. Before a person could be born, Khnum or Neith had to make them a body and animate it with the breath of life.

Like Ptah in the Memphite Theology, Neith was said to use divine words to create. In some versions of her myth, only seven words of power were needed to make the world. Neith was credited with inventing childbirth. She gave birth to the sun god in her cow form, which was equated with the life-giving powers of the primeval ocean. All substances that came from the body of a deity could become life forms. The spit or vomit of Neith became the chaos monster Apophis, who was the sun god's deadliest enemy. Neith

saved the solar child by lifting him above the watery chaos of the primeval ocean. As a creator, Neith seems a neutral force, making creatures of order and chaos, but by the end of the First Time she has chosen the side of order.

The sun god was often viewed as the active power of the creator in the world. In temple rituals and Underworld Books each sunset was treated like the end of the world. The nightly voyage of the sun god took him back into a dark chaotic realm. Figures from myths set in the mythical dawn of time, such as the mysterious Ogdoad and the gods of creative thought and authoritative utterance, helped the sun god to rise again and renew the world. Tomorrow was not just another day, but another world. For the Egyptians, their country was the centre of that world. In the next chapter we will look at the influence of the physical world on Egypt's mythology.

Geraldine Pinch

EGYPTIAN MYTH

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi
São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

© Geraldine Pinch, 2004

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published as a Very Short Introduction 2004

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate
reprographics rights organizations. Enquiries concerning reproduction
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN 13: 978-0-19-280346-7

ISBN 10: 0-19-280346-8

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by RefineCatch Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall