

Theology, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Egypt

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THE PRESUPPOSITION OF ALL Egyptian priesthood, worship, and theology was the existence of divine beings. The divine beings were both male and female (gods and goddesses), as were those who performed their cult (priests and priestesses). Obviously Egyptians believed that they had to come to terms with the world of the gods. These gods were known to manifest themselves in the cosmos and in the human world. Therefore, theology, as knowledge of the gods and their world, also encompassed cosmology, sociology, anthropology, and so forth, extending far beyond what can be covered in this essay.

The aim of worship was to come into contact with the gods—to satisfy, to please and honor, and to appease them if necessary, or in exceptional cases, to forestall them or to ward them off. It would be most unwise to neglect and forget gods. If the gods were not worshiped, they would leave Egypt, and cosmic disasters would occur. The state would fall apart and be destroyed by enemies and rebels. Individuals would become the victims of illness and premature death. (Such catastrophes are narrated in the Restoration Stela of Tutankhamun and in the Ptolemaic period Papyrus Jumilhac.) The Egyptian elite, from which the priests were re-

cruited and to which they belonged, was deeply convinced that human life is not possible in chaos. Against ever-threatening chaos, justice and order (Egyptian *ma'at*) should be maintained, and the correct action to take toward the mysterious and conflicting powers of the universe was to worship and appease them. The Egyptian root *hṭp* means both “offering” and “peace.”

PRIESTS

In principle, the only person qualified to approach and address the gods was the pharaoh. He was a human being but also a god or a son of a god; being of divine nature, he had access to the world of the gods. The pharaoh was the intermediary between the world of humanity and the world of the gods. For the third millennium BCE, clear evidence of worship and temple ritual is scarce and scattered, but it seems safe to assume that the king was, from the beginning of Egyptian history, the “lord of rites” (literally, “lord-of-doing-things”—*nb jrt hṭ*), as he was called from the Middle Kingdom onward.

Although in principle only the pharaoh could perform rituals, in practice he delegated the

enormous task of worshipping the gods of Egypt in the many temples to those of his state officials who served as priests. But the theological doctrine that he alone could build temples for the gods and perform the rituals was maintained, and the representations of temple ritual show the king officiating, even though the rituals were actually celebrated by priests. The officiating high priest of a temple seems to have been dressed like a king. Whether this was the case or not, the priest had to say at the beginning of the daily temple ritual: "It is the king who sends me." In theory the authority of the high priest and the validity of a ritual derived more from this royal mission or ordination than from any other factor such as ritual purity, initiation, sacred knowledge, or heredity. Even offerings made by private persons such as those depicted in tombs could be fully efficacious only if presented in the name of the king. An offering in a temple or elsewhere was to be acknowledged and announced as an "offering-which-the-king-gives." Although most daily rituals and religious festivals were delegated, the king doubtless performed the daily ritual in person in the main temple of the chief god in the pharaoh's residence and conducted festivals wherever possible.

The king was a priest and the priests were officials of state. A clear-cut separation between "church" and "state" did not exist. The Egyptian priesthood has been described as "a body of men separated from the rest of the community for the service of a god." This is true insofar as there emerged in the course of Egyptian history a professional priesthood separate from the rest of the elite of state officials. But Egyptian religion as such, including temple worship of priests, was never a religion of faction, as several modern religions with universal pretensions are, but a community religion. It was, of course, a hierarchical community religion in which the elite predominated. The pharaoh was the representative of the community and delegated his task of government to civil servants, his military task to army officers, and his task of worship to priests. Priests were specialized state officials, or servants of the pharaoh with a special task.

One of the Egyptian names for priest, which is always rendered by the Greek word *prophetes* in bilingual texts, is "servant of the

god" (*hm-ntr*). One might try to find in this expression an indication that the priest was or should be more obedient to his god than to the pharaoh, but that would be too modern an interpretation, based on the modern separation of church and state. The word "god" in the expression "servant of the god" simply means the divine pharaoh. So the high priest of Amun, who was officially called "First servant of the god of Amun," was the first royal servant of Amun. The main task of the priestly function was to worship, in the name of the pharaoh, the god or gods of a particular temple who were present in their cult images.

A god or goddess never lived alone in a temple. Usually there was a triad, or a divine family of father, mother, and son. This divine family could be extended to include many more divine companions. These larger groups were often called enneads, although their number was not always nine. Egyptian temple worship focused on the main god or goddess of the temple, but in keeping with the polytheistic character of Egyptian religion, it encompassed many other divine beings. A significant aspect of Egyptian theology was the formulation of the relations among the many gods and goddesses in hymns and other temple texts on the basis of traditional mythology.

The gods lived in their own world; they were in heaven. Their manifestations (*b'w*) descended to earth to live in two- or three-dimensional images. Cult images of the gods were made by the priests in secrecy. They were consecrated with a special ritual called the Opening the Mouth in which life was symbolically imparted to them. More or less the same ritual of Opening the Mouth was used to give life to the mummy of a deceased human being. Consecration rituals were repeated periodically, especially during New Year festivities, in order to guarantee a cult statue's symbolic life.

The cult images were kept in mysterious darkness in the inner part of the temple. The cult image of the principal god of the temple was placed in a shrine in the sanctuary. Between the entrance to the temple precinct and the sanctuary, a series of gates and doors on the main axis of the temple more and more effectively protected this most holy place from the dangers and impurities of the world outside. Although little is

known about these cult images, they were probably quite small, perhaps about fifty centimeters (twenty inches) high. One can therefore envisage such a statue as a kind of doll in human form, sometimes animal-headed and made of wood, stone, or often of precious metals such as gold. It was enveloped in linen cloths of different colors. It was this image or doll that represented the divine presence in the world and was called "mystery" (*št*). The priest had to worship, clean, clothe, anoint, fumigate, and nourish symbolically this cult image and to protect it every day from all evil influences.

Therefore, those who were allowed to enter the temple, that is, the priests, had to observe conditions of physical and symbolic or ritual purity. The most common term for a priest was "the pure one." It seems that many children of the elite, after reaching a certain age, began to observe rules of purity and were introduced into the priesthood as "pure ones." Some of them pursued a priestly career, while others later made a career elsewhere in the proliferating state bureaucracy. Older men might also enter or return to the priesthood after a career in the army or elsewhere.

Priests had to wash themselves several times each day. According to Herodotus, it was "twice a day and twice every night." Egyptian sources mention a lustration performed three times a day, a number that accords with the three daily services in the temple. This purification was carried out in the sacred lake in the temple precinct or in stone basins at the entrance to the temple. Its purpose was not only to remove physical pollution but also to give spiritual life. The water of this "baptism" was considered to be the primordial element from which life comes. Reliefs show purification scenes in which the water falling from the pitchers is indicated by a rain of hieroglyphs signifying life. Priests purified their mouths with natron diluted in water. Another obligation was to remove hair from the body and head. Shaven-headed priests are commonly shown in Egyptian art. Outside the temple, priests could wear wigs like other members of the elite.

Circumcision, whatever its original significance may have been, was connected with purity. It seems that circumcision was obligatory for priests. It was a distinctive mark of priest-

hood and formed part of the rites of induction in the latest periods, but whether it did for earlier times is uncertain. Another aspect of purity was sexual abstinence, at least when the priests were confined within the temple precinct. Celibacy was never required. The priesthood was hereditary. According to Diodorus Siculus, a priest was supposed, unlike others, to limit himself to one wife. Priestesses could also marry. Both the husband and the wife of such a couple often held priestly titles. In the first millennium BCE, however, the God's Wife of Amun and the women of her entourage had to remain virgins.

Priests observed food taboos that varied according to the temple and district to which they belonged. Priests were usually clad in clean white linen and wore white sandals. They were forbidden to wear wool. Holders of some priestly offices wore distinctive clothes. In the New Kingdom and later, *sem* priests dressed in a panther skin. This was an ancient garment worn in the Old Kingdom by the elite, not just by priests. The high priest of Heliopolis (biblical On) was draped in a skin covered with stars, and the high priest of Memphis (biblical Noph, modern Mit Rahina) was distinguished with a collar of special shape and a side plait or "lock of youth"; he was not completely shaven and was symbolically still a child.

On a door surround in the temple of Edfu is written: "Everyone who enters by this door, beware of entering in impurity, for God loves purity more than millions of rituals, more than hundreds of thousands of fine gold. . . ." A similar inscription in the temple runs:

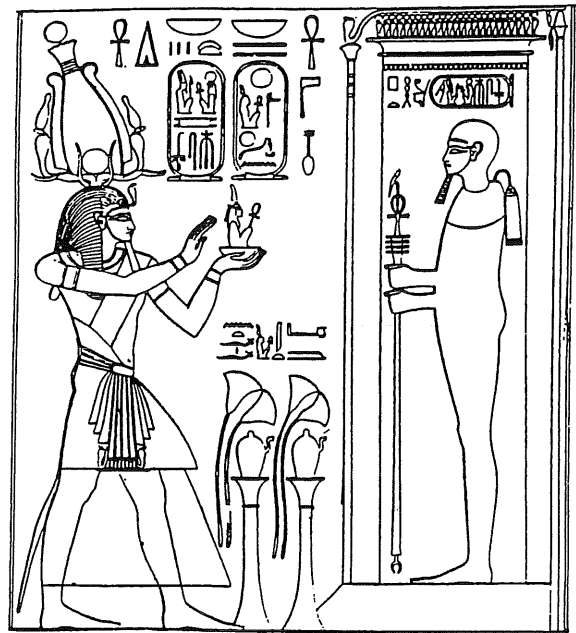
Turn your faces to this temple in which His Majesty has placed you. He sails in the heavens while seeing what is done therein, and he is pleased therewith according to its exactitude. Do not come in sin, do not enter in impurity, do not utter falsehood in his house, do not covet things, do not slander, do not accept bribes, do not be partial as between a poor man and a great, do not add to the weight and measure, but rather reduce them, do not tamper with the corn-measure, do not harm the requirements of the Eye of Re (i.e., the divine offerings), do not reveal what you have seen in the mysteries of the temple. . . .

Thus, the required purity was not only physical, but also moral.

There were two principal grades of priest: the higher grade of “servants of the god” (*hmw-ntr*), a term Egyptologists usually render “prophets,” as the Greeks did, and the subordinate “pure ones” (*wbw*), or *wab* priests. In an average temple, there may have been from ten to twenty or twenty-five priests, but in the larger temples in important and populous towns there may have been many more. The priests were divided into four groups or gangs of service, now known by their Greek designation, *phyle*. Each *phyle* served one lunar month by rotation, so that everyone had an interval of three months between two periods of ritual service. The head or “regulator” of a *phyle* was normally a prophet, while others were mostly *wab* priests. It seems that practically all the children of the elite became *wab* priests in one of the temples in their district after they had finished their education in school. Women had their own *phyles*. After marriage a woman remained in the *phyle* into which she had been initiated as a girl. All women of rank were singers, dancers, or musicians in the temple of a god or goddess in their hometown. *Wab* priests could do other work in or outside the temple when they were not on their months of ritual duty.

The title “servant of the god” is sometimes interchangeable with “father of the god.” This was originally a court title, with “god” signifying “pharaoh.” This court title was given as an honorific to persons who were already senior *wab* priests and who had effectively reached the higher level of “servant of the god” without being officially inducted into the grade. The High Priest of Amun, Bakenkhonsu, who lived in the time of Sety I and Ramesses (Ramses) II, relates in his autobiography that he went to school in the temple of the goddess Mut for four years. Then he was a chief of a training stable of King Sety I for eleven years. After that he was instructed in the priestly function by his father, who was a second prophet in the temple of Amun. He was a *wab* priest for four years and father of the god for twelve years before becoming a prophet. He was third prophet of Amun for fifteen years and second prophet of Amun for twelve years. At the end of his long career, he had held the office of high priest, or First Prophet of Amun, for twenty-seven years.

It is not possible here to define the conditions



Relief of Ramesses II (circa 1279–1213 BCE) worshipping Ptah. The king is offering *ma'at*, “Order,” shown as a hieroglyph of a goddess with a feather in her wig and holding the *ankh*-sign signifying “life.” Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak, southern exterior wall. CARL RICHARD LEPSIUS, *DENKMÄLER AUS ÄGYPTEN UND ÄTHIOPIEN* (1849–1859)

of admission to the priesthood for all periods of Egyptian history. Before the New Kingdom, the priesthood was hardly a distinct professional group. Priestly service was performed as a part-time job by those who belonged to the scribal elite. Another professional group emerged in comparable fashion. Before the New Kingdom, a standing army did not exist in Egypt. Even during the New Kingdom, it was easy to move from military or civil service into the priesthood and vice versa. In Ptolemaic and Roman times, the priesthood was almost the only route to personal distinction for the native Egyptian elite, because the higher positions in the army and administration were mostly held by foreigners.

Among the methods of recruitment to the priesthood were inheritance, cooptation, and the purchase of office. In a rather stable society, as Egyptian society generally was, it was traditional for a father to bequeath his function to a

son, and this pattern held for priestly service. Offices, including priestly ones with their incumbent privileges and income, could be disposed as personal property. From the Late Period, there are instances where men claimed up to seventeen generations of ancestors as priests of the same god in the same temple. In the text of the daily temple ritual of Karnak, one reads that the priest said not only "It is the king who sends me" but also "I am a prophet, the son of a prophet." The hereditary character of the priesthood was both rule and custom.

Nonetheless, the pharaoh or his delegate retained the right to nominate whom he pleased to whichever office he pleased. But such rights and privileges of the pharaoh were often no more than nominal. Because of the great number of temples and priestly functions, royal interference must in practice have been rare. So far as can be seen, royal interference or approbation was restricted to the highest pontiffs of the great cults, while nomination of priests to lesser ranks was left to the high priests. But even in cases where the high priest of Amun at Karnak was designated by an oracle of the god himself, the god's choice had to be confirmed by the king. On one occasion at the beginning of the reign of Ramesses II, the god chose, from several names placed before him by the king, someone who did not belong to one of the Theban priestly families; this was Nebwenenef, who was priest in This (Thinis), and the king was happy to confirm this politically significant divine intervention.

During the New Kingdom, the high priest of Amun sometimes held the title "overseer of all the prophets of Upper and Lower Egypt." This was doubtless often more than just an honorific title, but we do not know to what extent royal authority was really delegated to a sort of pope or minister of temple affairs. In Roman times the *idios logos*, or representative of the emperor in religious matters, granted permission to circumcise a candidate and to admit him to the priesthood after the necessary information had been laid before him, which included whether the candidate was able to read and declaim hieratic religious texts. When Tutankhamun revived local priesthoods after the turmoils of the Amarna period, it is said that he—which must mean those entrusted with the task—"installed *wab*

priests and prophets chosen among the sons of local dignitaries, children of prominent men whose names were known."

The majority of examples of the purchase of priestly office come from the Greco-Roman period. A priest could have several offices and incomes in different temples. He could also receive income from nonpriestly work. The income of a priestly office derived from two sources: the temple estates and the daily and occasional offerings in a temple. Priests could increase their income by performing periodical or daily services for the dead. They might receive allowances for a wife and children, and they usually enjoyed immunity from conscripted labor and taxation. Thus, priestly office could be economically very advantageous.

The office of priest was also prestigious. The stoic philosopher Chaeremon of the first century CE may have been right when he said that all people honored priests "as if they were a sort of sacred animal." This comparison of a worthy human being with an animal would have been as strange to Greek readers of his time as it is for modern westerners, and so it seems authentically Egyptian. According to the Egyptians, sacred animals were living images of gods. The divine nature of the king was on occasion explained similarly in Egyptian theology by saying that the pharaoh was an image of a god; the name Tutankhamun means "living image of Amun." Egyptian theology never went as far as Jewish and Christian tradition in stating that man as such is an *imago dei*, or at least is created in the image and likeness of God. It did, however, maintain that some men, such as high priests, reflected the appearance and qualities of the god they served, or that they impersonated him.

Thus, the title of the high priest of Thoth, who separated the two fighting gods Horus and Seth, was "arbitrator between the two." The high priest of Ptah, the divine craftsman, was "he who is great at directing the crafts," while the high priest of Khnum, the god who created man on his potter's wheel, was "modeler of limbs," and the high priest of the sun-god Re was "he who is great at seeing," probably not because he was permitted to see the god, but because the sun-god's special characteristic of unrestricted vision was transmitted to him. The *sem* priest clad in

The Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt

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AMAUNET "The hidden one." Female counterpart of Amun who was worshiped in Karnak and depicted as a woman wearing the crown of Lower Egypt.

AMUN "The hidden one." Creator-god of Thebes (Diosopolis Magna), who was connected with the sun-god Re, and who as "Amun-Re King of the Gods" became one of the most important gods of the Egyptians. He was worshiped principally at Karnak, where he formed a triad with Mut and Khons, but also elsewhere. He was usually shown as a human being wearing a cap and two plumes. As a fertility god, he was also linked with Min. His animals were the ram and the gander.

ANAT and ASTARTE West Semitic goddesses who were often worshiped together in Egypt in Ramesside times. They were connected with Seth, the divine foreigner of the Egyptian pantheon. Goddesses of warfare, related to the army and horses, they were portrayed carrying shield and weapons, usually in Egyptian dress, but also shown riding on horseback in the nude. They were worshiped mainly in the eastern Delta but also at Memphis (biblical Noph, modern Mit Rahina) and elsewhere.

ANUBIS "Puppy" (?). The divine embalmer, worshiped in several places as Lord of the Necropolis. He was depicted as a human being with a dog or jackal head, or as a recumbent dog or jackal.

ANUKIS Goddess of the region of the First Cataract. She was the divine daughter (rather than the usual son) in the triad of Elephantine, where she was worshiped together with her father and mother, Khnum and Satis. Elsewhere, for example at Komir near Esna, she was worshiped independently. She was represented as a woman wearing a crown of feathers or, more rarely, as a gazelle.

APIS Sacred bull with markings on his hide and a sun-disk between his horns, worshiped in Memphis, who became a manifestation or "herald," of Ptah. Other sacred bulls were Mnevis, worshiped at Heliopolis (biblical On) as a manifestation of Re, and Bukhis, worshiped at Armant (Hermopolis, Iuny) as a manifestation of Montu.

APOPIS The snake enemy of the sun-god Re. Con-

sidered to be a demonic dragon and not a god, he was not worshiped anywhere.

ASTARTE, see under **ANAT**

ATEN "Sun-disk." He became a deity in the time of Akhenaten, who made him his sole and exclusive god. He was initially depicted with a hawk's head, but this was soon replaced by the image of a sun-disk with rays terminating in human hands often extending symbols of life toward the king and his family. (See next chapter.)

ATUM "The completed one" and "the one who is not," according to the dual meaning of his name. Primeval creator-god depicted as a human being wearing the double crown and worshiped at Heliopolis as head of the Great Ennead ("Nine Gods"), consisting of Atum, Shu, Tefenet (Tefnut), Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys.

BAAL West Semitic god introduced into Egypt during the time of the Hyksos and closely connected with Seth, the divine foreigner in the Egyptian pantheon. He was depicted as a Syrian, wearing a pointed beard, a conical headdress, and foreign dress. Baal, or the foreign Seth, was worshiped at Memphis, in the eastern Delta, and elsewhere.

BASTET "She-of-Baset," one of the many Egyptian lioness goddesses, worshiped in Baset or Bubastis (Tell Basta, near modern Zaqqaziq in the Delta). In the first millennium BCE, she specialized as the friendly and appeased counterpart of the dangerous lioness goddess Sakhmet and was rendered as a cat or as a woman with the head of a cat.

BES God of the bedroom, connected with sexuality and fertility, but also a protective family god who repels evil, especially at night and at the birth of a child. He was primarily worshiped in private homes and had no special cult center. He was depicted as a dwarf with a masklike face, and often with a crown of feathers, a lion's mane, or exotic coiffure.

BULLS, sacred, see **APIS**

DEDWEN Anthropomorphic god presiding over Nubia and its products, such as incense. Despite being a Nubian, he was usually rendered in normal Egyptian form. In Nubia his cult is attested in al-Lessiya and Uronarti.

ENNEAD, see **ATUM**

GEB God of the earth. He was separated from his

consort Nut, the goddess of the sky, by his father Shu. Geb is "father of the gods," especially of Osiris, and "prince of the gods" as heir of Atum. He was depicted in human form. He was worshiped at Heliopolis and elsewhere.

HAPY "Inundation." Personification of the fecundity of the Nile and therefore typified as an obese human figure that was sometimes interpreted as being androgynous.

HATHOR "House of Horus." One of the most universal Egyptian goddesses, who was worshiped in many temples. She was the goddess of women, dance, drunkenness, and sexual excitement, but she was also identified with the desert plateau where the dead were buried. She was usually rendered as a woman with cow horns and a sun-disk on her head or as a cow, but she was also shown as a lioness or as a tree-goddess.

HAURON West Semitic god introduced into Egypt during the New Kingdom, where he was identified with the Great Sphinx at Giza as Hauron-Harmakhis. He was depicted as a sphinx or a falcon. He was worshiped at Giza and elsewhere.

HEKA "Magic." Personification of magic or creative energy. He was depicted in human form in the sun bark, together with Hu, or "authoritative utterance," and Sia, or "planning percipience," all aspects of the creator-god. Heka was also worshiped as a divine child, especially in the western Delta and at Esna (Isna, Iunyt, Lato-polis).

HORUS "The distant one" (?). God of the sky and of kingship. Depicted as a hawk or falcon, or as a man with a hawk's head. He absorbed several local gods with hawk form and was linked with the sun-god as Re-Harakhty, "Re-Horus-of-the-horizon," and with Osiris and Isis as Harpokrates, "Horus-the-child," or Harendotes, "Horus-who-protects-his-father," or Harsiese, "Horus-the-son-of-Isis." He was worshiped in many places, among which the oldest may have been Nekhen (Hierakonpolis, Kom al-Ahmar).

IMHOTEP Deified official of King Djoser of the Third Dynasty. He was later considered to be a patron of scribes, healers, sages, and magicians, and was regarded as the son of the god Ptah and of a woman called Khreduankh. He was portrayed as a human being sitting on a chair with an open papyrus roll on his lap, and was worshiped at Memphis and Thebes.

ISIS Sister and wife of Osiris and mother of Horus. She was a mother goddess but she also specialized in protective magic. Like Hathor, with whom she is often identified, she became one

of the most universal goddesses of Egypt. She was usually shown as a woman with the hieroglyph for "throne" on her head. She was the subject of major cults on the island of Philae in the First Cataract, and at Bahbayt al-Hagar (Hebyt, Iseum) in the Delta.

IUSAAS and **NEBETHETEPET** "She comes, being great" and "mistress of the vulva." Pair of goddesses, personifying the male and female organs. Iusaas was represented as a woman with a scarab on her head, Nebethetepet as a woman with either the crown of Hathor (cow horns and sun-disk) or a naos-sistrum on her head. Both of them were consorts of Re-Atum, and were called "Eye of Re" and "Hand of Atum." They were worshiped at Heliopolis in a temple called Hetepet, and elsewhere.

KHEPRI "He who is coming into being." Form of the morning sun (the other forms being Re, the midday sun, and Atum, the evening sun). Usually rendered as a scarab, symbol of spontaneous life but also occasionally in human form with a scarab for a head. He was worshiped at Heliopolis and elsewhere.

KHNUM Ram-headed creator god who was worshiped in the cataract area around Elephantine, where he formed a triad with the goddesses Satis and Anukis. Other important cult centers were at Esna and at Herwer near Hermopolis in Middle Egypt. He was known as a creator god, not only because of the procreative powers of the ram but also because he molded gods, men, and animals on a potter's wheel.

KHONSU "The wanderer," or "He who comes and goes." Moon-god who was usually depicted as a child wearing the sidelock symbolic of youth but sometimes also with a hawk's head. In both cases he wore the sign of the moon on his head. In the triad of Karnak, he was the divine child of Amun and Mut. He had an important temple in the precinct of Amun at Karnak.

MA'AT Personification of cosmic and social order. Shown as a woman with an ostrich plume on her head. Daughter of Re and, like many other goddesses, often called Eye of Re. She had a temple in the precinct of Montu at Karnak, but she was also worshiped in many other temples.

MERET Divine songstress and musician. The two Meret goddesses are usually depicted with raised arm and with the heraldic plants of Upper and Lower Egypt on their heads. Although they played an important role in ritual on the divine level, they had no local cult center.

MIN Mummiform god with erect penis, wearing a

Continued on the next page.

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cap with two plumes, and right arm raised with a flail. He was chiefly a fertility god, but he also protected the tracks in the Eastern Desert; he was worshiped at Koptos (Qift, Gebtu) and Akhmim (ancient Khem, Panopolis).

MONTU Ancient principal god of the Theban area, who was specialized as a war god during the New Kingdom. Normally shown as a hawk-headed man, wearing the sun-disk, usually with a double uraeus, and two plumes. He was worshiped at Karnak and in the neighboring towns of Armant, Tod, and Medamud.

MUT "Mother." The name of this goddess was written with a hieroglyph depicting a vulture, symbol of femininity and motherhood. She was usually shown as a woman wearing the double crown, but as she was often identified with Sakhmet, she could also be depicted as a lioness-headed woman. From the Eighteenth Dynasty on, she was the consort of Amun. Her most important temple was at Karnak, where she had a separate precinct south of Amun's.

NEFERTEM God of the lotus that appeared from the primeval waters at the beginning of the creation. He is usually represented as a human figure with a lotus on his head or as a child sun-god seated on the lotus. In Memphis he was the divine child in a triad with Ptah and Sakhmet.

NEITH Primeval goddess, sometimes said to be both male and female. Goddess of war and hunting, who usually wore the Red Crown of Lower Egypt or an emblem consisting of two crossed arrows and a shield. Her most important cult centers were Sais and Esna.

NEKHBET "She of Nekheb (Elkab)." Tutelary goddess of Upper Egypt who, together with Wadjjet, the goddess of Lower Egypt, protected the king. She was depicted as a vulture or as a woman wearing the "vulture cap," sometimes surmounted by the White Crown of Upper Egypt flanked by two ostrich plumes. Her most important temples were in the area of Elkab.

NEPHTHYS "Mistress of the House." Depicted as a woman with the hieroglyphs of her name on her head. Inseparable sister of Isis, whom she helps to protect Osiris. Often said to be childless herself she played the role of the divine wailing woman and wet nurse. She was nominal consort of Seth, with whom she was worshiped in Middle Egypt.

NUN Personification of the primeval waters, who was before and outside the organized cosmos and, hence, called "Father of the Gods." He was sometimes depicted as a human being, whose

lower body was hidden in unfathomable depths and upon whose hands the bark of the sun-god was raised aloft from the waters at sunrise. With Naunet, his female counterpart, Huh and Hauhet, Kuk and Kauket, and Amun and Amaunet, he and they formed the Ogdoad (Eight Gods) of Hermopolis, who embodied the characteristics of the world before creation.

NUT Sky goddess depicted as a nude woman arching over the earth-god Geb. At night the sun-god entered her body through her mouth to be reborn from her womb in the morning; hence, she became a goddess protecting the dead. She also was sometimes described as a sow giving birth to her children, the heavenly bodies, and then swallowing them. She had no special cult center but was worshiped with her children Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys, and with other members of the Ennead, at Heliopolis.

OGDOAD, see **NUN**

ONURIS "He who brings the distant (goddess)."

The name referred to the myth of the Solar Eye who had gone to the south and was pacified and brought back by Onuris. He was rendered as a man wearing a crown of four plumes and carrying a spear, or sometimes a rope, suggesting the capture of the wild lioness who became a peaceful cat. He was often identified with Shu, but his role in the myth of the Solar Eye could also be played by Thoth. He was worshiped with the local lioness-goddess Mehit in the area of Abydos (Araba al-Madfuna) in Upper Egypt; another cult center was at Sebennytyos (Sammannud) in the Delta.

OSIRIS God of regeneration usually shown in the form of a mummy wearing the crown of Upper Egypt flanked by two ostrich plumes and carrying the *heqa* scepter and the flail. He was killed by his brother Seth but was resurrected by Isis to become lord of the underworld, his son and reincarnation, Horus, ruling on earth in his place. He was also a god of the resurgent vegetation. His most important cult centers were Abydos and Busiris (Abusir in the Delta).

PTAH "Fashioner." Divine craftsman who created the cosmos with heart (thought and will) and tongue (word). Shown as a man wearing a close-fitting garment like a mummy and a close-fitting blue skullcap like the craftsmen whose patron god he was. He did not wear the usual curved beard of the gods but a straight one. He was worshiped at Memphis, where he formed a triad with Sakhmet and Nefertem, and elsewhere.

QADESH (QUDSHU, QEDSHET) Semitic goddess in-

roduced into Egypt during the New Kingdom. Her name was an epithet of West Semitic goddesses: the Holy One. She was depicted as a nude goddess, and unlike most Egyptian deities, she was shown nude in full frontal view, standing on a lion with both lotus flowers and snakes in her hands, thus expressing exotic sensuality. Qadesh is attested from various places, but she had no important cult center.

RE Sun-god, worshiped as creator and sustainer of the cosmos, traveling in a bark along the sky by day and through the underworld by night. He was usually depicted in human form with a sun-disk on his head, but often also hawk-headed (as Re-Harakhty, "Re-Horus-of-the-Horizon") or ram-headed (as the nocturnal sun who unites with Osiris). He was combined with many other gods and worshiped in many places, but especially at Heliopolis as Re-Atum and Re-Harakhty and at Karnak, which was termed "Southern Heliopolis" (the southern counterpart of the "real" Heliopolis in the north), as Amun-Re.

RENEUTET "Snake who nourishes." Goddess of the harvest who nursed both the king and the grain god, Nepri. Depicted as a cobra or as a woman with a snake's head, she had a special cult at Madinat Madi (Narmouthis) in the Faiyum. She survived the disappearance of the Egyptian religion to become a Christian saint, Thermuthis, the daughter of the pharaoh who raised Moses.

RESHEP West Semitic god introduced into Egypt during the New Kingdom. Depicted as a Syrian wearing a pointed beard, a conical headdress with a gazelle's head attached to its front, and a short skirt with tassels, he carried a shield and spear and brandished a battle-ax. Attestations of his cult are found all over Egypt, but he had no important cult center.

SAKHMET "The most powerful one." One of the many forms of the Eye (or Daughter) of Re, usually depicted as a woman with the head of a lioness. Often worshiped at the entrances of wadis, especially in Upper Egypt; she was said to have halted there on her journey back from Nubia, to which she had retreated after a quarrel with her father, Re. Her principal cult center was Memphis, where she became the consort of Ptah and mother of Nefertem. As the Eye of the Sun she was destructive and beneficent at the same time, spreading as well as curing disease and protecting the king and his subjects as well as attacking his enemies.

SATIS Goddess of the region of the First Cataract,

where she was worshiped as the consort of Khnum and the mother of Anukis in the triad of Elephantine. She was rendered as a woman wearing the crown of Upper Egypt flanked by two antelope horns.

SELQET (SELKET, SELKIS) "She who causes (the throat) to breathe." Protecting and healing goddess, depicted as a woman wearing a water scorpion on her head. If she had a special cult center, it may have been in the western Delta at Kedam, between Sais and Buto (Tell al-Fara'in).

SESHAT Goddess of writing, learning, and libraries. Depicted as a woman often wearing a panther skin and with her special five-horned emblem (which has not been successfully explained), above her head. No special cult center is known.

SETH God of confusion, who murdered Osiris and fought with Horus, but who also repelled the dangerous Apopis snake. The divine foreigner in the Egyptian pantheon. He was shown as a fabulous animal (the so-called Seth-animal) or as a man with that animal's head. He was worshiped at Ombos (Naqada) in Upper Egypt and elsewhere until his demonization in late times.

SHAY Personification of "destiny" (translation of Shay). Protecting god and also an aspect of the human person, he was depicted as a man and also as a snake. He had no special cult center but was worshiped locally in temples with other deities.

SHED "Savior." Name or epithet of Horus and of several other deities. This helper of humanity in times of distress was recognized as a distinct deity from the New Kingdom on, and was shown as a naked child, often with the head of a gazelle attached to his forehead. He was worshiped at Dayr al-Madina in western Thebes and elsewhere.

SHU God of the void between heaven and earth and of the air and light that filled the void, and therefore often shown separating his children Geb and Nut. He and his sister, and wife Tefenut, were created by Atum through masturbation and expectoration. As the first exclusively male being, Shu had some aggressive and bellicose traits and as such was connected with Onuris. Depicted as a man with a feather on his head or with a lion's head, he was worshiped at Leontopolis (Tell al-Muqdam in the Delta) and elsewhere.

SOBEK God of swamps and rivers, and of fertility—embodying both the beneficial and the dangerous aspect of the water; son of Neith. He was rendered as a crocodile or as a man with a crocodile's head.

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dile's head, and was widely worshiped, especially in the Faiyum and at Kom Ombo.

SOKAR Sokar was a god of death and resurrection, like Osiris, and a god of craftsmanship, especially metalwork, like Ptah. He was depicted as a man with a falcon's head but occasionally also as a man wearing a crown consisting of a sun-disk, double ostrich plumes, and ram horns, like Tatenen. He was worshiped at Memphis, especially in its vast necropolis, but through his links with Osiris his cult spread to many other places.

TATENEN God of the depths of the earth. From the New Kingdom and combined with or identified with Ptah, this deity is often associated with the primeval hill, his name being interpreted as "Risen Land." Depicted as a man wearing a crown consisting of a sun-disk, double ostrich plumes, and ram horns. He was worshiped in the Memphite area and elsewhere.

TEFENET Daughter of Atum, sister and consort of Shu, Eye of Re. The first female being, who had to be appeased with wine, music, and dancing so she would not turn into a fierce lioness. She was represented as a woman, a lioness, or a woman with the head of a lioness, sun-disk, and uraeus. She was worshiped at Leontopolis and combined with various local goddesses in many other temples.

THOERIS "The great (goddess)." Popular protective goddess, especially for women in childbirth and young mothers; known under several names. Shown as a composite being with the body of a pregnant hippopotamus with pendulous human breasts, the paws of a lioness, and the tail of a crocodile. Sanctuaries at Thebes and elsewhere.

THOTH Moon-god, scribe of the gods, god of learning and writing, and god of wise government. As the divine arbitrator he mediated in the conflict of Horus and Seth. He was depicted as an ibis or a man with a head of an ibis, or as a baboon. He had two principal cult centers, in Upper and Lower Egypt, both called Hermopolis.

WADJIT Tutelary goddess of Lower Egypt who, together with Nekhbet, goddess of Upper Egypt, protected the king. She was represented as a cobra, and was also shown as a woman with the head of a lioness and a cobra on her forehead. She was worshiped at Buto in the Delta.

WEPWAWET Protective god who opened the ways for the king and for the dead, depicted as a standing black jackal. He was worshiped at Asyut (ancient Lykopolis) and at Abydos, where he was usually divided into an Upper Egyptian and a Lower Egyptian Wepwawet and where he was linked with the funerary god Osiris.

a panther skin is sometimes called *Iunmutef*, as if he were the god of that name. Sometimes the *sem* priest is said more precisely to be the image (*tjt*) of *Iunmutef*. These examples could be multiplied; priests could also impersonate their god by wearing a mask in ritual, as in the case of embalming priests who wore a mask of Anubis, the embalmer god.

There is a more problematic example. The title of the priest of the ill-reputed thunder-god, Seth, who caused so much commotion by his deeds and behavior in the world of the gods, was said to be *shed-kheru* (*šd-ḥrw*). This expression means "he who raises his voice," or "causes commotion," or "kicks up a row." The evidence does not suggest that this title indicates the social position and behavior of the priest of Seth. It might simply be a nickname given by outsiders who abhorred Seth. Both officials and priests often declared in their ideal autobiographies that they had never committed the actions of

a *shed-kheru*, that they always reproved such actions, and indeed that they abhorred *shed-kheru*.

However this may be, we shall not go far wrong if we assume that many priests entered their priestly vocation and performed its functions with much humility, sincerity, devotion, and godliness, as is asserted in the following passage from an autobiographical text of about 850 BCE on installation and initiation into the priesthood of Horus:

I was given access to the god when an excellent youth. I was introduced into the horizon of heaven (temple) to sanctify the mysterious image of the god who is in thebes, to satisfy him with his offerings.

After I came from Nun (the primordial waters), had rid myself from all that was evil in me, had exchanged evil with purity, and had loosened clothes and ointments according to the purification of Horus and Seth, I entered into the presence of

the god in the holy place while I was afraid and in awe of him.

The king praised me; he made my position. He appointed me in the steps of my father.

(Jansen-Winkeln, pp. 172, 532; Kruchten, p. 183)

The text presents the royal nomination and endorsement of an inherited right, as well as a brief characterization of priestly duties as being to sanctify the image of the god and to satisfy him with offerings. This is the core and kernel of the daily temple ritual (treated in the next section of the text). The description of purification points to a ritual of initiation comparable with the initiation into the mysteries of Isis in Rome reported by Apuleius in the second century CE. The initiate comes from the primordial waters, which signifies a symbolic death and rebirth. During the ritual of initiation, he seems to be purified by priests wearing the masks of the gods Horus and Seth as if he were to be enthroned like a king, because in Egyptian iconography it is always a king or a god who is purified by these gods. It is most impressive that the old priest hints at the personal religious experience he had, or should have had, when as a young man he first entered as a priest into the divine presence in the temple sanctuary, stating "I was afraid and in awe of him."

WORSHIP

The priestly task of sanctifying the image of the deity and of satisfying him or her with offerings, as mentioned in the text just cited, was performed in the daily temple ritual. It seems that basically the same daily liturgy was celebrated in all the country's temples. Special names, rites, spells, and hymns relating to the deity of a particular temple could be added, particularly on festival days. The daily temple ritual is known from papyri and temple reliefs from Karnak, Abydos ('Araba al-Madfunah), Edfu (Idfu, Apollinopolis Magna), and other places, dating from the New Kingdom and later, that is, from a time when the priesthood had become a professional group. The temple service may nonetheless have been much older, going back to the Old Kingdom. The liturgy is based on that celebrated on behalf of the sun-god at Heliopolis, a city which exer-

cised a far-reaching religious influence in early times.

Furthermore, the daily temple service resembled in many ways ceremonies performed for the pharaoh at court. The priests symbolically accorded to the cult-image the care that any high-ranking personage required. From rising in the morning to retiring at night, the god was washed, dressed, perfumed, fed, and entertained with music, songs, and fine words; all these attentions made him disposed to do what was needed in order to maintain order and justice (*ma'at*) in the cosmos. Some features of the daily temple ritual may go back to times immemorial and may be inherited from pre-Egyptian cultures and religions. Elements comparable to Egyptian temple ritual can be found in more recent religions. Thus, in liturgies of Christian churches there are aspects of the unworthy priest in the Introit, Kyrie, and Agnus Dei; there is also the Elevation or offering of bread and wine, as well as worship in the Gloria and Sanctus. Rather than pursuing these comparisons and the many details of the liturgy, I shall summarize the course of the ritual and add some remarks on its significance.

Before dawn, offerings were prepared and libation vessels filled, and these materials were brought into the temple and consecrated. A special priest on the temple roof measured and indicated the hour of night and day, so that rituals were performed at the precise moment required. The priest officiating in the name of the king entered the temple reciting a declaration of innocence. He was ceremonially purified, dressed, and invested. A torch was lit in the darkness, a censer and incense were picked up, and incense was put on the flame while appropriate spells were recited and hymns were sung. Then the officiating priest marched at the head of a solemn procession toward the sanctuary. He mounted the steps of the god's shrine, probably alone, and opened the shrine doors when the sun rose and began its ascent in the eastern sky. The principal singer intoned the morning hymn, "Rise, great god, in peace! Rise, you are in peace." The choir answered, singing: "You are risen, in peace." At Edfu the hymn was very long, with seemingly endless solos and refrains, including addresses to the many gods and goddesses in the temple, the members and insignia

of the god, and individual parts of the temple, all of which were bidden to rouse themselves from slumber.

After the long hymns, the priest uncovered the god's face, beheld him, kissed the ground, and lay down prostrate on his belly. Then he stood and prayed with his arms hanging down in a gesture of respectful humility, repeating his recitations four times so that they reached the four cardinal points and the cosmos was full of the god's glory: "I worship your majesty with the chosen words, with the prayers that enhance your prestige, in your great names and in the holy manifestations under which you revealed yourself on the first day of the world. . . ."

Then incense, myrrh, and a golden image of the goddess Ma'at, symbolizing order and justice, were presented, all with appropriate spells and accompanied by a long hymn praising divine order and justice. The presenting of Ma'at may have been followed immediately by the offering of food and drink, but it seems more likely that the rites of the toilet and sanctification of the cult image were performed beforehand.

After the adoration of the god and the presentation of Ma'at, the priest laid his hands upon the god, took the cult image out of the shrine to perform the toilet, divested the image of the clothes and ornaments in which it had been arrayed the previous day, and cleansed away the ointments. He then placed the image facing south (the primary orientation) on a heap of sand, cleaned the shrine, fumigated it, and sprinkled water. He painted the cult image's eyes with green and black cosmetics and anointed it with various unguents and oils. He dressed the image with cloth of four different colors—white, blue, green, and red—and offered the god his insignia, scepters, crowns, and other ornaments. It seems that, in some temples at least, this part of the ritual, from the offering of Ma'at on, was not performed by the high priest but by a colleague, called by the Greeks the *stolistes*, "the one who enters the sanctuary to dress the gods with their apparel." As throughout the ritual, this divine toilet was accompanied by the recitation of many solemn formulae.

After the toilet ritual and before the closing ceremonies, some or all of the offerings of food and drink that had been brought into the temple and consecrated before dawn were presented to the god. It seems that of all the meats, bread,

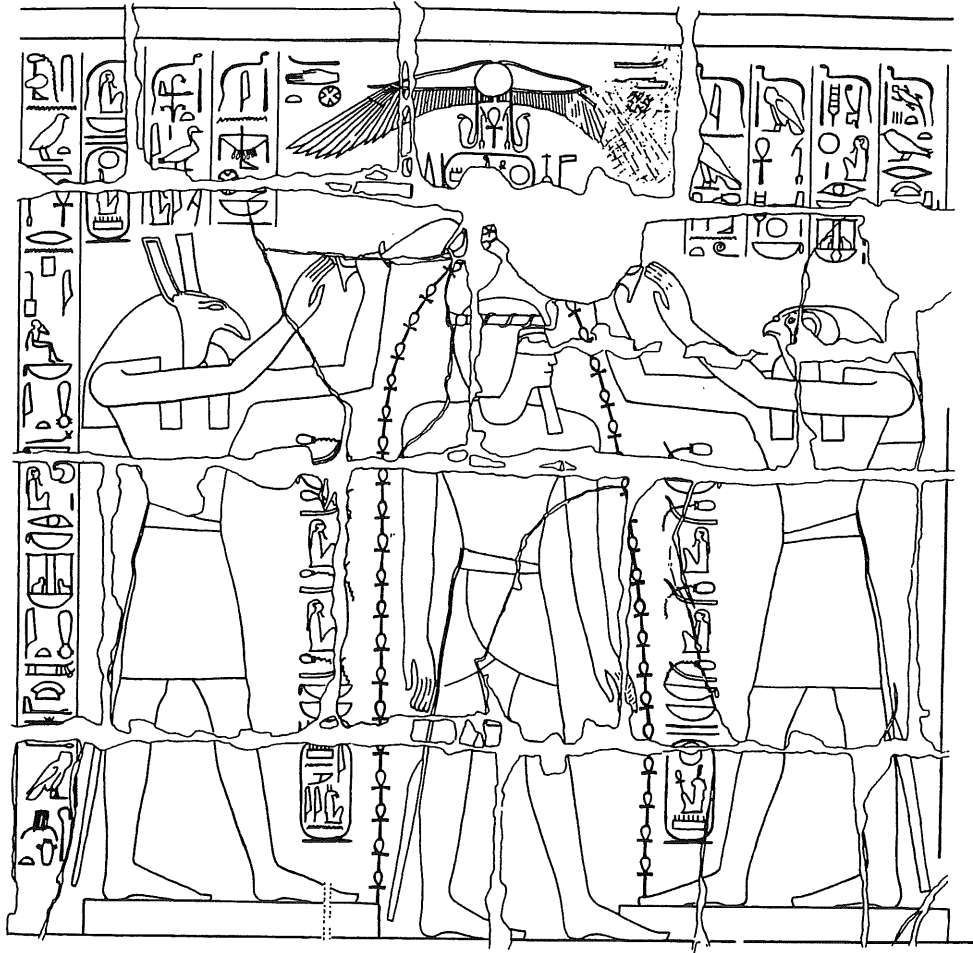
cakes, vegetables, and fruits heaped up in the offering hall, only a small part was solemnly laid before the god on an altar, table, or mat and elevated by a priest reciting appropriate formulae. The offering formula began with the words "An offering which the king gives" and continued with a list of what was offered. The god was summoned to the offerings with special spells, and hymns were sung. The meal was consecrated with prayers and gestures. As in other ritual contexts, water was libated and incense burned. After the god had been satisfied, the offerings were presented to the other gods and goddesses of the temple, who had been propitiated with comparable but more sober rituals of sanctification. The offerings were then presented to statues of deceased kings, priests, and other officials and finally taken out of the temple and divided for consumption by the priests according to their rank and position.

The closing ceremonies comprised the veiling of the god's face in his shrine, several purifications with water, natron, and incense, and the sealing of the shrine. After a last fumigation with incense, the priest swept away the traces of his footsteps on the sand covering the floor of the sanctuary and closed its doors.

Besides the daily temple ritual in the morning, a midday service and an evening service before sunset were celebrated. There is evidence that in some temples, rituals with cosmological significance were performed in each of the twelve hours of the day and of the twelve hours of the night.

The recitations performed during the ritual show that the aim of worship was not just to honor the god of the temple because he was worthy of praise. The priest wanted something from the god, namely that he be present, awake, benevolent, and so forth. When the torch was lit at the beginning of the ritual, the priest recited, "Welcome, Eye of Horus, which is glorious, complete and youthful. It shines like Re in the horizon and the power of Seth hides itself immediately from the Eye of Horus." This was a theological exegesis and sacralization of making fire in this ritual context. The priest announced the victory of light and the day and the driving away of the powers of darkness.

However, the texts imply still more. The priest officiating in the temple officiated symbolically in the world of the gods. He represented the



Relief of Horus and Seth libating and purifying Sety I. The water pouring from the gods' jars is represented as a stream of *ankh*-signs, signifying "life." Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak, west wall, north side, second register. HAROLD H. NELSON AND WILLIAM J. MURNANE, *THE GREAT HYPOSTYLE HALL AT KARNAK*, VOL. 1, *THE WALL RELIEFS*, THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO (1981)

king, and as such was himself a god who partook on the divine level in the interplay of gods, powers, and symbols of myth and cosmos. This does not mean that he considered himself to be a solitary, free, and almighty "magician" upon whose word and deed the rising of the sun depended. Elsewhere in the same ritual, the priest says: "I am a prophet, the son of a prophet of this temple. I shall not linger. I shall not turn back. I am a prophet. I have come to perform the ritual. Indeed I have not come to do that which is not to be done." The priest had to play his divine role in the cosmic process carefully and in an orderly manner. He had to do, and

did, what was necessary in order for the world to recover its harmony and maintain itself without any disasters occurring.

In a sense the priest helped to bring about the sunrise by lighting the torch in the temple ritual. He did this in the way prescribed by the old ritual texts, not so much out of fear or out of a conviction that the sun would not rise if he did not make light in the temple as because one has to come to terms with the cosmos. Otherwise, the sun might rise, but its rising would have no meaning for the country's welfare, for victory over death and enemies, and for everything that the Egyptian worldview associated with sun-

rise. The creation theology that was practiced or performed in the cult did not simply commemorate the great mythological deeds of the gods or express the coherence and process of the created world; it was, in effect, creation itself. An Egyptian term for performing ritual is "doing things." The priest had to "do things" to make sure that the order of the cosmos would be maintained and that the universe, the state, and the individual would continue their ordered existence.

Countless liturgical acts, such as the lighting of the torch in the temple and many offerings, were called the Eye of Horus. The eye—that is, the eye of the sun and the Eye of Horus—was one of the most important Egyptian religious symbols. Without entering into mythological details, it can be said that the Eye was a symbol of all that is good and holy and is restored to sound and undamaged condition. The Eye signified the salvation of cosmos, society, and individual. In the offering ritual described above, the priest recited: "Come to these offerings. . . . I know the sky. I know the earth. I know Horus, I know Seth. Horus is appeased with his eyes, Seth is appeased with his testicles. I am Thoth who reconciles the gods." Here not only the Eye of Horus but also its more negative counterpart are mentioned. The sacrifice was not so much a gift from men to the gods as a sacred act through which men could contribute to restoring and maintaining cosmic harmony. The priest could do this because he took on a divine role, in this case that of Thoth. As we have seen from several priestly titles, he could impersonate the god. He was able to speak on behalf of the god as if he were the god himself and thus give oracles to men. However, divine possession and ecstasy as they appear in other religions hardly existed in Egypt, if at all.

Oracles were mainly given during festivals, when the god appeared in procession outside the temple. The daily ritual was celebrated in the temple by a strictly limited number of priests, and the general public had no access to it. In contrast, festivals always included processions during which the processional statue of the god, enclosed in a small wooden shrine and placed on a portable bark, was carried out of the sanctuary on the priests' shoulders. Some of these processions were restricted to the temple or the temple precinct. Often, however, the god

was carried outside the precinct and through the town. He might even visit temples and places farther away. Every temple had its own festival calendar. Festivals seem to have been celebrated about every four or five days. During a calendar year, at the Ptolemaic temple of Edfu, there were more than forty festivals varying in length from one to a maximum of fifteen days, the latter when the goddess Hathor of Dendara (Iunet, ancient Tentyra) visited her divine consort Horus there. The New Year festival, the Coronation of the Falcon, and the Festival of Victory, in which a sacred drama of the myth of Horus and Seth was enacted, were other important festivals at Edfu. The mysteries of Osiris were celebrated at Abydos and elsewhere. The Festival of Opet, which lasted more than a month, and the Festival of the Wadi were famous festivals at Thebes. The general public and the pilgrims coming from afar rejoiced and acclaimed the god when he passed in procession. It seems that what the public saw of the god was not so much the holy image itself as his closed shrine.

People could ask the god all kinds of questions, to which the god's oracle answered either yes or no. The positive or negative answer was deduced from the movements of those who carried the bark. Questions could also be asked in written form, and the priest could issue oracular decrees in writing. Priests could also give oracles orally, sometimes through the intermediary of a speaking statue. The famous oracle that Alexander III "the Great" received in the Oasis of Siwa seems to have been given orally. Oracles are attested from the New Kingdom on, that is, from the time when the priesthood emerged as a professional group. But the gods are not likely to have waited to vouchsafe their word until there were full-time professionals to transmit their messages.

It is obvious, however, that divine intervention through priestly oracles enhanced the priesthood's position. Priests could and did influence the social and political impact of oracles in many ways. Nonetheless, they had to reckon with the social and political situation; the truth and validity of an oracle could also be doubted. It seems that the Greeks rendered the priestly function and title "servant of the god" by *prophetes* because of their task of giving oracles. The more elaborate title, "servant of the god

who carries the message" (*hm ntr whm*), states this role.

THEOLOGY

I have already touched upon intellectual aspects of the Egyptian priesthood. Egyptian priests belonged to the elite; they were state officials and servants of pharaoh. They had to observe rules of purity. They were supposed to be god-fearing. They performed rituals to sanctify the divine image and satisfied the god with offerings; they impersonated the gods and gave oracles. But were they also theologians? What of the renowned sacred knowledge of the Egyptian priests?

Chaeremon, who was cited above, stated that the Egyptian priests "were considered also as philosophers among the Egyptians, that they chose the temples as the place to philosophize." He wrote:

They divided the night for the observation of the heavenly bodies and sometimes for ritual, and the day for worship of the gods in which they sang hymns to them three or four times in the morning (and the evening) when the sun is on the meridian and when it is descending to the west. The rest of the time they spent with arithmetical and geometrical speculations always trying to search out something and to make discoveries and in general always busy with the pursuit of learning.

(Pieter Willem van der Horst, comp.,
Chaeremon, pp. 17, 21)

Chaeremon provided more information, too much to be quoted or discussed here. His picture of Egyptian priests is on the whole idealized and romanticized and accords more with Hellenistic ideas about saintly philosophers than with the historic reality of the Egyptian priesthood. It is a question of definition whether Egyptian priests, or at least some of them, should be called philosophers (although we are accustomed to the idea that philosophy began with the Greeks, and that Egyptian intellectual efforts to understand men, gods, and cosmos should be characterized as being "before philosophy," to cite the title of an influential book edited by Henri Frankfort). It is also debatable whether one should replace the term "philosophy" with "theology." Some scholars wish to reserve the

term "theology" for the religion to which they themselves belong or to religions of more modern times, while others find it difficult to take the theology of any culture seriously. Here I use the word "theology" to designate the intellectual efforts of the Egyptians to understand men, gods, and cosmos because the results of these efforts were considered to be sacred knowledge. With the emergence of the priesthood as a separate professional group, the pursuit of sacred knowledge became restricted increasingly to specialized priests or theologians and to an institution within the temple precinct called the House of Life.

There is little or no evidence for theological study by, or intellectual examination of, candidates for the priesthood. One or two late sources mention literacy or the ability to read hieratic texts as prerequisites for entering the priesthood that were supplementary to heredity, or belonging to a priestly family, and circumcision. But it goes without saying that the candidates for the priesthood, who were recruited from elite families, were literate. It is well known that the school program included some religious education. Not only literary texts, such as *The Story of Sinuhe* and Wisdom texts, but also some hymns to the gods were studied and learned by heart. This implies that those who began a priestly career would already have had some superficial theological knowledge. Knowledge of sacred writings in hieroglyphs (*mdw-ntr*, literally "words of the god"), however, was restricted to the temples. In a demotic story, it is told that after Siosiris, the son of Setna-Khaemwese, had completed his elementary scribal education, "he began to recite (study) writings with the scribes of the House of Life in the temple of Ptah." It seems that the famous but rather mysterious institution of the House of Life was not only a location, a building within the temple-precinct where theological, medical, and other sacred texts were written, copied, and studied and where secret rituals were performed; it was also a sort of school for advanced studies. This does not mean that everyone who entered the priesthood had to take courses in the House of Life. It seems that many were prepared for priesthood in a more practical and individual way as apprentices of such senior priests as the "fathers of the god." Bakenkhonsu relates in his autobiography, "I was instructed into priesthood in the temple

Organization of Sacred and Secular Knowledge

JOHN BAINES

Religious knowledge in Egypt was doubtless oral in origin and continued throughout history to be transmitted through social institutions involving much personal contact, recitation, and reading aloud. The social forms that sustained cultural knowledge will have extended through precept, rituals, and performances to architectural forms and other works of art. Writing was, however, vital to the development and preservation of knowledge in the very long term, and the forms of religious and secular knowledge, which developed together, were profoundly affected by the potential and limitations of written forms.

The high-cultural knowledge of formative periods is not easily accessible. Its visible manifestation in rather later periods is confined to writings and works of art that were available to few. While something can be said about the religious knowledge, secular "science" and sense of progress in the small elite, and about the maintenance of cultural tradition, hardly anything is known about such matters in the broader society.

In the third millennium BCE, the principal subjects of organized knowledge for which evidence is preserved were religious. Much significant knowledge was esoteric and could be alluded to but not discussed or displayed in public. This restriction seems to have applied to the ideas underlying the central cult of the sun-god and the king's role in sustaining it. Vital texts on this subject were composed perhaps in the Middle Kingdom but did not become more widely accessible until after the end of the New Kingdom. There is little evidence for the recording of important knowledge in continuous texts in the third millennium. Crucial materials were nonetheless written down, including the daily ritual for the cult of the gods and funerary rituals, as well as magical incantations and probably medical knowledge—so far as those two can be distinguished.

The Egyptians codified important cosmological and religious knowledge in the form of lists and of hybrid compositions mixing pictorial representations and written captions. Both these genres go back to a time before writing recorded continuous language. Despite the heavily pictorial character of these forms, they too were addressed to the literate few. Among the lists was one enumerating the deities of the Memphite area, which two high officials and priests of the late Fifth and Sixth dynasties used to construct a set of artificial priesthoods that both displayed and disguised their access to this important source. Still more distinctive is the composition in the solar temple of the Fifth Dynasty king Neuserre that displays the sun-god's creation and maintenance of the natural world and the presentation of its bounty back to its creator. This was carved as a set of reliefs within the temple, where only cult personnel entered. Among its sub-

jects are detailed "zoological" observations of such phenomena as the mating habits of birds and antelopes and the migration patterns of fish, expressed in cryptic captions. Here, "science" and the sacred were inextricably enmeshed.

With the emergence of discursive literary texts in the Middle Kingdom, this tradition diversified. The most distinctive compositions in the pictorial-textual form are cosmographies describing the day and the night world of the sun-god; astronomical knowledge was sometimes presented in a similar form. The cosmographies are known from New Kingdom copies but some may have been composed in the Middle Kingdom. The Underworld Books are complex works that present an encyclopedic vision of their subject and are said to be beneficial to those who know them. The *Amduat*, the longest of these books, also existed in a short version rather like an abstract, and the deities and demons represented in it were gathered into a kind of pictorial index. The earliest known copies of these books were inscribed in the tombs of New Kingdom kings, and the knowledge they embodied cannot have been disseminated beyond a very small circle. Unlike Old Kingdom compositions, these works included extensive passages in continuous language.

Encyclopedic knowledge was also recorded in continuous lists known as onomastica, a genre comparable with the Mesopotamian lexical tradition but lacking its bilingualism. These texts have a possible Old Kingdom precursor and are otherwise known from the Middle Kingdom to the Roman period, but they do not seem to have formed an effective continuous tradition.

This pattern of transmission of significant knowledge encompasses the sacred and the secular, the pragmatic and the abstract. In Egyptian terms, the crucial "science"—for which there was no word—concerned the next world as much as, for example, the understanding of disease and of the human body. Two of the most important medical compositions, the general compilation of Papyrus Ebers and the surgical treatise in Papyrus Edwin Smith, were probably found together in a tomb of the early New Kingdom; their owner may have seen them as valuable to him in the next life.

This intertwining of sacred and secular had profound implications for the theology and for the position of temples. In later periods, the temples were the principal repository of written high culture and of many of its artistic manifestations. The mixture of the sacred and the secular and of closely religious and broader materials characterized Egyptian traditions to the end. The hierarchical restriction of sacred knowledge may also have endured, although the clearest evidence for this feature comes from earlier periods.

of Amun under the hand of my father," who was Second Prophet of Amun. Moreover, there is no proof that all the major temples of every period had a House of Life.

In all periods, the priestly knowledge one had to acquire principally concerned ritual. In the first instance, theology had to be practical. To be able to perform the ritual, to do things (*jrj ht*), required that one know things (*rh ht*). But "knower of things" is one of the titles of the scholars of the House of Life. When lay priests of earlier times claimed knowledge about religious matters and secret things, the knowledge in question was ritual knowledge, ritual formulae (*hk'w*), "words of the god" (*mdw-ntr*), and rites (*ht*). The Sixth Dynasty official Harkhuf held among other titles that of "lector priest." It is stated that he was one who "knew his spell." This must mean not only that he knew the spells in question by heart and could read and recite them in the right way, but also that he understood them and knew what they meant. This does not imply that he would explain a spell to anyone who was interested in an explanation. Egyptian priests had no parishes, and they did not preach. They were not permitted to divulge sacred knowledge. Theological and sacred knowledge was restricted to theologians and kept secret. It was transmitted orally within the temple precinct and written down in hieroglyphs, which only the priests, who were conversant in the words of the god (*šs' m mdw-ntr*), could read. The Egyptian term "words of the god" can be translated "hieroglyphs" or "sacred text." Hieroglyphic texts were ritual and secret texts. One man boasted about his restricted secret and sacred knowledge with the words, "I know the secret of the hieroglyphs."

The title *hrj-hb* is usually rendered "lector priest." It means "he who carries (literally, is under) the ritual book," and the lector priest was depicted performing this role in public processions. These men seem to have been the theological students, studying and reciting the sacred texts in the House of Life. The title is sometimes extended with the epithet, *hrj-tp*, "chief." These "chief" or "senior lector priests" were the *hartummim*, or "Egyptian magicians," of the Hebrew Bible. Common or chief lector priests were not priests in the sense of the servants of the god or prophets who officiated in

the daily temple ritual, although it was expected that the functions of priest and theologian could and should be combined. Before the New Kingdom, local lords were often overseers of prophets and stood at the head of the local priesthood. They claimed not just to be administrators but to have a deeper theological knowledge, as they should have had as heads of the local priesthood, and to be lector priests who knew their spells, as we have seen in the case of Harkhuf.

Because these theologians were versed in the sacred books and thus had knowledge of hidden wisdom and magic, they had a great reputation in Egyptian stories; in the temple hierarchy, however, ordinary priests were fourth in rank after servants of the god, fathers of the god, and *wab* priests. This ordering confirms that they were juniors or students.

Egyptian sacred knowledge was traditional. There was an obsession with the written word, and religious texts were authoritative not least because they were written in hieroglyphs, literally "words of the god." The books in the House of Life, or in the specialized ritual and liturgical library within the temple called the House of Books, were sometimes termed emanations (*b'w*) of Re, so that one must conclude that they were considered to be inspired by the sun-god.

The sacred books studied by the theologians of the House of Life contained the myths or "annals" of the gods and goddesses, catalogues of divinities, hymns and specific ritual texts, manuals for the decoration of the temples, rituals for embalming, and source texts for the *Book of the Dead* and other funerary literature as well as magical, medical, veterinary, astronomical, and mathematical books, books on the sacred geography and topography of Egypt, on history, the interpretation of dreams, and many other subjects.

In the House of Life, the sacred and secret traditions of Egyptian knowledge were brought together. In form and content, they constituted holy scripture. They were written in the sacred scripts of hieroglyphs and hieratic, not in demotic. This holy scripture contained ancient theology or philosophy, including ancient science. It was secret knowledge not to be divulged because knowledge is power; it was restricted to the elite of "the great knowers of the things learned in the emanations (i.e., sacred books)

of Re." Abstract theological, philosophical, and scientific knowledge was kept not only in the libraries. It was also in the heads and hearts of the personnel of the House of Life, who learned the sacred texts by heart and recited them. Consultations were given to the king and to others. Sacred knowledge was also applied; the "things" were not only known but done. Ceremonies and rituals were performed in secrecy; texts were recited for the welfare of the king and also for the conservation of life in Egypt. This secret—not to say occult—knowledge was used for the benefit of all.

People cannot live in a world without order, at least in the long run. Experience shows that order is disturbed and will be disturbed, but few can accept a senseless world. In a hierarchical society such as that of Egypt, the king and the state had to provide order and justice. The pharaoh was the representative or symbol of social, cosmic, and religious order.

The theologians of the House of Life studied and reworked the sacred tradition of what had to be done in an endangered world and how the pharaoh could be protected spiritually. Priests and theologians had collected knowledge about men, gods, and cosmos and had developed models of reality, of how to come to terms with the cosmos. The reality surrounding humanity was conceived of as a process of conflicting powers of order and confusion. It was a process, not—or not so much—a progress. The cosmos, including the history of society and of individuals, was considered, hoped, and finally known to be a perpetuum mobile through life and death. That movement had to be kept going if disturbances and disasters were to be averted. Egyptian theology—the sacred knowledge of gods, men, and the cosmos—was a model of how to do things, to perform rituals, to appease gods and goddesses, and to reassure men so that they could live in peace and harmony in Egypt for thousands of years.

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