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ANCIENT RELIGIONS

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Egypt

Jan Assmann and David Frankfurter

Classical period

There is no Egyptian word for "religion," but there is a text that clarifies the Egyptian concept. According to this text, the sun-god and creator, Re, placed the king on earth in order that he might establish *ma'at* (justice/truth/order) and annihilate *isfet* (injustice/lie/disorder) by judging humankind and satisfying the gods (i.e., by giving offerings to the gods and funerary offerings to the dead).

Establishing *ma'at* and annihilating *isfet*: this formula refers to a broad concept of religion, encompassing both cult and culture. Within this broad concept, the text draws a further distinction, setting off cult (satisfying the gods) from justice (judging humankind). This distinction between the spheres of justice and cult has been consciously and emphatically destroyed in biblical monotheism, where justice moves into the center of religion. In Egypt, the question of justice is dealt with not in the context of religion proper, which is concerned with satisfying the gods, but in the comparatively secular context of judging humankind. In the broader frame of establishing *ma'at*, however, justice and morals play a central role, and almost everything that the Bible has to say on these topics is inherited from its ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian neighbors.

At the center of Egyptian religion, however, was cult. The main function of cult was to establish a connection between this world and the otherworld, where not only the gods but also the transfigured spirits of the dead were supposed to live. The basic form of this connection was an exchange of goods. The living served the gods and spirits with offerings and sacrifices and received in return all kinds of support and blessing. The ultimate aim of these offerings, therefore, was not to "feed the gods," but to support this connection, and the cultic barter was only a symbolic expression of contact and communication. Every presentation of offerings, in temples and tombs, was accompanied by a

spell stressing its symbolic or sacramental meaning. However, the Egyptian concept of the divine was not restricted to the sphere of the cult. The gods were believed to dwell in the otherworlds (supernal and infernal) and to take only temporary sojourn in cultic representations such as cult images, symbols, sacred animals, trees, and objects. Cult was concerned with establishing and supporting this sojourn, to make the divine descend from heaven into the image, to transfer divine actions from the celestial to the terrestrial realm. During the offering ritual, the god or the spirit was invoked to come from all parts of the world in order to partake of the offering meal; he or she was not supposed to be simply present in the temple or tomb. The gods were believed not to dwell on but only to visit earth, and this visit would irrevocably end if cult were discontinued. Withholding offerings would make the gods not starve but only retreat into their supernal or infernal abodes.

The cult with its rituals, symbols, and recitations formed only one dimension of divine presence. Another dimension was the cosmos as a sphere where the divine manifested itself. According to the Egyptians, the world or cosmos is a process rather than a space, and the idea of order is more a matter of successfully overcoming disorder and destruction than a matter of spatial structure and beautiful arrangement. Virtually all of the gods cooperate in the project of maintaining the world, of keeping the cosmic process going. The core of this process is constituted by what the ancient Egyptians conceived of as the solar circuit, the daily course of the sun across the heavens and through the netherworld. In the eyes of the Egyptians, the success of the cosmic process was far from taken for granted—it was constantly at stake. In the same way as the Mesopotamians, the Chinese, and the Romans, the ancient Egyptians were constantly occupied in watching the sky and in observing all kinds of natural phenomena with the greatest attention. Yet unlike with the Mesopotamians, Chinese, and Romans, the goal of this attention was not divination, that is, finding out the will of the gods and foretelling the future, but to assist the gods in maintaining the world and to accompany divine action with ritual action. Thus, the Egyptians observed what was regular and recurrent in the skies, whereas cultures interested in divination watched for exceptions and deviations. In the context of this task and intellectual preoccupation, the Egyptians accumulated an incredible amount of knowledge, a kind of sacred cosmology.

In the cosmic dimension of divine presence, every major Egyptian deity had a specific cosmic manifestation and played a role in the cosmic process, in the same way as, in the cultic dimension, they had a place on earth in which to exert their terrestrial rulership. In both dimensions, the principle of diversity was irreducibly relevant: the cosmic process resulted from the synergy of a multitude of different powers, and the order and structure of Egypt found its expression in the various towns and cities ruled by deities. All of the major deities are lords or ladies of a town, and all of the major towns or cities are the realms of specific deities. The institution of divine rulership served as a representation of social and political identity. The focus of social and political identification in Egypt was the temple and its lord, a specific deity. Being citizen of a town

meant being a member of a festive community, participating in the feasts that were celebrated in the form of processions. The concept of civic allocation was thus invested with religious meaning. It was a kind of covenant, where the religious tasks of the citizen corresponded to the political role of the deity. But the principle of political identity and representation was not limited to the level of villages, towns, and cities. The gods Horus and Seth represented the two parts of Egypt, Lower and Upper Egypt, and later Egypt and the foreign countries. The sun-god Re, later Amun-Re, represented the unified empire. Therefore, the cultic dimension of divine presence can also be called the political dimension. Cult and political identity are simply aspects of one and the same concept of divine presence and communication.

The third dimension of divine presence is constituted by what the Egyptians understood by the term *name*. A name in the Egyptian sense is not just a name but everything that can be said and told of a person. A name is not just an identifier but a description, a linguistic representation of a person's essence. Telling the names of a deity means reciting hymns and eulogies in his or her praise. To the linguistic dimension of divine presence belong Egyptian concepts of sacred language and sacred texts, whose recitation in the appropriate context, according to the ancient Egyptians, has magical power and contributes to the maintenance of the world.

The most important realization of the linguistic dimension of divine presence is myth. Egyptian mythology is centered on three basic myths: the myths of cosmogony, of Osiris, and of the solar circuit. In Egypt, the principle of mythical thinking is the logic of establishing analogies between three discreet realms: cosmos, state, and individual destiny (especially death). Therefore, cosmology, political philosophy, and funerary beliefs may not be separated; all three levels of reality are constantly projected onto each other in Egyptian religious texts. The myth of Osiris is centered on the problem of death; however, it is also the myth of the state, because every king plays the role of Horus, the son and avenger of his predecessor; and it has a cosmological meaning, because it clarifies the relation between heaven, earth, and netherworld. The myth of the solar circuit is basically cosmological; however, it also concerns the state and human destiny (death), because the sun-god is the model of Pharaoh in establishing *ma'at* and the model of the dead in being reborn every morning. The cosmogony is about the origin of the cosmos and of the state; it tells how, after a period of symbiosis, the gods departed to heaven and the state was established in order to organize ways of communication between the now-separated worlds of the gods and the living. Thus, establishing analogies and making the three levels of reality transparent to each other constitutes the basic principle of the linguistic articulation of divine presence. The three dimensions of divine presence correspond surprisingly well to Varro's distinction between three forms of theology: political (*civilis*), cosmic (*naturalis*), and poetic (*fabularis*). Yet this correspondence does not mean that we are dealing here with a universal structure. Mesopotamian and, above all, biblical religion is different in that a fourth dimension, history, becomes more and more promi-

ment. This process has repercussions even in Egypt, and the rather eruptive emergence of history as a fourth dimension of divine presence after the Amarna experience (1320 BCE) changes the structure of Egyptian religion in a profound way. From now on, the gods are believed to intervene in the course not only of history but also of individual biography. This means the rise of personal piety as an attitude of deep confidence in and submission to the will of god.

Another line of religious evolution that led to fundamental changes in the structure of Egyptian religion is the rise of theological discourse, triggered first by the breakdown of the Old Kingdom, when the experience of distress and disorder posed the classical problems of theodicy. The central problem underlying the theological discourse of the New Kingdom is the relationship between God and gods on the one hand and between God and world, or creator and creation, on the other hand. Both of these relations are simply aspects of the same question, because the gods and their constellations and cooperations constitute the world in Egyptian thought. Theogony and cosmogony are the same. According to the cosmogony of Heliopolis, which played the role of a "great tradition," the One (Arum), the personification of preexisting Oneness, creates the world by engendering Shu and Tefnut (air and fire), who engender Geb and Nut (heaven and earth), the parents of the five children of Nut who prolong cosmic reality into the institutions of civilization and human history. This same sequence of generations corresponds also to a succession of rulers: cosmogony appears as cratogony, the emergence and evolution of power. The most important epithet of the highest god in Egypt, the quality that distinguishes the highest god from the other gods, is temporal firstness. To be the first means to be the chief.

With the New Kingdom, the imperialistic politics of the Thutmosid Dynasty brought about a new, universalistic cosmology. The order of creation did not stop at the Egyptian borders but stretched far beyond, comprising many nations with whom Egypt now entered into political relations. This new image of the world immensely enhanced the supremacy of the sun-god within the Egyptian pantheon who, from his original embeddedness in the synergetic process of maintaining the cosmic process, moved more and more into the position of sole creator and preserver vis-à-vis a world inhabited by both humans and gods. Akhenaten's monotheist revolution drew but the logical consequences in eliminating the gods altogether. His god is alone in creating and maintaining the world, producing light and warmth by his radiation and time and development by his motion. The theology of the post-Amarna period admits the gods into the world, but it also stresses the distance and solitude of the solar creator and maintainer of the world. Now, besides creation, a new model is used to express the God-world or God-gods relationship. This is the Ba concept. Amun-Re comes to be called the "hidden Ba," whose manifestations are either the other gods or the visible cosmos itself. God remains One, relating to the world in a similar way to that in which the Ba relates to the body, an invisible animating principle. This new idea of god is not only a response to Amarna but also the origin of the Hermetic idea of god, *deus mundus*, a god whose

body is the world. The Ramesside formula of "The one becoming millions" anticipates Hermetic formulations such as *ben kai pan* (one yet also many), *una quae es omnia* (you who are one and everything), and so on. The Ramesside Ba theology reaches its apex in the Late Period with the cult of the ten Bas in Thebes and El-Hibe. The idea of the world as the incorporation of a soul-like God and of God as a soul animating the world remains central in Egyptian theology even after the New Kingdom and the flourishing of the theological discourse.

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J. A.

Later period

The later period of Egyptian religion, from the Greco-Roman and Coptic eras up to the Muslim conquest, involves a gradual separation and ultimate rupture between traditional Egyptian cults and foreign rulers, with consequences for cults, priestly institutions, religious literature, and popular religion. The stages of transformation can be roughly divided into the Ptolemaic period (305–30 BCE), which saw an infusion of royal patronage and the expansion of the Egyptian religious infrastructure; the early Roman period (30 BCE–early 3rd century CE), which saw the bureaucratization of Egyptian religious institutions for purposes of Roman control and taxation; the later Roman period (mid-3rd–4th century CE), which saw the economic decline of much of the Egyptian religious infrastructure and principal temple centers; and the Coptic period (late 4th–7th century CE), which saw the Christianization of Egyptian religion, involving both the persecution of traditional cults and the expansion of local forms of Egyptian Christianity.

Most of the temples visible today in Egypt—Philae, Karnak, Edfu, Kom Ombo, Kysis, and others—owe their principal expansions to Ptolemaic patronage. Ptolemaic kings styled themselves as Pharaohs according to archaic royal mythology, and they involved numerous priesthoods in the cultivation of this image. Some of this propaganda responded to a series of revolts around Thebes during the 2nd century BCE, which were sponsored and probably led by temple priests (sometimes to support a "native" Pharaoh) and in whose suppression Ptolemaic armies were often engaged. Consequently, the Ptolemaic kings were themselves presented as sons of Re and conquerors of chaos (Rosetta Stone), and they were consistently represented on temple reliefs as pious maintainers of cosmic order and fertility (Philae, Edfu).

Ptolemies also developed new cults at the center, like Sarapis (an anthropo-

morphic hybrid of the Apis bull and Osiris), and on the periphery, like Mandulis (based on a Nubian god). The influx of Greek language, art, and religious and philosophical ideals affected many domains of Egyptian religion. Temple scriptoria produced mythological tracts and legends in Greek, sometimes with influence from Greek literature. An already script-oriented religion absorbed Greek writing for record keeping, oracle responses, ritual spells, and even the quasi-nativist prophecies of the 2nd century BCE that paradoxically urged the expulsion of Greeks (*Oracle of the Potter*). Encouraged by a Hellenistic romanticism of Egypt as the origin of culture and of Egyptian priests as consummate philosophers, some priests sought to convey Egyptian ideas in Greek philosophical or theosophical guise and to present their hieroglyphic systems, ritual traditions, and magical procedures as peerless in the Mediterranean world (Manetho; cf. Herodotus 2.2.5-3.1; 2.54.1-2). By the Roman period, the Egyptian wizard—an exoticized image of a lector-priest literate in hieroglyphs—would become a standard of Greek fiction, and Egypt itself would become the land of magic and mystery. Hellenistic artistic ideals influenced both domestic and public representations of gods like Isis, Amun, and Harpocrates (the Horus-child). Such representational styles—in poetry as well as art—contributed to the pantheization of certain Egyptian gods as omnipotent, Mediterranean-wide deities. Isis, for example, is hailed in inscriptions and papyri as the universal goddess, invoked in various lands by names like Aphrodite, Hecate, and Demeter. The particular center of such synthetic, multimedia activities was the new city of Alexandria, but many other cities also became centers of mixing classical and Egyptian cultures (e.g., Panopolis, Oxyrhynchus).

In none of these endeavors was Egyptian religious tradition smothered or replaced by Hellenism. Rather, Egyptian myths, deities, rites, and priestly roles were extended and developed through these various Greek expressions. As much as the god Sarapis, for example, emerged *de novo* in the 4th century BCE, he had clear Egyptian roots and had become an installation in shrines and festival calendars by the early Roman period. As much as new “foreign” gods such as Asarte, Demeter, and the Dioscuri arose as the protectors of immigrant communities, by the early Roman period they had become expressions of native gods such as Isis or Sobek, the crocodile god. Sobek himself, among the most distinctive of Egyptian deities, was the object of multiple different crocodile cults around the Fayyum region, almost all of which had thoroughly incorporated Greek language into every aspect of organization and communication.

The Roman period begins with the immediate consolidation of imperial control over priesthoods and temples. Under Augustus, the temple institutions were organized in a single bureaucracy under an imperial agent, the *Idios Logos*, their financial resources attached exclusively to imperial munificence. The annals of Egyptian religion from this period—predominantly in Greek—thus show a new determination in record keeping: priestly initiation oaths; inventories of temples, their property, and festivals; and other forms of institutional accounting, prepared for Roman supervision. Emperors continue to sup-

port Egyptian temples and priesthoods and are celebrated for it in temple reliefs; but the Roman relationship to Egyptian religion carries a distinct ambivalence. Egyptian cults have become a common feature of cities around the Mediterranean world, and Egyptian priests have grown ever more famous as court ritual experts and fictional wizards. Yet fears that such “foreign” cults might subvert political order, and fears of the revolutionary potential of indigenous priesthoods, all lead Roman officials to exert control over priestly affairs on every level: proscribing oracles, for example, in an ill-fated declaration of the late 2nd century CE.

Still, sources for this period show ever-new dimensions of Egyptian religion flourishing: a great variety of oracle shrines, producing both written and mysteriously vocal responses and attracting pilgrims’ devotional graffiti; mortuary workshops in which archaic traditions of mummification and burial were extended to include gold masks (as in several oasis necropolises) or portraits of the deceased (as in Fayyum necropolises); and new forms of ancient deities, developed for local or domestic protection, such as Bes, Tutu, and Petbe, enlarging the phalanx of protector-gods that included most prominently Harpocrates-on-the-crocodiles, produced on small stone stelae to ward off dangers.

It is also at this time that the great literary syntheses of Greek and Egyptian theosophy are produced: the *Hermetica* (revelations of the scribal god Thoth in his Greek guise, Hermes the thrice-great) and the writings of Egyptian priests such as Chaeremon and Iamblichus. These texts articulate in Greek terms the efficacy of ritual utterance and gesture, the power of images and places, the relationship between an incomprehensible Divinity and the gods of traditional devotion, and the moral life of the one seeking communion with Divinity. The intellectual convictees that produced such literature probably departed from temple scriptoria and took on a life of their own during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, ultimately communicating or even merging with similar scribal groups producing Christian (including gnostic) texts.

At the beginning of the 3rd century, Egyptian temples themselves were thrust officially from imperial patronage onto the diminishing financial resources of local councils; and with the declining economy of the empire over the course of the 3rd century, the infrastructure and institutions of Egyptian religion fell into decline. The sprawling precincts of Memphis, Thebes, and Edfu dwindled and were largely abandoned. Other temples, as at Douch (Kharga Oasis), Abydos, and Deir el-Bahri (Thebes), cultivated oracle cults to maintain some income; while local temples, such as those of Canopus and Menouthis near Alexandria, and peripheral complexes, like that of Isis at Philae, continued to prosper with more circumscribed catchment areas. A literature of apocalyptic decline, rooted in ancient Egyptian imagery of the liminal interregnum period (but now phrased in Greek, Hermetic, and even Christian terms), arose in the 3rd century to express utopian hopes for an eschatological kingship and the reestablishment of gods and proper worship (*Asclepius* 2.4-2.7; *Apocalypse of Elijah*). Egyptian papyri and Christian legends both record the impact of

destruction of the Sarapeum of Alexandria in 389 CE by Christian mobs and soldiers (under a bishop's direction) may itself have triggered further, local destructive acts by monks around Egypt. Most evidence for the continuation of local cults through the 5th century appears in the legends of Coptic saints, which celebrate these cults' extirpation. The 5th through 7th centuries also see the religious resettlement of Egyptian temples with churches and monasteries. Whether the archaic holiness of these structures is maintained by virtue of these acts of reconsecration or not, the temples' physical importance in the landscape certainly reemerges in Christian institutional guise; and certain graffiti, incised crosses, or image desecration in the temples suggest that the temples were still believed to carry some ambivalent power. Shrines with cults to Coptic saints of often murky historicity proliferate from the 5th century, offering Christians a new sacred landscape and sense of local religious identity through processions, the recitation of martyrs' legends, the magical services of shrine attendants, and even the development of ancient oracular services of these shrines: incubation, written responses, private consultation. In such ways many of the practical elements of Egyptian religion become reformulated in Christian idiom.

Occasionally Egyptian mythological ideas are transmitted past the 4th century as well, as in some Coptic magical texts of the 7th and 8th centuries. Coptic apocryphal texts preserved images of the underworld based on ancient mortuary traditions; and some Coptic martyrologies, read aloud at feast days, depicted a sacred geography based on the martyr's dismembered body that distantly recalled images of Egypt integrated through the body parts of Osiris. But the preservation of non-Christian ideas most publicly in the Coptic period involved Hellenistic rather than Egyptian motifs: the Greek heroes and gods on Coptic textiles, for example.

Over the Ptolemaic, Roman, and Coptic periods, then, we see the swelling and centralization of Egyptian religious institutions; then their decline from economic causes; and finally their persecution—dismantled or scattered—on Christian grounds. The elaborate priestly literary production, temple dramaturgy, and skilled artistic workshops that together supported the complex mythologies of Isis, Horus, Re, Amun, Osiris, and Seth, which we typically equate with Egyptian religion, all fell victim to historical vicissitudes. But the more practical elements of Egyptian religious tradition—from the gestures at domestic altars to the visits made to oracle sites and even to priests' creative reformulation of ritual traditions—continued in local or regional form well after the official establishment of Christianity; and Coptic Christianity itself maintained many of these elements.

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religious edicts issued by anxious 3rd-century emperors (Decius, Valerian, Diocletian) in the hope that the general decline of the empire could be averted through mass uniformity in ritual display.

The empire's official embrace of Christianity in the early 4th century touched off a series of edicts (e.g., the Theodosian Code) restricting non-Christian religion that, if not immediately repressive on traditional Egyptian piety, certainly threw some cults further onto their local-support networks. Given the centrality of image processions, shrine devotion, and divination in traditional religious expression, rather than sacrifice as the 4th-century edicts imagined heathen ritual, much active piety fell outside the edicts' scope (and was difficult to police anyway).

Traditional Egyptian religion in the 3rd and 4th centuries consequently underwent a centrifugal shift away from major temple complexes. Papyri, inscriptions, and archeological remains show the persistence of local cults to familiar avatars of Isis, Sobek, Horus, Bes, Tutu, and other deities, as well as regional pilgrimages, festivals, and oracles—all rather circumscribed expressions of communities' religious self-determination. The lives of Christian saints in the 4th through 6th centuries recall "heathen" domestic practices with ancient roots: household shrines, festival lamps, popular devotion to the Nile or a village image. From this evidence we derive less a sense of Egyptian mythology persisting than of the vitality and "place" of ancestral religious practices.

Yet among priests, such as those who collected the many spells preserved in the Greek and Demotic Magical Papyri, older myths were preserved and extended, combined with foreign names, and often directed to new types of "magic" with foreigners in mind—the priest self-styled as a wizard according to Roman expectations. These spells show the preservation of solar myths, imagery of Anubis and Thoth, and stories of the great Egyptian gods alongside Homeric verses and Syrian deities. The early forms of Coptic writing (Egyptian language transcribed in Greek letters) that appear in such texts suggest that the very writing system that Egyptian Christians would eventually appropriate began as a way for ritual experts to fix ritual pronunciation. Other priests—at the Bucheum of Arment or the Isis temple of Philae, for example—devoted themselves to more-traditional shrine duties; and it is in such places that hieroglyphic writing continued to the end of the 4th century. Well into the 4th century, one priesthood maintained an internationally renowned oracle temple of the popular fertility-god Bes at the ancient shrine of Osiris at Abydos, only to be closed when the Christian emperor feared its potential to intervene magically in imperial affairs. Egyptian priestly families remained prominent in the intellectual culture of cities such as Panopolis and Alexandria, producing poetry and philosophy and trying to maintain their priestly traditions in some form in a Christian world.

By the end of the 4th century the violent persecution of Egyptian religious places and practices seems to have reached a pitch, with bishops, monks and their abbots, village gangs, and occasionally (as at late-6th-century Philae) even armies acting to purify the landscape from a demonic heathenism. The

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D. F.

Mesopotamia

Paul-Alain Beaulieu

The earliest detailed evidence for organized religious beliefs in the lands of southern Iraq (Sumer and Akkad, later Babylonia) comes from Eridu and Uruk. During the protohistorical period, these two sites, the earliest urban centers of Sumer, grew around cultic compounds that are already clear prototypes of later Mesopotamian temples. Created shortly after the invention of writing, the archaic texts from Uruk (ca. 3300–3100 BCE) shed light on the organization of the cult at the threshold of history. Many of them can be identified as offering lists to various forms of the goddess Inanna, including "Morning Inanna" and "Evening Inanna," the two manifestations of the planet Venus as morning and evening star. The art of the period provides compelling evidence that Uruk was ruled by a charismatic figure who acted as intermediary between the community and the city goddess. This ruler was probably a priest-king, denoted by the Sumerian word EN, which in fact appears several times in the archaic texts from Uruk.

The basic graphic and visual concepts stressing the essential nature of deities as separate from the world of mortals crystallized at a very early date. The divine determinative that precedes names of gods and goddesses in the writing system already appears in the archaic texts from Uruk and is universally used by the beginning of the 3rd millennium. Similarly, the horned headress, which first appears in the iconography of deities during the Early Dynastic period, becomes the obligatory marker of divine status in the art by the middle of the 3rd millennium. Although Mesopotamian religion was always strongly anthropomorphic, gods could also be represented by an emblematic animal, whether real or imaginary, or a symbol, which could be a standard, a cult object, or even a completely abstract form. Some scholars espousing evolutionist views have claimed that there was a general historical tendency toward anthropomorphism from a more primitive stage of abstract or symbolic representation. The extant documentation, however, clearly indicates that all modes of divine representations existed side by side from earliest times. Indeed, during the

