

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07518-3 - Universal History: The Oldest Historical Group of Nations and the Greeks

Leopold von Ranke Edited and translated by George Walter Prothero

Excerpt

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# UNIVERSAL HISTORY.



## CHAPTER I.

### AMON-RA, BAAL, JEHOVAH, AND ANCIENT EGYPT.

IN the dawn of history the popular conceptions of things divine are found to coincide with the tendencies of human life and the spirit of political organisation. They summarise and express those tendencies and that spirit in a form more intelligible to us than any detailed description of circumstances and institutions. The ideal to which humanity aspires is always a divine ideal, and the efforts of mankind, however strong may be the alien influence of physical conditions, are unceasingly directed towards this goal. With these conceptions, therefore, I begin.

In ancient Egypt we meet with three distinct forms in which men have shadowed forth their consciousness of divine things. The first is one, so to speak, aboriginal, arising from and corresponding to the nature of the soil. In all times men have premised and thought themselves justified in assuming an immediate and local influence on the part of their divinities. This form I distinguish by the most general name—the worship of the Egyptians. It corresponded to the foundations of the life and culture of the nation. But the possession of the soil becomes the prize for which other nations contend. Egypt, a rich and self-sufficing region, excited the cupidity of neighbouring races which served other gods. Under the name of the Shepherd-peoples, foreign despots and races ruled Egypt

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for several centuries. These followed the ensigns of another god, who, however, was not peculiar to themselves, but belonged to all the peoples of Western Asia. This was the god Baal, who appears in Egypt under the name Sutech and is held accursed as the evil principle. As might naturally be expected, a deadly struggle broke out between the two religions. The result was that the Egyptian worship not only reinstated itself and expelled the invader, but sought out and vanquished the latter in its own home. But even whilst these two religions were struggling with each other, there arose a third in which the Divine Idea was exalted above nature. This religion Egypt cannot be properly said to have expelled; it emancipated itself by its own power. The steps by which this religion, when it had once made itself independent, obtained the supremacy over all other forms of religious worship, and became one of the fundamental principles both of Islam and of the Christian world, form one of the most important elements in universal history. From the very first this religion developed itself in opposition to the ancient worship of Egypt.

The Egyptian religion has its origin in an epoch which we lack the means of investigating. In inquiring into its meaning and purport, we have no intention of encroaching upon those labours by which modern research endeavours to clear up this obscure subject. Egypt forms the conclusion of an introductory chapter of human history, a period of inconceivable duration, whose most precious legacy consists of the more ancient Egyptian monuments. In this epoch the religion of the country had its beginning, a religion to which, with all its defects, we must assign a world-wide significance.

The cosmic phenomena, by which life on earth is generally conditioned, dominate it nowhere so absolutely as in the mysterious region which is called Egypt. Everything rests upon the fact that the Nile by its inundations has turned the land near its banks in the midst of the desert into a soil capable of cultivation, and by its alluvial deposits has gradually converted the bay into which it originally fell into one of the richest plains in the world. Chemical analysis has shown

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## RELIGION.

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that there is nowhere a more fruitful soil than that formed by the mud of the Nile. These overflows, however, which have not only fertilised the land, but have even partially created it, are limited to fixed seasons of the year. They occur, though not always to the same extent, yet with absolute certitude at the times once for all determined.

The language of ancient Egypt has been supposed to present a distant affinity with the Semitic tongues. But, isolated as they were by nature, it is no wonder if the Egyptians framed a religion exclusively their own, and a political constitution equally peculiar. Both were based upon the physical conditions alluded to above. The inundation which flooded the whole country was but a single event. It was necessary, therefore, that the whole country should be under one government, with power to guide the water into districts which otherwise it might not have reached, and to re-establish the limits of individual property, which were on each occasion effaced. Such a power there was; otherwise the people would have been condemned to simple slavery. Where the ordinary and habitual conditions of agriculture exist, a territorial nobility may be established which, gathered in cities, assumes republican forms. Here, however, where the fixity of property is dependent upon occurrences which affect all without distinction, the prevision and active forethought of a single supreme power are necessarily implied. The deity, whose ordaining hand is to be recognised in the course of the sun, upon which everything depends, and the king, who devises the arrangements for security upon earth, are in idea indissolubly connected. On the monuments, indeed, we see the king presenting to the god emblems representative of the different provinces, each with attributes of an agricultural nature. The gods appear under divergent names, varying with the chief towns and provinces, in which they were worshipped. To the principal of them, however, Ra, Ptah, Amon, the same designations are assigned. They form but one divinity under different names. A hero who wished to see the god Amon met with a refusal. The Divine, it was said, revealed itself only through its works, and under a multiplicity of forms.

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## ANCIENT EGYPT.

God is not, properly speaking, the creator of the world. He did not say, 'Let there be light,' and there was light; he summoned the sun, which accordingly must have been in existence already, and prescribed his course. There are, however, opposing elements which exert themselves to disturb the order introduced into the universe by the deity. The deity is further identified with the Nile, the chief support and basis of life, no less than with the sun itself, and is manifested in the animal world even more immediately than in man. The bull Apis is the living type of the god Osiris, who is regarded especially as the giver of all good.

Man is not considered as an incarnation of deity, although the legend makes him spring from the eye of deity, the sun. He was at first without speech or language; this as well as everything else was taught him by the gods. Religious worship was the principal business of the Egyptian: properly speaking there was nothing profane in the land. There was a numerous priesthood, which everywhere represented the national religion, and was besides in possession of the science and experience by which everything is regulated. Nor is the science of Egypt to be spoken of with contempt. The Egyptians, in this rivalling Babylon, determined the course of the sun in relation to the earth, and divided the year accordingly. Their system was at once so scientific and so practical, that Julius Cæsar adopted their calendar and introduced it within the Roman empire. The rest of the world followed suit, and for seventeen centuries it was in universal use. Among the relics of primeval times the calendar may be regarded as the one which has attained to most conspicuous influence in the world.

With this idea of God is closely associated the monarchical authority. The king is not only established by God, he is himself of the lineage of God, and returns to God when he dies. Never were there rulers who made it more their concern to oppose to the perishable nature of things, imperishable monuments. The traveller who visits the pyramids of Gizeh stands in silent awe as he gazes upon these gigantic monuments of the remotest antiquity in their mysterious

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## MONARCHY.

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solitude. They stand there lonely in time as in space. The appeal of a great general of modern times to his troops, 'Forty centuries look down upon you,' was perhaps after all an inadequate expression of the truth. Innumerable are the centuries which look down from the pyramids upon the races of to-day.

In spite of all the efforts of research, we have, as one of the most distinguished Egyptologists has expressly admitted, not advanced far beyond Herodotus in positive knowledge of ancient Egyptian history. Now, as then, the first founder of the monarchy appears to have been that Menes who, descending from Thinis, founded Memphis, 'the goodly dwelling.' The great dyke which he built to protect the town against the inundations of the Nile afforded at the same time a secure stronghold for the dominion over the Delta. According to a legend preserved elsewhere, Menes succumbed in a struggle with a crocodile while engaged in his task of subduing the hostile powers of nature. Of all the names out of which the three dynasties in immediate succession to Menes have been compiled, nothing memorable is recorded. In the fourth dynasty at length appear the builders of the great pyramids, the noble sepulchral monuments of epochs inconceivably remote.

It is easy to see even at the present time from how great a distance the blocks of stone have been brought to form a flat surface round the monument to be erected. The foundations of the building were cased in granite. The regular entrances were closed by trap doors of granite. The long passages leading to the sepulchral chambers are constructed upon an admirable plan. The chambers themselves were entirely carved out of the rock, with the exception of the roof, which was formed of huge blocks of limestone. In the very centre of the building is found the sarcophagus, which in the two largest pyramids is without any inscription. The name of the builder, however, was given in an inscription on a slab of granite outside. The amount of force employed is as remarkable as the architectural skill displayed throughout. These structures belong to this region, and this alone. Tradition was not agreed whether they were erected in complete

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harmony with the Egyptian gods or in defiance of them ; the first of the builders are called arrogant enemies of the gods, the last builder their servant and the friend of the nation by whom they are worshipped.

Even after this, however, we find only a list of names to which no actions are attributed that could give them any significance. We pass on to the so-called sixth dynasty, which is made significant through the name of Nitocris, or, as it also appears on the monuments, Nitagrit. We are familiar with the heroic legend which Herodotus was told, how that Nitocris was exalted to be queen by the magnates of the land, who had slain her husband ; and how she avenged his murder upon them, inviting those implicated in the crime into a subterranean hall, into which she brought a canal from the river, so that they were destroyed. But this action made life impossible for her : she threw herself into a space inclosed by a wall and filled with red-hot embers, and died.

The murder of a king, a crafty woman's revenge, the destruction of the guilty by the river, the suicide of the queen in red-hot embers, interrupt the first series of Egyptian kings with a story which could have been conceived nowhere else but in the valley of the Nile. I do not venture to fix a time in which these occurrences could be placed.<sup>1</sup> They belong, if I mistake not, to the traditions which have passed as a heritage from the remotest antiquity to later generations. After this five hundred years pass by, about which the monuments are practically silent. An occurrence such as that must have been which forms the historic foundation of the story of Nitocris could not fail to bring the most intricate complications in its train. Yet the unity of Egypt was maintained. The dynasty which appears as the twelfth in the successive series, and which had its capital no longer at Memphis, but at Thebes, extended the territory towards the north and south, formed a well-secured frontier, and left as its legacy a work of

<sup>1</sup> I must not be misunderstood. I yield to none in my admiration for the industry and attention which antiquaries have devoted to the chronological order of the kings ; but it can form no part of my design to follow them into these regions.

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## THE PYRAMIDS.

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hydraulic engineering the aim of which exactly includes and expresses the principle which gives the land of the Nile its unity. Herodotus had seen and admired the Lake Mœris ; the name of the King Mœris, to whom he attributed it, rests upon a misconception. But the work, magnificent in its very ruins, still exists. It is not a natural lake, but an excavated reservoir, with enormous dykes about fifty feet in width, and it was designed, when the Nile rose, to receive the waters which might perhaps have worked mischief in the Delta, and to reserve them for times when the inundation of the country did not attain the height requisite for its fertility. In the water was to be seen the colossus of stone which perpetuated the memory of the constructor, Amenemhat III ; for to regulate the inundations was the principal business of a ruler of Egypt. It must have been in close connection with this duty, if not expressly on account of it, that this prince and the dynasty to which he belonged extended the frontier, in order to obtain in due time information of the rising of the Nile and to transmit it to the plains below,

In the sepulchral chamber of Chnumhotep, one of the provincial governors under this dynasty, we discover the names of the kings. Much instruction may be gained from these sepulchral chambers, and we venture to linger over them for a moment, since they bring before our eyes, at least in individual instances, the condition of the country at a significant period.<sup>1</sup>

In the sepulchral chambers of Beni-Hassan, Chnumhotep appears in the midst of his own possessions, which, from the districts in the east, whose guardianship has been confided to him by the king, extend far into the west. We see him represented in heroic proportions in the midst of the waters, fields, and groves which the inscription assigns to him, while his people are threading the Nile in barks. In the water are to be seen crocodiles, hippopotami, and fish ; on the bank are papyrus plants, on which we can distinguish an ichneumon,

<sup>1</sup> It is scarcely necessary to mention that I avail myself of the excellent monumental work which Lepsius was enabled to execute by the munificence of Frederick William IV. Cf. Lepsius, *Denkmäler*, Bd. iii. Abth. 2, Bd. i. 130.

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at which he is aiming his spear ; above are water-fowl, and a tree upon the branches of which birds are sitting. On the other side we see him holding in his hand a number of water-fowl which he has killed. Still more imposing is he as governor and deputy of the king. He is the subject of a design which has been much discussed, in which neighbouring tribes are represented paying him homage. An Egyptian scribe is handing to the deputy a sheet of papyrus. The visitors have come to offer him cosmetics for the eyes, probably for the adornment of his women. Another Egyptian to whom he has entrusted the charge of entertaining the strangers seems to be introducing them. We see the chieftain splendidly dressed, with eyes downcast, and at his side a noble ibex, behind him his son, also with a young ibex. Behind them appear several personages in rich costume with bow and spear. They belong, as the inscription says, to the tribe Amu. Ibexes such as they are bringing are found to this day in the peninsula of Sinai. In a second section of the procession four tall and carefully dressed women occupy a conspicuous place ; their luxuriant hair falls over their shoulders, and is compressed in front by a band across the forehead. It seems doubtful whether they belong to the family of the strangers or are being offered as a present. Before and behind them are beasts of burden carrying arms, and a lute-player depicted in the act of playing ; last of all, again, a stately warrior armed with bow, quiver, and club. They appear to be allies offering homage to the deputy, who here represents the king. There is nothing to show that they are begging to be admitted as subjects, and it is clear from a single glance that there is no reference to the children of Israel. It is a scene from the most flourishing era of the Egyptian power.

We see clearly how far the art of reproducing life in imitative forms had already progressed in Egypt. The most conspicuous achievements in art are, however, the edifices themselves, which satisfy the eye in their colossal grandeur, and, though not always what we should call classic, yet give constant evidence of technical skill and aptitude of a very



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## PANTHEISM.

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advanced kind. Colossal dimensions are combined with accuracy of form, as in those statues of Memnon to which tradition ascribes a vocal salutation to the rising sun. It is the dawn of artistic development for the whole human race.

In those sepulchral chambers are conspicuous also the symbols of that worship of the gods which, though radically modified by the nature of life in the valley of the Nile, yet still retains a religious import. Amon, even with his ram's head, appears a stately and truly divine form in contrast with those who are offering him their presents, their pitchers in their hands. It is very striking that the distinct divinities which are named beside him have yet the same attributes as his. These attributes imply that they owe their existence only to themselves and are the rulers of the world. The godhead, which, as we have already mentioned, would not reveal itself in its own form, appears also with the head of a falcon, and even in the form of a beetle, and in a thousand other shapes. The animal-worship of the Egyptians rests upon a presumption that the deity is in the habit of assuming certain animal forms. This did indeed degenerate into a brutish idolatry, but it was never forgotten that all was symbolical, and worship was always given to the god concealed under an external form. The Egyptian conceptions may, in spite of instances of degeneracy, always be styled a religion, and form a pantheism embracing the whole phenomenal world and recurring even in man. Life was not ended in death; it was assumed that it returned to its divine source. Another Nileland was imagined beyond the grave, the Egyptian having neither power nor inclination to sever himself from local associations. The soul of the pure is united to the Deity, and yet seems to retain its individuality, and is adored by posterity. Hence the extreme care bestowed upon the sepulchres; in the sarcophagus documents are placed, designed to show that the deceased is worthy of admission to another world.

In the sepulchral chambers some light is thrown on the political constitution of the country. The deputy above mentioned says in praise of King Amenemhat II that he

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has quelled an insurrection, 'taken possession of one town after another, gathered information about each town and its territories as far as the next town, set up their boundary stones and assessed their tributes.' In the same inscription nothing is so strongly emphasised as the hereditary position of the deputies and princes of the districts. 'My mother,' says Chnumhotep, 'succeeded to the possession of an hereditary dignity as daughter of a prince of the district of Memphis. A king, Amenemhat II, led me as a son of a noble house into the heritage of the principedom of my mother's father, according to the greatness of his love of justice.'<sup>1</sup>

Chnumhotep makes special boast of the manner in which he displayed his zeal in reverencing the dead. 'I did good for the dwellings of reverence,' that is, of the dead, 'and their homes, and caused my portraits to be brought into the sacred dwelling, and bestowed on them due sacrifices of pure gifts, and appointed the priest to minister to them, and made him rich with gifts of fields and peasants.' Another business which engaged him was the arrangement of the festivals, in which the union of the celestial and terrestrial phenomena is represented in a calendar. He quotes annual festivals—feast of the new year, feast of the little year, feast of the great year, feast of the end of the year; then monthly festivals—feast of the great burning, feast of the little burning, feast of the five reckoning days of the year, as well as a whole series of other festivals, which represent a sort of Egyptian *fasti* analogous to those of the Romans. The priest who neglects them is to be counted a thing of naught, and his son shall not sit upon his seat.

For some time Egypt stood firm in all its unity and homogeneity. It was rich and fertile, the granary for all neighbouring tribes which then as now infested its borders. These invaders gradually overpowered the defence. The aliens took possession of the Delta, and pushed on further still. They were tribes of Bedouin Arabs. In the sepulchral chambers are found also Phœnician names. It is an

<sup>1</sup> Inscription translated in Brugsch, *Gesch. Aegyptens unter den Pharaonen*, pp. 141, 142, a work abounding in essential additions to our knowledge of the subject.