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James Henry Breasted

Excerpt

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DEVELOPMENT OF  
RELIGION AND THOUGHT IN  
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## LECTURE I

## THE ORIGINS: NATURE AND THE STATE IN THEIR IMPRESSION ON RELIGION—EARLIEST SYSTEMS

THE recovery of the history of the nearer Orient in the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphic and Babylonian cuneiform brought with it many unexpected revelations, but none more impressive than the length of the development disclosed. In Babylonia, however, the constant influx of foreign population resulted in frequent and violent interruption of the development of civilization. In Egypt, on the other hand, the isolation of the lower Nile valley permitted a development never seriously arrested by permanent immigrations for over three thousand years. We find here an opportunity like that which the zoologist is constantly seeking in what he calls "unbroken series," such as that of the horse developing in several millions of years from a creature little larger than a rabbit to our modern domestic horse. In all the categories of human life: language, arts, government, society, thought, religion—what you please—we may trace a development in Egypt essentially undisturbed by outside forces, for a period far surpassing in length any such development elsewhere preserved to us; and it is a matter of not a little interest to observe what humankind becomes in the course of five thousand years in such an Island of the Blest as Egypt; to follow him from the flint knife and stone hammer in less than two thousand years to the

#### 4 *RELIGION AND THOUGHT IN ANCIENT EGYPT*

copper chisel and the amazing extent and accuracy of the Great Pyramid masonry; from the wattle-hut to the sumptuous palace, gorgeous with glazed tile, rich tapestries, and incrustated with gold, to follow all the golden threads of his many-sided life, as it was interwoven at last into a rich and noble fabric of civilization. In these lectures we are to follow but one of these many threads, as its complicated involutions wind hither and thither throughout the whole fabric.

There is no force in the life of ancient man the influence of which so pervades all his activities as does that of the religious faculty. It is at first but an endeavor in vague and childish fancies to explain and to control the world about him; its fears become his hourly master, its hopes are his constant mentor, its feasts are his calendar, and its outward usages are to a large extent the education and the motive toward the evolution of art, literature, and science. Life not only touches religion at every point, but life, thought, and religion are inextricably interfused in an intricate complex of impressions from without and forces from within. How the world about him and the world within him successively wrought and fashioned the religion of the Egyptian for three thousand years is the theme of these studies.

As among all other early peoples, it was in his natural surroundings that the Egyptian first saw his gods. The trees and springs, the stones and hill-tops, the birds and beasts, were creatures like himself, or possessed of strange and uncanny powers of which he was not master. Nature thus makes the earliest impression upon the religious faculty, the visible world is first explained in terms of religious forces, and the earliest gods are the controlling forces of the material world. A social or political realm,

## THE ORIGINS

5

or a domain of the spirit where the gods shall be supreme, is not yet perceived. Such divinities as these were local, each known only to the dwellers in a given locality.<sup>1</sup>

As the prehistoric principalities, after many centuries of internal conflict, coalesced to form a united state, the first great national organization of men in history (about 3400 B. C.), this imposing fabric of the state made a profound impression upon religion, and the forms of the state began to pass over into the world of the gods.

At the same time the voices within made themselves heard, and moral values were discerned for the first time. Man's organized power without and the power of the moral imperative within were thus both early forces in shaping Egyptian religion. The moral mandate, indeed, was felt earlier in Egypt than anywhere else. With the development of provincial society in the Feudal Age there ensued a ferment of social forces, and the demand for social justice early found expression in the conception of a gracious and paternal kingship, maintaining high ideals of social equity. The world of the gods, continuing in sensitive touch with the political conditions of the nation, at once felt this influence, and through the idealized kingship social justice passed over into the character of the state god, enriching the ethical qualities which in some degree had for probably a thousand years been imputed to him.

Thus far all was national. As the arena of thought and action widened from national limits to a world of imperial scope, when the Egyptian state expanded to embrace contiguous Asia and Africa, the forces of imperial power consistently reacted upon the thought and religion

<sup>1</sup> These remarks are in part drawn from the writer's *History of Egypt*, p. 53.

## 6 RELIGION AND THOUGHT IN ANCIENT EGYPT

of the empire. The national religion was forcibly supplanted by a non-national, universal faith, and for the first time in history monotheism dawned. Unlike the social developments of the Feudal Age, this movement was exclusively political, artificial, and imposed upon the people by official pressure from above. The monotheistic movement also failed for lack of nationalism. The Mediterranean world was not yet ripe for a world-religion. In the reversion to the old national gods, much of the humane content of the monotheistic teaching survived, and may be recognized in ideas which gained wide currency among the people. In this process of popularization, the last great development in Egyptian religion took place (1300–1100 B. C.), a development toward deep personal confidence in the goodness and paternal solicitude of God, resulting in a relation of spiritual communion with him. This earliest known age of personal piety in a deep spiritual sense degenerated under the influence of sacerdotalism into the exaggerated religiosity of Græco-Roman days in Egypt.

Such is the imposing vista of development in the religion and thought of Egypt, down which we may look, surveying as we do a period of three thousand years or more. To sum up: what we shall endeavor to do is to trace the progress of the Egyptian as both the world about him and the world within him made their impression upon his thought and his religion, disclosing to us, one after another, nature, the *national* state, the inner life with its growing sense of moral obligation, the social forces, the *world* state, the personal conviction of the presence and goodness of God, triumphant sacerdotalism, scribal literalism, and resulting decay—in short, all these in succession as felt by the Egyptian with profound effect

*THE ORIGINS*

7

upon his religion and his thought for three thousand years will constitute the survey presented in these lectures.

The fact that a survey of exactly this character has not been undertaken before should lend some interest to the task. The fact that objective study of the great categories mentioned has ranged them chronologically in their effect upon thought and religion in the order above outlined, disclosing a religious development in the main points analogous with that of the Hebrews, though with differences that might have been expected, should also enhance the interest and importance of such a reconstruction. Indeed one of the noticeable facts regarding the religious and intellectual development of the Hebrews has been that the Oriental world in which they moved has heretofore furnished us with no wholly analogous process among kindred peoples.

It will be seen that such a study as we contemplate involves keeping in the main channel and following the broad current, the general drift. It will be impossible, not to say quite undesirable, to undertake an account of all the Egyptian gods, or to study the material appurtenances and outward usages of religion, like the ceremonies and equipment of the cult, which were so elaborately developed in Egypt. Nor shall we follow thought in all its relations to the various incipient sciences, but only those main developments involved in the intimate interrelation between thought and religion.

One characteristic of Egyptian thinking should be borne in mind from the outset: it was always in graphic form. The Egyptian did not possess the terminology for the expression of a system of abstract thought; neither did he develop the capacity to create the necessary terminology as did the Greek. He thought in concrete pict

## 8 *RELIGION AND THOUGHT IN ANCIENT EGYPT*

ures, he moved along tangible material channels, and the material world about him furnished nearly all of the terms which he used. While this is probably ultimately true of all terms in any early language, such terms for the most part remained concrete for the Egyptian. We shall discern the emergence of the earliest abstract term known in the history of thought as moral ideas appear among the men of the Pyramid Age in the first half of the third millennium B. C. Let us not, therefore, expect an equipment of precise abstract terms, which we shall find as lacking as the systems which might require them. We are indeed to watch processes by which a nation like the Greeks might have developed such terms, but as we contemplate the earliest developments in human thinking still traceable in contemporary documents, we must expect the vagueness, the crudities, and the limitations inevitable at so early a stage of human development. As the earliest chapter in the intellectual history of man, its introductory phases are, nevertheless, of more importance than their intrinsic value as thought would otherwise possess, while the climax of the development is vital with human interest and human appeal.

As we examine Egyptian religion in its earliest surviving documents, it is evident that two great phenomena of nature had made the most profound impression upon the Nile-dwellers and that the gods discerned in these two phenomena dominated religious and intellectual development from the earliest times. These are the sun and the Nile. In the Sun-god, Re, Atum, Horus, Khepri, and in the Nile, Osiris, we find the great gods of Egyptian life and thought, who almost from the beginning entered upon a rivalry for the highest place in the religion of Egypt—a rivalry which ceased only with the annihilation of Egypt—



## THE ORIGINS

9

tian religion at the close of the fifth century of the Christian era. He who knows the essentials of the story of this long rivalry, will know the main course of the history of Egyptian religion, not to say one of the most important chapters in the history of the early East.

The all-enveloping glory and power of the Egyptian sun is the most insistent fact in the Nile valley, even at the present day as the modern tourist views him for the first time. The Egyptian saw him in different, doubtless originally local forms. At Edfu he appeared as a falcon, for the lofty flight of this bird, which seemed a very comrade of the sun, had led the early fancy of the Nile peasant to believe that the sun must be such a falcon, taking his daily flight across the heavens, and the sun-disk with the outspread wings of the falcon became the commonest symbol of Egyptian religion. As falcon he bore the name Hor (Horus or Horos), or Harakhte, which means "Horus of the horizon." The latter with three other Horuses formed the four Horuses of the eastern sky, originally, doubtless, four different local Horuses.<sup>1</sup> We find them

<sup>1</sup> These four Horuses are: (1) "Harakhte," (2) "Horus of the Gods," (3) "Horus of the East," and (4) "Horus-shesemti." On their relation to Osiris, see *infra*, p. 156. Three important Utterances of the Pyramid Texts are built up on them: Ut. 325, 563, and 479. They are also inserted into Ut. 504 (§§ 1085–6). See also §1105 and §1206. They probably occur again as curly haired youths in charge of the ferry-boat to the eastern sky in Ut. 520, but in Ut. 522 the four in charge of the ferry-boat are the four genii, the sons of the Osirian Horus, and confusion must be guarded against. On this point see *infra*, p. 157. In Pyr. § 1258 the four Horuses appear with variant names and are perhaps identified with the dead; they are prevented from decaying by Isis and Nephthys. In Pyr. § 1478 also the four Horuses are identified with the dead, who is the son of Re, in a resurrection. Compare also the four children of the Earth-god Geb (Pyr. §§ 1510–11), and especially the four children of Atum who decay not (Pyr. §§ 2057–8), as in Pyr. § 1258.

## 10 RELIGION AND THOUGHT IN ANCIENT EGYPT

in the Pyramid Texts as “these four youths who sit on the east side of the sky, these four youths with curly hair who sit in the shade of the tower of Kati.”<sup>1</sup>

At Heliopolis the Sun-god appeared as an aged man tottering down the west, while elsewhere they saw in him a winged beetle rising in the east as Khepri. Less picturesque fancy discerned the material sun as Re, that is the “sun.” While these were early correlated they at first remained distinct gods for the separate localities where they were worshipped. Survivals of the distinction between the archaic local Sun-gods are still to be found in the Pyramid Texts. Horus early became the son of Re, but in the Pyramid Texts we may find the dead Pharaoh mounting “upon his empty throne between the two great gods” (Re and Horus).<sup>2</sup> They ultimately coalesced, and their identity is quite evident also in the same Pyramid Texts, where we find the compound “Re-Atum” to indicate the identity.<sup>3</sup> The favorite picture of him discloses him sailing across the celestial ocean in the sun-barque, of which there were two, one for the morning and the other for the evening. There were several ancient folk-tales of how he reached the sky when he was still on earth. They prayed that the deceased Pharaoh might reach the sky in the same way: “Give thou to this king Pepi (the Pharaoh) thy two fingers which thou gavest to the maiden, the daughter of the Great God (Re), when the sky was separated from the earth, and the gods ascended to the sky, while thou wast a soul appearing in the bow of thy ship of seven hundred and seventy cubits (length), which the gods of Buto built for thee, which the eastern gods shaped for thee.”<sup>4</sup> This separation of

<sup>1</sup> Pyr. Texts, § 1105.

<sup>2</sup> Pyr. §§ 1694–5.

<sup>3</sup> Pyr. § 1125.

<sup>4</sup> Pyr. §§ 1208–9.