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The large-scale scientific investigation of Egyptian antiquities by Western scholars began as an unintended consequence of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt during which, in 1799, the Rosetta Stone was discovered. The military expedition was accompanied by French scholars, whose reports prompted a wave of enthusiasm that swept across Europe and North America resulting in the Egyptian Revival style in art and architecture. Increasing numbers of tourists visited Egypt, eager to see the marvels being revealed by archaeological excavation. Writers and booksellers responded to this growing interest with publications ranging from technical site reports to tourist guidebooks and from children's histories to theories identifying the pyramids as repositories of esoteric knowledge. This series reissues a wide selection of such books. They reveal the gradual change from the 'tomb-robbing' approach of early excavators to the highly organised and systematic approach of Flinders Petrie, the 'father of Egyptology', and include early accounts of the decipherment of the hieroglyphic script.

Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt

The American archaeologist James H. Breasted (1865–1935) is best remembered for his 1906 four-volume *Records of Egypt*, which contains fresh readings and translations of almost all the ancient Egyptian historical inscriptions available at the time, and remains an important resource. In this 1912 work, originally delivered as lectures, he discusses the significance of the 'Pyramid Texts', preserved on fifth- and sixth-dynasty pyramids at Saqqara, and then recently published in full, to the understanding of ancient Egyptian religious thought. He argues that mortuary practice as revealed by archaeology gives indications of the beliefs of a pre-literate society, but that by the time of the earliest inscriptions the Egyptian belief system was well established. He is particularly interested in the development of a moral sense in the context of the traditional pantheon with its multiple aspects of human/animal divinities, and in the influence of the developing Egyptian empire on its religion.

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James Henry Breasted

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Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt

*Lectures Delivered on the Morse Foundation
at Union Theological Seminary*

JAMES HENRY BREASTED



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RELIGION AND THOUGHT IN
ANCIENT EGYPT

LECTURES DELIVERED ON THE MORSE FOUNDATION
AT UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

BY

JAMES HENRY BREASTED, PH.D.

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TO
ADOLF ERMAN
IN GRATITUDE AND AFFECTION

PREFACE

CONTRARY to the popular and current impression, the most important body of sacred literature in Egypt is not the Book of the Dead, but a much older literature which we now call the "Pyramid Texts." These texts, preserved in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty Pyramids at Sak-kara, form the oldest body of literature surviving from the ancient world and disclose to us the earliest chapter in the intellectual history of man as preserved to modern times. They are to the study of Egyptian language and civilization what the Vedas have been in the study of early East Indian and Aryan culture. Discovered in 1880-81, they were published by Maspero in a pioneer edition which will always remain a great achievement and a landmark in the history of Egyptology. The fact that progress has been made in the publication of such epigraphic work is no reflection upon the devoted labors of the distinguished first editor of the Pyramid Texts. The appearance last year of the exhaustive standard edition of the hieroglyphic text at the hands of Sethe after years of study and arrangement marks a new epoch in the study of earliest Egyptian life and religion. How comparatively inaccessible the Pyramid Texts have been until the appearance of Sethe's edition is best illustrated by the fact that no complete analysis or full account of the Pyramid Texts as a whole has ever appeared in English, much less an English version of them. The great and complicated fabric of life which they reflect to us, the religious and intellectual

forces which have left their traces in them, the intrusion of the Osiris faith and the Osirian editing by the hand of the earliest redactor in literary history—all these and many other fundamental disclosures of this earliest body of literature have hitherto been inaccessible to the English reader, and as far as they are new, also to all.

It was therefore with peculiar pleasure that just after the appearance of Sethe's edition of the Pyramid Texts I received President Francis Brown's very cordial invitation to deliver the Morse Lectures at Union Theological Seminary on some subject in Egyptian life and civilization. While it was obviously desirable at this juncture to choose a subject which would involve some account of the Pyramid Texts, it was equally desirable to assign them their proper place in the development of Egyptian civilization. This latter desideratum led to a rather more ambitious subject than the time available before the delivery of the lectures would permit to treat exhaustively, viz., to trace the development of Egyptian religion in its relation to life and thought, as, for example, it has been done for the Hebrews by modern critical and historical study. In the study of Egyptian religion hitherto the effort has perhaps necessarily been to produce a kind of historical encyclopædia of the subject. Owing to their vast extent, the mere bulk of the materials available, this method of study and presentation has resulted in a very complicated and detailed picture in which the great drift of the development as the successive forces of civilization dominated has not been discernible. There has heretofore been little attempt to correlate with religion the other great categories of life and civilization which shaped it. I do not mean that these relationships have not been noticed in certain epochs, especially where they have been so obvious as

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hardly to be overlooked, but no systematic effort has yet been made to trace from beginning to end the leading categories of life, thought, and civilization as they successively made their mark on religion, or to follow religion from age to age, disclosing especially how it was shaped by these influences, and how it in its turn reacted on society.

I should have been very glad if this initial effort at such a reconstruction might have attempted a more detailed analysis of the basic documents upon which it rests, and if in several places it might have been broadened and extended to include more categories. That surprising group of pamphleteers who made the earliest crusade for social justice and brought about the earliest social regeneration four thousand years ago (Lecture VII) should be further studied in detail in their bearing on the mental and religious attitude of the remarkable age to which they belonged. I am well aware also of the importance and desirability of a full treatment of cult and ritual in such a reconstruction as that here attempted, but I have been obliged to limit the discussion of this subject chiefly to mortuary ritual and observances, trusting that I have not overlooked facts of importance for our purpose discernible in the temple cult. In the space and time at my disposal for this course of lectures it has not been possible to adduce all the material which I had, nor to follow down each attractive vista which frequently opened so temptingly. I have not undertaken the problem of origins in many directions, like that of sacred animals so prominent in Egypt. Indeed Re and Osiris are so largely anthropomorphic that, in dealing as I have chiefly with the Solar and Osirian faiths, it was not necessary. In the age discussed these two highest gods were altogether human and highly spiritualized, though the thought of Re displays oc-

casional relapses, as it were, in the current allusions to the falcon, with which he was so early associated. Another subject passed by is the concept of sacrifice, which I have not discussed at all. There is likewise no systematic discussion of the idea of a god's power, though the material for such a discussion will be found here. I would have been glad to devote a lecture to this subject, especially in its relation to magic as a vague and colossal inexorability to which when invoked even the highest god must bow. Only Amenhotep IV (Ikhnaton) seems to have outgrown it, because Oriental magic is so largely demoniac and Amenhotep IV as a monotheist banished the demons and the host of gods.

It will be seen, then, that no rigid outline of categories has been set up. I have taken those aspects of Egyptian religion and thought in which the development and expansion could be most clearly traced, the endeavor being especially to determine the order and succession of those influences which determine the course and character of religious development. It is of course evident that no such influence works at any time to the exclusion of all the others, but there are epochs when, for example, the influence of the state on religion and religious thought first becomes noticeable and a determining force. The same thing is true of the social forces as distinguished from those of the state organization. This is not an endeavor, then, to trace each category from beginning to end, but to establish the order in which the different influences which created Egyptian religion successively became the determining forces. Beginning shortly after 3000 B. C. the surviving documents are, I think, sufficient to disclose these influences in chronological order as they will be found in the "Epitome of the Development" which follows this

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preface. Under these circumstances little effort to correlate the phenomena adduced with those of other religions has been made. May I remind the reader of technical attainments also, that the lectures were designed for a popular audience and were written accordingly?

Although we are still in the beginning of the study of Egyptian religion, and although I would gladly have carried these researches much further, I believe that the reconstruction here presented will in the main stand, and that the inevitable alterations and differences of opinion resulting from the constant progress in such a field of research will concern chiefly the details. That the general drift of the religious development in Egypt is analogous to that of the Hebrews is a fact of confirmative value not without interest to students of Comparative Religion and of the Old Testament.

I have been careful to make due acknowledgment in the foot-notes of my indebtedness to the labors of other scholars. The obligation of all scholars in this field to the researches of Erman and Maspero is proverbial, and, as we have said, in his new edition of the Pyramid Texts Sethe has raised a notable monument to his exhaustive knowledge of this subject to which every student of civilization is indebted. May I venture to express the hope that this exposition of religion in the making, during a period of three thousand years, may serve not only as a general survey of the development in the higher life of a great people beginning in the earliest age of man which we can discern at the present day, but also to emphasize the truth that the process of religion-making has never ceased and that the same forces which shaped religion in ancient Egypt are still operative in our own midst and continue to mould our own religion to-day?

The reader should note that half brackets indicate some uncertainty in the rendering of all words so enclosed; brackets enclose words wholly restored, and where the half brackets are combined with the brackets the restoration is uncertain. Parentheses enclose explanatory words not in the original, and dots indicate intentional omission in the translation of an original. Quotations from modern authors are so rare in the volume, and so evident when made, that the reader may regard practically all passages in quotation marks as renderings from an original document. All abbreviations will be intelligible except BAR, which designates the author's *Ancient Records of Egypt* (five volumes, Chicago, 1905–07), the Roman indicating the volume, and the Arabic the paragraph.

In conclusion, it is a pleasant duty to express my indebtedness to my friend and one-time pupil, Dr. Caroline Ransom, of the Metropolitan Museum, for her kindness in reading the entire page-proof, while for a similar service, as well as the irksome task of preparing the index, I am under great obligation to the goodness of Dr. Charles R. Gillett, of Union Theological Seminary.

JAMES HENRY BREASTED.

The University of Chicago,
April, 1912.

EPITOME OF THE DEVELOPMENT

NATURE furnishes the earliest gods—The *national* state makes early impression on religion—Its forms pass over into the world of the gods—Their origin and function in nature retire into the background—The gods become active in the sphere of human affairs—They are intellectualized and spiritualized till the human arena becomes their domain—The gods are correlated into a general system—In the conception of death and the hereafter we find a glorious celestial realm reserved exclusively for kings and possibly nobles—Herein, too, we discern the emergence of the moral sense and the inner life in their influence on religion—Recognition of futility of material agencies in the hereafter and resulting scepticism—Appearance of the capacity to contemplate society—Recognition of the moral unworthiness of society and resulting scepticism—The cry for social justice—The social forces make their impression on religion—Resulting democratization of the formerly royal hereafter—Magic invades the realm of morals—The Empire (the *international* state) and political universalism so impress religion that the “world-idea” emerges and monotheism results—Earliest manifestation of personal piety growing out of paternal monotheism and the older social justice—The individual in religion—The age of the psalmist and the sage—Sacerdotalism triumphs, resulting in intellectual stagnation, the inertia of thoughtless acceptance, and the development

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CORRIGENDA

Page 345, footnote, last line, “Ikhnaton,” should read “Tutenkhamon.”

Page 363, line 21, “twenty-fifth century,” should read “twenty-eighth century.”

Page 366, line 8, “which now received its last redaction,” should read “still undergoing further redaction.”