

I

The Cosmology of Ancient Egypt

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Most English dictionaries define the word 'cosmology' as a metaphysical view of the universe as an ordered whole. Reasonable as this definition may seem to us, it must be recognised that it is a definition which is only meaningful to an age which has inherited an independence of thought which finds no difficulty in accepting a dichotomy between what might be called Church and State, clerical and lay, religion and science. It is therefore important that when we speak of what the Ancient Egyptians meant by cosmology, we should not forget that this same people belonged to the pre-Greek era, and that for them neither the content nor the language of what we know as philosophy existed.

Nineteen centuries divide us from the Ancient Egyptians. Their expressions and processes of thought sprang out of beliefs now long lost. Even if it were possible to recover some of those ancient beliefs in their entirety, they would be utterly foreign to us in our modern European setting. And furthermore, because we live in a different age, we must not expect the Ancient Egyptians to have asked some of the questions which we ask about the world in which we find ourselves.

In addition we must recognise that there are problems of satisfactory transmission of ideas, for we are trying to understand a language which has ceased to be spoken for hundreds of years, and which, over three millennia, revealed in its written

forms many linguistic changes and developments. It would be true to say that, while we can usually grasp the general meaning of what is recorded in one or other of the forms of hieroglyphic writing, we cannot be certain of the exact meaning of certain passages and phrases. Nuances will, for the most part, forever escape us. Not only do we lack knowledge in both the grammatical and lexicographical aspects of the language of Ancient Egypt, but many of the similes and metaphors are meaningless to us, since we no longer live in the kind of society that provided such similes and metaphors, and we are no longer sufficiently acquainted with the beliefs that were once part and parcel of the life of the Nile Valley.

For many centuries the Ancient Egyptians lived comparatively undisturbed in their river valley; for the desert region of the Sinai Peninsula, while negotiable by small, experienced and determined bands of traders from the other civilized parts of the Near East, presented a formidable natural barrier against large-scale foreign invasion. During this long period of peace the ideas and mental conceptions of the Ancient Egyptians continued to develop along their own peculiar, insular lines of thought, to be represented repeatedly in pictures and writing alongside new and often contradictory mental images. Indeed it is this abundant wealth of illustration which, while being a source of information, has frequently proved an embarrassment to modern students of Egyptology. The plain fact is that the extent of the available material is such that one is forced to concur with an eminent German Egyptologist, Adolf Erman, who wrote nearly seventy years ago: the material 'is so endless and impossible to grasp . . . it is in fact too great'.

Or, to use an analogy, it is as if one were to find oneself in a vast museum housing a collection of materials which would seem to have been brought together on the principle that the collection must be all-embracing, even at the expense of being scientifically selective. Indeed it is not so much a museum as a gigantic depository. On closer examination one would find that, while the greater part of the exhibits had labels, many of the labels were hard to read. In some instances this would be

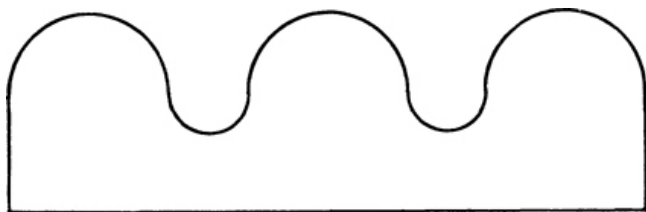
because the labels had faded with age. It would soon become clear that in other instances later hands had attempted to re-write the labels or to add further details and explanations. Not infrequently these later additions would only serve to add to the confusion. It would be found that some of the exhibits had no labels at all, simply because their meaning and purpose was obvious. But what was once obvious to the ancient curators is not necessarily so to us. Sometimes there would be no label, because even to the Ancient Egyptians the object was so old that they themselves had lost all knowledge of its name and original purpose.

Though for the reasons stated we cannot understand fully the thoughts of the Ancient Egyptians, we can still put ourselves into the same physical environment and geographical setting which so greatly shaped their ideas. It is of course a fact that the Nile Valley has undergone various changes since the time of the Pharaohs. The most significant of these changes has been the complete cessation of the inundation or annual rise of the Nile waters as the result of the recent construction of the Aswan dams. Nevertheless, most of the climatic and geographical features of Egypt are the same today as they were in ancient times.

Contrary to modern usage the Ancient Egyptians orientated themselves to face southwards. At their backs lay the Mediterranean and the rest of the ancient world. The west was for them the right, and the east the left. Immediately before them lay the plain of the Delta, 112 miles long and 181 miles in width with great lakes on either side – Lakes Marcotis, Burlus, and Menzaleh, etc. In ancient times this alluvial plain was divided by three great branches of the Nile and interlaced with many waterways both natural and artificial. Near the locality where the Nile divided, the eastern and western deserts closed in on the river valley to create a narrow corridor of cultivable land, rarely exceeding eighteen miles in width at any point, and extending southwards for 625 miles as far as the First Cataract at Aswan. Here a natural river barrier of granite out-cropping formed the historic boundary of Egypt, being

known in ancient times as 'The Door of the South'. Beyond it lay the lands of Nubia and the Sudan which in the course of time were to come under the direct rule of Egypt.

The striking contrast in colour between the cultivated banks of the river valley and the bordering deserts, most easily seen today from the air, did not go unnoticed by the Ancient Egyptians, who distinguished the two by describing them as 'the Black Land and the Red Land'. It was the Black Land, Keme, which was Egypt proper. Every other place, not in the Valley of the Nile, whether the limestone cliffs which bordered the Valley or the distant countries of Nubia or Syria, all were lumped together in the eyes of the Ancient Egyptians as 'mountainous country', while the hieroglyphic writing of the name of a foreign country was usually accompanied by the determinative sign representing a line of hills or mountains. The Ancient Egyptian was always aware that in order to leave Egypt one literally had to walk up out of the Valley of the Nile and into the bordering hills.



1. Hieroglyph denoting a foreign country.

Having little, if any, knowledge of other lands than their own, it is not surprising that the makers of the most ancient Egyptian picture of the world should have been inspired solely by the physical and geographical conditions of the Nile Valley. Accordingly they thought of the world as being a bank of earth divided in the middle by the Nile and surrounded by water, the Great Circuit or the Great Circular Ocean. This mass of water was itself the product of the first of the gods, Nun, from whom the world came forth, and in whom the Nile and the rain had their origin.

Above the earth was the expanse of the sky, separated from the earth by the air, and held aloft like a great flat plate by four

supports at the corners of the earth*. In some representations these supports are shown as poles or forked branches, such as might be used for holding up the corners of an awning. In other instances they were spoken of as being four great mountains. It is clear that although the conception was first applied to a small local universe, as the knowledge about other countries grew, the confines of the world picture were accordingly extended in all directions, but apart from these extensions and the varying of a few details, the overall conception of the world was not changed significantly.

At times the sky appeared to the Ancient Egyptians to be not unlike a gigantic canopy stretched out over the valley. On the other hand its colour, unbroken for the greater part of the year by clouds, suggested to them that it might be some kind of celestial ocean across which the sun sailed in a boat by day and the moon by night. During the hours of darkness the same sky was lit by myriad points of light – the stars – the appearance of which in the clear night air of Egypt was no less a pageant of splendour to the gaze of the most ancient dwellers beside the Nile as it is to modern man.

It was a daily event that the sun rose in the east and, passing high over the earth, descended at evening into the western hills. Apart from an annual shift in its path towards the south during the winter and a return to the north in the spring, there appeared to be no other variation in its daily journey. When it disappeared in the west, not only did darkness envelop the land, but the cold air from the rapidly cooling deserts descended into the valley of the Nile. Not illogically the earliest inhabitants of Egypt concluded that without the sun's light and warmth death would engulf the world. The eagerness with which they welcomed the sun's return at dawn is attested in the various versions of hymns to the sun which have survived from all periods of the history of Ancient Egypt. But they were at a loss to explain the sun's re-appearance in the east other than by postulating that during the hours of the night it had travelled beneath the earth upon which they lived. Further,

* See plate 1.

it seemed to them that the sun travelled on through another world, possibly a duplicate of the world in which men lived, but a world which lay deep underground. We may smile at so naïve a conception, but not so many centuries have passed since our own forebears thought of heaven above and hell below and 'merrie middle earth' in between.

As to how the sun made its daily progress across the face of the sky there were a number of explanations. In some the sun was the eye of the sky, beaming down upon the earth. In others the sun sprang like a glittering hawk from the eastern hills to soar triumphantly into the vault of heaven. In yet other explanations its journey across the heavens was in a splendid celestial boat*. Born at dawn as the child of the sky goddess it entered the solar bark to mount the heavenly ocean, rapidly growing into full manhood as the point of midday was reached, and then sinking down as an ageing old man into the west. In some accounts it was born as a calf from the womb of the sky then thought of as a great celestial cow. In yet another account, which employed a very earthy simile, it was considered to be a gigantic beetle rolling the fiery ball of the sun before it, just as the common scarabaeus beetle rolls its ball of dung before it into its lair to devour it in the darkness.

The appearances and movements of the moon in the night sky and its occasional presence in the day undoubtedly posed problems for the early inhabitants of Egypt. In the first place the moon possessed less light and gave no warmth. Not only were its appearances in the sky less predictable, but its disc altered in size and shape. Its seemingly erratic movement, its growth and decrease, suggested that like the sun it was a living entity, but unlike the sun it was less dependable and less powerful. From the earliest times various explanations were advanced for its apparent irregularity and change. At Thebes it was worshipped under the name of Khonsu. The root meaning of the name Khonsu means 'to travel' and more especially 'to travel through a marsh'. It is not difficult to see that the progress of the moon was not unlike a man travelling through

* See plate 4.

a marsh between the clumps of reeds and waterplants, so that his progress is not always easy to perceive or anticipate. And there is no doubt that at a very early period the moon became the object of careful observations, observations which led to its use as a means of time reckoning in relation to the seasons. As in other parts of the Ancient East the creation of a Lunar Calendar must have been amongst the earliest achievements of man.

To the most observant watchers of the night sky in Egypt it was apparent that there was movement in the stars. What at first sight seemed to be a fixed and invariable pattern of points of light or celestial lamps was seen to move slowly across the expanse of heaven during the hours of darkness. Continued observance over the seasons revealed that some of the fixed patterns of stars dropped below the horizon to remain invisible for considerable periods of the year before returning once more in the night sky. In the observation of this annual movement, the appearance of one bright star, Sirius, the so-called Dog Star, was noted by the Ancient Egyptians in reference to the commencement of the annual inundation. This was a most important event in the life of an agricultural people, and incidentally for the Egyptologist too, for whom the few written records of the rising of Sirius are a most valuable aid in establishing a more exact chronology. The slow but demonstrable movement of the constellations and the more obvious movements of the five planets visible to the human eye were seen as indications of some kind of life in the celestial regions, and it is not difficult to see that the conclusion followed that the heavenly bodies were in fact living entities. Notwithstanding the influences of such conceptions the Ancient Egyptians, though never the equals of the Babylonians as astronomers, possessed a knowledge of the heavens which was far from negligible. Charts of the heavens, carved or painted on the ceilings of tombs and temples*, dated tables referring to the movements of the stars, some astronomical treatises, notes in religious writings, their division of time and their calendar show quite clearly the attention which the Ancient Egyptians

* See plate 2.

gave to celestial movement, even if their explanations appear to us to be utterly unscientific.

In trying to understand the thought of the Ancient Egyptians a number of facts must be borne in mind. For them the whole universe was a living unity. Even those parts of the physical world which we are accustomed to think of as inanimate, e.g. stones, minerals, water, fire, air, etc., partook of a common life in which men and women and animals and birds and fishes and insects and plants and even the gods themselves shared. The Ancient Egyptian, in common with other ancient peoples, could not conceive of anything that was not alive in some degree. Having no neuter gender in his language it was necessary for him to classify this or that thing as masculine or feminine. By making such distinctions he did not imply that there was any manifestation of what might be termed physical sexual differences. Rather he was concerned with representing qualities, characteristics, tendencies as exhibited by living creatures irrespective of what their physical sexual distinction might be. This being so, it is not surprising that in his attempts to express abstract ideas he employed personification, and it is this use of personification which in no small measure accounts for the multitude of deities, both male and female, which is so marked a feature of Ancient Egyptian religion.

It must also be noted that while the Egyptian thought of the world as a living unity, he was aware that much of it was subject to decay as well as to growth, that there was both a coming into being and a passing out of being, that there was birth and there was death. On the other hand he also perceived that there were some things which appeared to be indestructible, permanent, never changing. In particular the seemingly unchanging and ever-continuing physical conditions in the Nile Valley fostered in his mind a sense of determined continuity in creation. Ever before him were the daily rise and setting of the sun, the annual rise and fall of the waters of the Nile, the yearly recurring cycle of life. Added to these was the equable and rarely changing climate. It is not surprising that the monotonous regularity of life in the Nile Valley tended to produce the

sense of 'as it was in the beginning, is, and ever shall be'. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that the Egyptian mind was pervaded by an eternal now. Indeed, something like a sense of timelessness is latent in the ancient language. Throughout the long history of Egypt the conception of the timeless state was never absent, be it the Old Perfective form of the verb in Ancient Egyptian or the Qualitative form in Coptic, and it is not without significance that while it was always possible to negate verbal forms which denoted action, negation was not possible, at least not until much later and then only rarely, with those verbal forms which denoted state.

Though the foregoing remarks are a reminder that the men of Ancient Egypt used thought patterns very different from ours, they did not thereby differ from us in asking certain questions which we find ourselves asking. As has been mentioned earlier, we should not forget that because of the limitations of their knowledge there are some questions which we must not expect them to have asked. But at least the men of those ancient times would have been at one with us in asking how the world came into being, how it all began.

The actual asking of the question indicates that the Ancient Egyptians could speculate that there had been a time when the world as they knew it did not exist, though it was difficult for them to imagine that there could ever have been a time when there did not exist something, however nebulous, out of which the world itself was created. For them that something was a state described as the Primeval Waters. Every Egyptian Creation Story, of which there are three major accounts and the remnants of an unspecified number of others, starts with the basic assumption that before the beginning of things there was a Primordial Abyss of Waters, everywhere, endless, and without bounds or direction. This was unlike any sea which has a surface, for here there was neither up nor down, no distinction of side, only a limitless deep – endless, dark, and infinite. As one Spell from the Coffin Texts expresses it, 'in the infinite, the nothingness, the nowhere, and the dark'. This watery state was personified as the god Nun, who is sometimes called in the

texts 'father of the gods'. He remained, however, a purely intellectual concept, possessing neither temple or worshippers. Not surprisingly, representations of Nun are rare. In one papyrus of the Book of the Dead he is depicted as a male figure plunged up to his waist in water, elevating his arms to support the boat of the sun*. In the boat the solar disc is held aloft by the scarab beetle which is flanked on each side by the deities who, it was believed, came forth from Nun. The name of this most ancient of gods passed on into Coptic, the last stage of the old language used in Christian Egypt. Then, as *Noun*, it came to mean the deep abyss of hell or the unfathomable depths of the sea.

The basic principle of Egyptian cosmology may therefore be said to be the Primeval Waters, which existed before the beginning and which would last for ever. Whereas we think of our world as a speck of matter moving through boundless space, the Ancient Egyptians thought of their world as a cavity, rather like an air bubble, floating in the midst of the limitless expanse of Nun, the Primeval Waters. It seemed logical to them to believe that those waters were to be met everywhere at the limits of their world, and beneath the earth and above the sky. Just as for the Hebrews, so for the Egyptians there was a firmament dividing the waters above from the waters below. Likewise, it was thought that the seas, the rivers, the rain from heaven, and the waters in the wells, and the torrents of the floods were parts of the Primeval Waters which enveloped the world on every side. Though there is a hint in some texts that the Primeval Waters might one day like Noah's Flood come seeping in as 'the windows of heaven were opened and the fountains of the great deeps broken up' to engulf the world, by and large Nun, the personification of the waters, was thought to be a beneficent god who guarded and kept in check the demonic powers of chaos, represented by gigantic dragon-snakes.

The three most important and best attested cosmogonies are those associated with the religious centres of Hermopolis, Heliopolis, and Memphis.

* See plate 3.

At Hermopolis, so called by the Greeks because it seemed to them that their deity Hermes most closely represented the Egyptian god Thoth, the four characteristics of the Primeval Waters – depth, endlessness, darkness and invisibility – were personified by eight beings*. That is, each of the four characteristics was represented by a male and a female form. Thus there were Nau and Naunet (depth), Huh and Hauhet (endlessness), Kuk and Kakwet (darkness), and Amun and Amaunet (Invisibility). The number of these deities gave rise to the native name of Hermopolis, Khnum (in Coptic *Shmoun*) literally ‘eight’ or ‘Eight Town’. The deities were worshipped there as genii, the males being represented with the heads of frogs and the females with the heads of serpents. It was believed that the eight swam together and formed the primeval egg in the darkness of Nun. According to one version, out of this egg burst the bird of light. But according to another version, the egg contained not light but air. In yet another version, which was associated with the district of Thebes, the egg was laid by a goose†, the Great Primeval Spirit called *Kenken Wer*, which means literally ‘the Great Cackler’ whose ‘voice broke the silence . . . while the world was still flooded in silence’.

The account is complicated by the presence of the supreme god of Hermopolis, Thoth‡, who was considered to be the head of the eight genii. It is possible that in early times Thoth had been a creator-god in his own right, but in the dynastic period this function had become obscured, for he was henceforth credited with the invention of hieroglyphic writing and was regarded as the original lawgiver (*štn hḫw*), the repository of all learning, both sacred and profane, and the master of *Hike*, which may be rendered loosely as ‘magic’.

In a variant of the Hermopolitan cosmogony a lotus flower was said to have arisen in the beginning out of the primeval waters. When its petals, which had been closed in the primeval darkness, opened, the creator of the world in the form of a beautiful child sprang from the heart of the lotus§. This

* See plate 10.

† See plate 5.

‡ See plate 8.

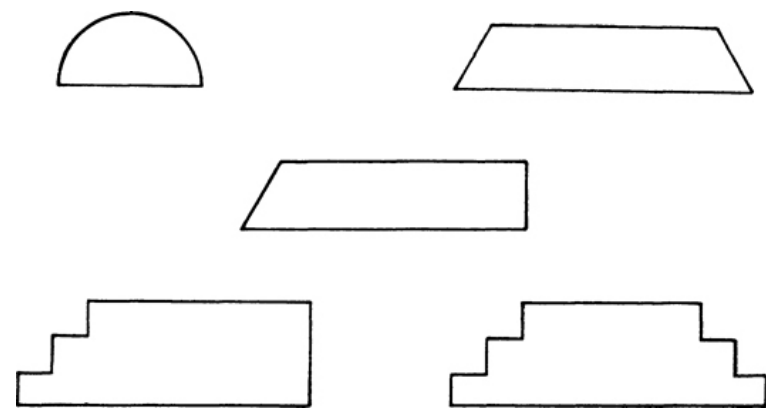
§ See plate 11.

was the infant sun, who immediately spread his rays of light throughout the world. Henceforth each day at evening, when the light fades, the lotus closes its petals around the sun and shelters it during the hours of darkness only to release it again when the next morning dawns.

The Hermopolitan creation account is further confused because it would seem that during the First Intermediate Period in the history of Egypt (c. 2200–2000 BC) the cosmogony of Hermopolis became mingled with that of Heliopolis, with the result that many of the details in the cosmogony of Hermopolis were ousted from the creation account, current in Heliopolis.

At Heliopolis the Creator-god who held pride of place was Atum, whose name probably meant 'the Complete One'. According to the earliest versions of this cosmogony Atum emerged out of the primeval waters in the form of a hill. A later recension of the story states that Atum arose out of the waters seated or standing upon the hill. Some texts speak of Atum as the child of Nun, others affirm that he was self-created. In his emerging like a hill Atum would have resembled the life-engendering hillocks which appeared regularly in the river when the waters of the inundation began to recede. The Egyptians could not fail to notice that every year, shortly after each little hill broke through the surface of the river, its top would begin to swarm with life.

The Primeval Hill seems to have had no fixed form, and there are various representations of it. The early formalizing of the Hill into an eminence with sloping sides or a platform surrounded by steps is probably what the Step Pyramid at Sakkara, and possibly the later pyramids with unbroken sloping sides, were supposed to represent. Indeed it has been suggested that this formalizing of the Primeval Hill may be the prototype of the later obelisk which was associated with the worship of the sun, of whom Atum was considered to be a form. Not unnaturally the priesthood of Heliopolis claimed that it was at Heliopolis that Atum emerged in the beginning. But the priesthoods of other religious centres were equally ardent in claiming that it was in their vicinity that the place of creation was to be



2. Hieroglyphic forms of the primeval mound.

found. Thus at Hermopolis the site of the beginning was a rectangular space surrounded by a wall; within lay a pool of water named the 'Lake of the Two Knives', symbolising Nun. In the middle of the pool was an island upon which rose a hill from which it was believed light originated. This hill was a place of pilgrimage and the setting for the performance of much ritual. And if further proof were needed to confirm the veracity of the claim, pilgrims were shown the remains of the primeval egg from which the creator of the world came forth. Other religious centres, undeterred by such evidence, claimed for their localities the actual site of creation. At Memphis the whole district round the city was named *Ta-tjenen*, i.e. 'the land rising', and at Thebes it was asserted that the Primeval Hill was situated in the temple area of Medinet Habu, on the West bank of the Nile.

Spell or Utterance 600 of the Pyramid Texts (c. 2400 BC), the oldest surviving corpus of religious literature from Egypt, reads: 'O Atum-Khoprer, thou becamest high in the height. Thou didst arise up as the *benben* stone in the Mansion (i.e. Temple) of the Bennu Bird (i.e. the Phoenix) in Heliopolis. Thou didst spit out Shu. Thou didst expectorate Tefenet, and thou didst set thy arms about them as the arms of a *ka*-symbol that thy essence might be in them.'

This passage refers to the time when Atum was alone in the Cosmos, when no world had been created, and when he contained in himself everything that was to come into being. In order that the world might come into being, Atum had to

create it out of himself, an act which the Ancient Egyptians could only explain in the terms of natural functions. Thus, in the Utterance quoted, Atum is said to have created the two deities Shu and Tefenet by the action of spewing from his mouth. It is to be noticed that in the description of the act of creation the Egyptians were using a favourite and for them a very significant verbal device, the use of assonance or the employment of the pun. The facts are that the name of the god Shu is similar to the verb *ishesh* 'to spit', while the name of the goddess Tefenet resembles the word *tef* with much the same meaning as *ishesh*. For the Ancient Egyptians the name of a person or a thing was potential of actual being, and to utter the name of something was to bring what was named into being. In the cosmogony of Memphis this conception of the power of speech was to have far reaching consequences in the account of the creation of the world. It was this kind of reasoning which led the people of the Ancient World to be circumspect in their mentioning of certain persons and things, and caused them to resort to the employment of euphemisms when some particularly dangerous person or thing had to be referred to in speech.

In another version of the Hermopolitan cosmogony Atum, having no consort, achieves his purpose of creation by mating with his own hand. This account, which may seem indecent to Western ears, stems from a primitive naturalistic view of the world which could only account for creation in the terms of physical generation. But for the Ancient Egyptians both versions would have been seen as complementary and not alternative or contradictory.

The two children of Atum, Shu and Tefenet, were themselves personifications. Shu was the air and Tefenet, his sister, appears to have been associated with moisture, and is therefore the goddess of damp, mist, dew and rain. To Shu and Tefenet were born the two deities, Geb and Nut. Geb was the earth god, and Nut was the sky goddess. In the beginning both were locked together in a close embrace, but their father Shu separated them, lifting Nut high above himself to form the arch of

heaven, and leaving his son Geb lying prone upon his back to become the earth. Shu then remained in between them to be the air between heaven and earth*. In the numerous representations of this story the goddess Nut appears, her body painted blue and encrusted with stars, standing and bending over the reclining body of her brother, her hands touching the ground. Geb is usually coloured green to represent the vegetation. Sometimes the figure of Nut as a woman is replaced by that of a cow. Sometimes she was called the mother of the sun, for as the sky goddess she was supposed to swallow the sun at evening, and to give birth to him when he came forth from her womb on the following morning†. According to one account Nut married her brother Geb secretly and against the wish of the sun-god Re. In his anger Re had the couple forcibly separated by Shu, and further decreed that Nut should never be able to bear a child in any given month of the year. According to another tradition, preserved by Plutarch, the god Thoth took pity on Nut. By playing a series of games of draughts with the moon he managed to win a seventy-second part of the moon's light, out of which he created five extra days. Since these days did not belong to the official Egyptian Calendar of twelve months of thirty days, totalling 360 days, Nut was able on the five days before the New Year began to give birth to five children, Osiris, Horus, Set, Isis, and Nephthys, all of whom became important deities in the Egyptian pantheon.

A papyrus in the British Museum (B.M. Pap. 10188), *The Book of Knowing how Re Came into Being, and of Overthrowing Apepi*, contains two versions of the Hermopolitan cosmogony. The first of these is interesting because it contains a reference to the creation of Mankind. Here the creator-god is named Neb-er-Djer, i.e. 'the Universal Lord'. Neb-er-Djer is quoted as saying: 'Now after the creation of Shu and Tefenet I gathered together my limbs. I shed tears upon them. Mankind arose from the tears which came forth from my eye.' In a fragment which has been preserved in a magical work of the First Intermediate Period called *The Book of the Two Ways* the Universal

* See plate 9.

† See plate 6.

Lord says: 'The gods I created from my sweat, but mankind is from the tears of my eye.' In these two extracts there are allusions to two creation stories. The gods, on the one hand, are the exhalations of the god himself, whereas mankind comes from the tears of his eye. This essential difference between the gods and man is nowhere else mentioned. In both accounts the origin of mankind is linked with the assonance between the Egyptian words for 'tears' and 'mankind' – *remeyet* and *romet*. Effectively isolated from the rest of the Ancient World of many generations in the earliest periods of their history, the Egyptians tended to consider themselves as being the only true men, *romet*, the favoured of the gods, and in their earlier history the term *romet* was reserved exclusively for the men of Egypt and was not applied to foreigners. Indeed, through the whole of their history they were slow to welcome men of other nations into their midst.

At some time during the Old Kingdom (c. 2700–2200 BC), when Memphis was the capital city of Egypt, it seems that a need was felt to attempt a reconciliation between the cosmogony of Heliopolis, in which Atum was the creator-god, and the cosmogony of Memphis, which attributed the act of creation to Ptah*. Not surprisingly, the priesthood of Memphis were not prepared to allow their deity Ptah any place less than first in this attempted reconciliation of differing beliefs. Nor does it seem that they were content to countenance what had been the practice elsewhere, a synthesis of beliefs and a creating of composite deities. Instead, they conceived an approach so novel as to be reckoned one of the great religious achievements of early man. For the details of the Memphite cosmogony we are dependent on a hieroglyphic text engraved upon a slab of black basalt now in the British Museum, which was presented to the Museum in 1805 by Earl Spencer, who had obtained it from the ruins of the temple of Ptah in Memphis. It had once stood upright in the Temple, but in the course of the years it had been thrown down so that large portions of the text had been obliterated by the passage of many feet across it and by

* See plate 7.

its having been used as the nether stone of a mill. Not only were the signs barely legible in places, but when the text was first examined it revealed an unusual arrangement of signs, and for many years it defied all attempts by scholars to read it. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the American Egyptologist, James Breasted, recognised that the lines of inscription were not to be read in the usual manner with the hieroglyphic signs facing the beginning of the sentences, but in the opposite direction. His pioneer translation of the text encouraged the eminent German Egyptologist, Adolf Erman, to re-examine the inscription afresh and to produce a skilful analysis of its contents. Finally in 1928, over a century after its discovery, Erman's distinguished pupil and successor, Kurt Sethe, published what can be regarded as the final edition of the hieroglyphic text with a translation, comprehensive notes and a most instructive introduction.

It had already been confirmed by both Breasted and Erman that the text was a copy of a much older exemplar. During the eighth century BC the existence of a very ancient worm-eaten wooden archetype in the temple of Ptah at Memphis had been brought to the notice of the reigning Pharaoh, the Ethiopian Shabaka. Although the inscription was badly eaten away in places, the portions of the text which remained were considered by Shabaka to be of such importance that he gave orders for a copy to be made in hard stone so that their contents might be preserved for future generations. Sethe, in his study of the inscription, was able to show that the text was the remains of the libretto of a sacred drama or play which was probably performed during the annual celebration of certain of the great religious festivals at Memphis. During the course of the unfolding of the action of the drama various gods and goddesses made speeches, here and there explanatory remarks were added by unnamed beings, and the fundamental beliefs of the theology of Memphis were laid bare. From the text it emerges that during the Old Kingdom (c. 2700–2200 BC), one priesthood at least had been able to formulate the doctrine that the god who had created himself and heaven and earth, who was the maker

of gods and men and animals and all that exists, was a Spirit and the Eternal Mind of the Universe. As in the cosmogonies of Hermopolis and Heliopolis we find mention of the primeval god of the Waters, Nun and a female counterpart Nunet. But in the Memphite cosmogony these are said to be the products of the Eternal Mind, Ptah, who manifests himself in many ways and under many aspects. The ancient gods of the other cosmogonies, including Atum, are said to be contained in Ptah. 'They have their forms in Ptah' and are nothing but Ptah. Atum is stated to be the heart and tongue of Ptah, and the divine forms of these are the gods Horus and Thoth.

To quote from the text: 'Creation took place through the heart and the tongue as an image of Atum. But greatest is Ptah, who supplied all gods and their faculties (*kas*) with (life) through this heart and tongue – the heart and tongue through which Horus and Thoth took origin as Ptah. His *Ennead* (of gods) are in front of him as teeth and lips which are nothing else but the seed and hands of Atum, for the Ennead of Atum was born of his seed and his fingers, but the Ennead are the teeth and the lips in his mouth which has pronounced the names of all things, from which Shu and Tefenet have come forth, and which has fashioned the Ennead.'

Or in another passage: 'In this way were fashioned all the gods, Atum and his Ennead were complete. For every divine word sprang from what the heart had pondered over, and the heart had ordained. And in this way the faculties (*kas*) were made and their female counterparts (*hemset*) were determined, which make all food and all supply through this word. And in this way that man was declared just who does what is loved, and that man was declared wrong who does what is hated. So also life is given to the peaceable and death to the wrongdoer.'

In the Memphite cosmogony the creation of the world is presented in a highly intellectual manner as the combined action of conceiving through the intelligence (the seat of which is the heart) and creating through the spoken word or command (the seat of which is the tongue). The other gods are only this heart and tongue and lips and teeth of Ptah.

Interspersed in the account of creation by Ptah are passages which give a surprisingly accurate knowledge of physiological phenomena. Thus: 'for so it is that the heart and the tongue have power over all members, considering that (the heart) is in every body and (the tongue) is in every mouth of all gods, all men, all cattle, all worms, and all living beings, the heart conceiving thoughts freely and the tongue commanding freely. The seeing of the eyes, the hearing of the ears, and the breathing of the nose make report to the heart. And it is the heart which produces all cogitation, and it is the tongue which repeats all that has been thought out by the heart.' 'And so is produced all work and all craft. The activity of the arms, the walking of the feet, the movement of all the members, according to the order which the heart has thought out, have come forth by the tongue, and are put into effect in order to accomplish all things.'

To quote once more from the text: 'He is Tatjenen (the primeval hill at Memphis) who produced the gods from whom everything has come, whether food, divine sustenance, or any other good thing. So it has been found and understood that his power is greater than that of any other gods. And thus was Ptah satisfied after he had made all things and every divine word.'

The foregoing outlines of the cosmogonies of the Ancient Egyptians are an attempt to illustrate some of the ways in which they tried to answer the question as to how the world came into being. We look in vain in the great mass of religious texts for answers to some of the other questions which the fact of the existence of the Universe raises. If we want to know what answers the Ancient Egyptians proffered to such questions as 'Why was the World created, and to what purpose?' we must resort to what remains to us of the literature which has been given the name 'The Wisdom Literature'. Didactic treatises containing wise maxims and proverbial truths were very much to the taste of the Ancient Egyptians, and there is little doubt that some of these were very ancient. Much of the teaching in such works was based upon experience and had as

its aim the way of life which a man ought to adopt in order to be happy. Much of the teaching was concerned with the observance of traditional etiquette and practical morality, but now and again, especially after the period of social upheaval and political disruption which followed the end of the Old Kingdom (c. 2200 BC), the writers of didactic treatises began to develop humanistic ideas and to ask why such and such an event came to pass. It is in these treatises that men raised the question why was man created, and even dared to postulate that man was the centre, even the purpose of creation, and that the world was his tool. Thus in a book of advice written by an unnamed king of the first Intermediate Period (c. 2200–2000 BC) for his son, *The Instruction for King Men-ka-re* we read: 'Well favoured are men, the flock of God. He made heaven and earth according to their desire. For them he drove back the monster of the primeval waters. He made the breath of life for their nostrils. They are his own image and made of his body. For them he shines in the heaven. In the same way he has made for them the plants, the animals, the fowls, and the fish to be their food.'

But whatever wise men might think about the purpose of creation and whatever might be the official doctrines about the way in which the creation came into being, there was the universal belief that what had been achieved in the beginning of time must be maintained. For mortal men the most essential task of earthly life was to ensure that the fabric of the Universe was sustained. The ancient cosmogonies were in agreement that obscure forces of chaos had existed before the world was created, and that, although in the act of creation they had been cast away to the outer edges of the world, they nevertheless continued to threaten to encroach into the world. The possibility of such a catastrophe could only be averted by the actions of gods and men, both working together to maintain the world order. That order which embraced the notions of an equilibrium of the Universe, the harmonious co-existence of all its elements and its essential cohesion for the maintenance of all created forms was summed up in the word Ma'at. In reality a

pure abstraction, Ma'at was personified as a goddess and appears as a woman standing or sitting and wearing on her head a single ostrich feather, the hieroglyphic sign of her name*. Ma'at personified the cosmic order, but as a secondary development of this basic idea she also represented the ethics which recognise the need to act in all circumstances for the upholding of the universal order. Thus in the affairs of men she represented the two concepts, truth and justice. As the symbol of truth her figure or her feather was placed in one pan of the balance used for the weighing of the heart of a dead man in the judgement before Osiris the god of the dead. Her image was also worn as part of the insignia of the Vizier who was the supreme head of all the courts of justice and in his office as such was called 'the Priest of Ma'at' who 'spoke according to Ma'at and did not lie'.

Each day without fail creation must be renewed. This renewal was the work of the gods and their representative *par excellence* on earth, the reigning Pharaoh. And it was primarily for this work of renewal that the temples existed. While it was accepted that in the first instance the precarious maintenance of creation was only achieved through the ceaseless efforts of the gods, the gods in their turn depended upon the assistance of men, for they lived upon the earth in their mansions, the temples. The function of the temples was to provide for the gods security against the attacks of hostile forces, to nourish them with offerings of food and drink, to keep them clothed and in perfect condition for their divine tasks, and to ward off from them any influence which could impede their beneficent work. We are not to think, therefore, of the temples of Ancient Egypt as houses of prayer to which men might resort to seek comfort for their souls, but rather as government-supported religious establishments, restricted of access, and administered by staffs specially picked and trained. In theory the supreme officiant and head of each temple was the reigning Pharaoh, but for obvious reasons his office and duties were delegated to a high-ranking priest. And while every day a multitude of

* See plate 12.

different offerings was made to the various presiding deities of each temple, one offering in particular was never omitted – the culminating offering of the figure of Ma'at, for this was the supreme offering in that every other offering was virtually included in her.

However, the Ancient Egyptians were never lulled into a sense of false security. At all times in their history they were aware that the gods might be in heaven, but all was not thereby well with the world. Ma'at might indeed be the ruling principle of the universe, but without the exercise of some special power the threat of this or that adversary was very real. This dynamic power which had come into being on the day of creation was known as *Hike*. Though this term may be translated loosely as 'magic' it is important that we do not thereby imply notions which were foreign to the Ancient Egyptians. For them *Hike* was the power to be used for the protection of human beings and sometimes of gods. Its primary purpose was defensive. Thus, in the *Instruction for King Men-ka-re* it is said, 'God has given *Hike* to men as a weapon against adversity.'

Basically, *Hike* was founded on the belief that a sympathetic affinity existed between identical sounds and replicate things. It was believed that the name of a living being or an object was not just a simple or practical designation to facilitate the exchange of ideas between persons but that it was the very essence of what was defined, and that the actual pronouncing of a name was to create what was spoken. Similarly, the making of a recognizable copy of someone or something was to create an entity into which part of the spiritual personality of a living person or an object could be transferred. Both the act of speaking and the making of a material copy also provided the speaker or the artificer with a measure of control over persons and things. Purposeful utterance underlay all the rites which made use of formulae, just as the manufacture of images was designed to bring about reality through representation. It was this absolute faith in the creative power of sound and the productive force of representation which played so great a part in the daily lives of the Ancient Egyptians, that caused not only the

men of the Classical World but their modern successors to conclude that Egypt was a land of the enchanters. The evidence for such a conclusion is not difficult to find, the meaning of the evidence has not always been understood.

As *Hike*, or Egyptian Magic, was essentially protective, it was used in the service of the State and the temples. In the service of the State it was employed to protect Egypt and the Pharaoh from the attacks of her enemies. Thus figurines inscribed with the names of nations and their rulers who were feared were made in order that they might be mutilated, trampled on, burnt and buried. In the temples the priests ceremonially cut to pieces the figure of Apepi, the fearful dragon-snake who daily endangered the Cosmic Order by attacking the boat of the sun at dawn and at sunset*. Everywhere spells were recited for the benefit of the sick and as a means of protecting the healthy from the attacks of the demons of disease. Likewise *Hike* was believed to be a protection against ghosts and accidents. It saved the dead from the demons who lurked in the Hereafter. It prevented the deceased from dying a second time from hunger when their living relatives neglected to provide their funerary offerings.

Not unnaturally the help of *Hike* was sought to gain some advantage for its user either in obtaining power over somebody or something, or as a love charm to gain some person's affection. In some instances its use was clearly an attempt to persuade the gods to bend the natural course of events to the user's benefit. Far less frequently attested are the instances where it was employed in what might be termed acts of black magic, performed secretly for personal ends. The most notorious of such abuses of *Hike* is recorded in the account of the attempt on the life of the Pharaoh Ramesses III (c. 1182-1151 BC), when a certain criminal obtained some of the royal magical texts and made wax figures and charms by which he hoped to cast a spell on the guardians of the King's harim. The repugnance felt by the Ancient Egyptians against the misuse of *Hike*

* See plate 14.

is illustrated by a story* contained in a Demotic papyrus which relates how a certain Neneferkaptah tried to exploit for his own ends the powers of *Hike* and how a series of misfortunes and calamities overtook him and his family for his impious attempts.

What is sometimes called the Cult of the Dead with its seemingly disproportionate care lavished upon the deceased has been largely responsible for the preservation of the greater part of the physical remains of the Ancient Egyptian Civilisation. Were it not for the pictorial representations and the inscriptions upon the walls of tombs, the texts upon sarcophagi and coffins, and the contents of papyri containing various recensions of *The Book of The Dead*, we should know very little of what the Ancient Egyptians thought about the world in which they lived. It would be a mistake to explain all the care devoted to the furnishing of tombs, as one distinguished archaeologist has done, by stating that the Ancient Egyptians were in love with death. Nothing is further from the truth. The fact is that they were in love with life, and with life as they knew it in the Nile Valley. Their passion for the continuance of that life was such that they carried over into the Hereafter many of the conceptions and ideas which they had held about the physical world. But even so, their ideas about the Hereafter were never very precise. Thus, in one form of belief the dead man joined his ancestors who were already lodged in the necropolis on the edge of the desert. There, if his tomb was cared for by his living relatives, he could expect to enjoy a happy and carefree existence, and even to revisit some of the places which he had known when living. In other accounts the dead man would pass to the fields of the blessed, where he would continue to take everlasting pleasure in a way of life not unlike that which he had known upon earth, but immeasurably more serene and full of delight†. In yet another account, what would seem to be a contrary conception held that the soul of the dead man soared up into the sky to join the solar bark and to be forever in the presence of the sun-god

* F. Ll Griffith, *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis*.

† See plate 13.

and the other deities who accompanied him. Difficulty is created in the modern mind by the fact that these differing ideas about the fate of the dead were all believed in at the same time. We have to remember that what appears to us to be contradictory the Ancient Egyptians accepted as complementary.

In what by necessity can be no more than an introduction to the Ancient Egyptian conception of cosmology the main facts have been presented to speak for themselves. No conscious attempt on the part of the author has been made to diminish or gloss over the considerable difficulties which the same facts invariably raise for the readers of a later age. Even a weighty treatise in the place of a single chapter could not succeed in minimising the task for either the author or his readers. If this introduction has opened a small window on to one aspect of a civilisation which was a 'very special blend of archaic tradition and the most advanced ideas' the author's purpose has been amply achieved.

Notes for Further Reading

This paper is printed in the form in which it was delivered as the introductory lecture in 1972. Because of the nature of the extensive evidence from Ancient Egypt no single work is able to present fully and systematically the religious beliefs of the Ancient Egyptians. For the purpose of further reading a reliable general introduction is J. Cerny, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (London, 1952), containing a useful bibliography of the most important studies. A good, well-illustrated, introduction to the subject will be found in V. Ions *Egyptian Mythology* (London, 1968). As an introduction to the complexities of the religious thought of the Ancient Egyptians as expressed in their writings reference can be made to two excellent translations by R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford, 1969), and Aris and Phillips, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, Vol. 1 (Warminster, 1973). Translations of some of the relevant texts will also be found in J. B. Prichard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton University Press, 1969).

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