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The Religion of Ancient Egypt

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The Religion of Ancient Egypt.¹⁾

From Classical Sources.

Paul generally summarizes the world of men about him as Jews and Greeks, the latter being more comprehensive to him than to us in our outlook upon the ancient world. Paul also often uses the Jewish term *τὰ ἔθνη*, the nations, which the Authorized Version renders Gentiles (as Rom. 2, 14; I like Luther's *Heiden* better) and which comprehended all non-Jews. One fundamental observation must be made at the beginning of this essay. The "religions" of the Greeks and Romans as well as of the Egyptians are, if not immoral, at least non-moral; they appeal scarcely at all to the conscience; they endow the mythological figments and fictions called gods and goddesses with no moral excellence, no spiritual and soul-dominating power. A simple parable of Jesus the Christ or His Beatitudes afford more to the soul of man than the Olympian stories from Homer down or the state religion of the Tiber city, which ascribed to Jupiter Capitolinus their world-empire. At the outset of this study we must hold fast to this important fact, that Egypt up to the time of St. Paul had four periods, or eras, of rule, or government. First, the native, or independent. Manetho (at the time of the earlier Ptolemies), an Egyptian priest, assumed some thirty "dynasties" before the Persians came. Some of these, as G. Rawlinson observes,²⁾ must have been contemporary with one another. Thus, too, in their final estimates eminent Egyptologists like Lenormant, Brugsch, Bunsen, Wil-

1) When I wrote my *Testimonium Animae* (1901—1908), I limited my outlook to Greeks and Romans, bringing out with sincerest effort all the spiritual elements traceable in every phase of their culture and religion. I did not touch the most ancient of the historical empires of the pre-Christian world, Egypt. So in a way the present study is a postscript or epilog of my *Testimonium Animae*.

2) *History of Ancient Egypt*, chap. XII.

kinson, differ. The capitals changed: Thebes, Sais, Buastis, and others. The monuments give nothing of the earliest three "dynasties" of Manetho; again, there are none of the kings from the seventh to the tenth dynasties. Manetho has not even given their names. The same is true of the fourteenth dynasty. But surely reliable history of Egypt antedates by a thousand years that of Greece and Rome. The last king of free Egypt is called Amasis by Herodotus. Then, from 528 to 330 B. C., followed the reign of the Persians. The Ptolemies, with Alexandria as their capital, ruled from 323 B. C. to 30 B. C., when Egypt was made a Roman province.

Herodotus describes Egypt under the Persian rule in his second book and Strabo, about 21 A. D., under the Roman; however, their description of Egyptian religion differs but little. Plutarch's essay on Isis and Osiris is that of a Platonic philosopher. We also have notes by Seneca and Tacitus. One may center everything about the Nile, a Nile country, living by the Nile, and so the religion may be fairly called a Nile religion. The sweeping condemnation of pagan morals by St. Paul may be fairly applied to Egypt. I quote from St. Paul, Rom. 1, 22 ff.: "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools [the priests in Egypt credited the myths] and changed the glory of the incorruptible God (*τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ*) into an image made like to corruptible man and to birds and four-footed beasts [the Apis] and creeping things [the Asp]. For this cause God gave them up to vile affections (*πάθη ἀτιμίας*); for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature; and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another: men with men working that which is unseemly and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet." And 2 Pet. 1, 16: "For we have not followed cunningly devised fables (*σεσοφισμένοις μύθοις*) when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses (*ἐπόπται*) of His majesty." The religions of the pagan world were almost altogether concerned with material things and prosperity.³⁾ The Egyptian priests were actually a class, or caste, virtually controlling everything, from birth to mummification, and they lived from the taxes from peasants and tradesmen.

We know now that the Nile comes from the two lakes in Central Africa, the Victoria Nyanza and Albert Nyanza, explored by Speke and by Grant in the earlier sixties of the nineteenth century. From Ethiopia, or Abyssinia, the Nile virtually receives nothing.

Herodotus traversed Egypt from the Mediterranean to Elephantine and Syene, where the sun at noon comes down perpendicularly

3) Hence the ever-growing worship of Fortuna in Rome or near Rome, as at Praeneste ("drawing lots").

and the sun-dial (*gnomon*) is shadeless. The Greek traveler sought information from the priests everywhere. Of course he often expressed his doubt. Continually he strove to find Greek equivalents for the Egyptian gods: Thoth was Hermes; Isis, Athena; Ammon, Zeus, and so on. The article on Egypt in the last *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1929) was written by Dr. H. R. H. Hall, "Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities in the British Museum." I now transcribe from p. 61: "The beliefs of the Egyptians with regard to death were hopelessly confused, like those of most other peoples." "The whole idea of a tomb seems originally to have been due simply to the passionate desire to deny the existence of death. 'O ye living on earth who have life and hate death,' begins the invocation to the living often inscribed on the tomb." "Then there was the idea that the dead lived with the gods, especially those of the underworld, and accompanied Khentamentin (Osiris) on his nightly round of his realm as the dead Sun." Osiris as judge of the dead had forty-two "assessors."

I must not entirely omit Israel in Egypt and Moses, the leader. Many ancient writers simply said the Jews were Egyptians, as did Apion of Alexandria, a Greek scholar in the time of Caligula,⁴ 37-41 A. D. Apion also operated with the chronology of Manetho. Strabo, discussing the Jews, says (p. 760): "For a certain Moses, one of the Egyptian priests holding a portion of Lower Egypt, withdrew thither [to Palestine], displeased with existing conditions, and many moved out with him, honoring the Deity (*τὸ θεῖον*). For he said and taught that the Egyptians were not rightly minded in likening God to wild beasts and cattle, nor the Libyans, and perhaps (761) not even the Greeks in giving human form" (to the gods); and Strabo adds his deeper conviction: "For this alone is God which embraces us all and land and sea, what we call heaven and universe and the nature of existence." And so Moses rejected all cult figures. At this point we may aptly cite Ex. 20, 4: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth." (In certain nomes of Egypt the fish *oxyrhynchus* (sharp snout) and the crocodile were worshiped.) V. 3: "Ye shall not make with Me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you altars of gold." (Cf. chap. 22, 20.) Further on (p. 824) Strabo says that the Jews expose no infants, that they practise circumcision, and that ancestrally they are Egyptians.

Going forward now to the chief subject of this study, I notice that G. Rawlinson in Vol. I begins his survey of the gods with Ammon (Am-n), Kneph (at Elephantine), "the breath of life," Khem, the generative power of nature, worshiped with gross indecency, com-

4) Cf. Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, I, 12.

parable with the Priapus of the Greeks. The he-goat was consecrated to him with unspeakable forms of vileness. (Herodotus, II, 46; Strabo, 802 — consult a Greek lexicon *s. v.* φαλλός.) He was worshiped especially at Chemmi (Panopolis). Phtah was identified by the Greeks with Hephaistos, the god of fire, often represented with the head of a hawk, especially worshiped at Memphis. Iamblichus called him a general Creator.

But before I go on, it may be best to speak of the sacred animals⁵⁾ enumerated by Herodotus (II, 65—76), who keenly disapproved it all. The keepers were called guardians; if women, nurses. In the cult the worshipers shaved themselves very closely. Capital punishment was inflicted on any one who killed a sacred animal knowingly. In the case of the ibis or the hawk, however, even involuntary killing was punished with death. If a cat died, the dwellers in that house shaved their eyebrows. In Bubastis such a cat was solemnly embalmed. The dogs in every town were entombed in sacred chests, or coffins, because they were sacred to the god Anubis, who had a dog's head. Similarly the ichneumons were buried. The hawks and field-mice were conveyed to the town of Buto, the ibis to the town of Thoth (Hermes). The position of the crocodile was peculiar. They were sacred in some nomes, but not in others. At Thebes and Lake Moeris they were especially honored. Some were adorned with gold and precious stones in their ears and were abundantly fed. (Many mummies of embalmed crocodiles have been found in the limestone mountains opposite Monfalut, according to Wilkinson.) In the south, at Elephantine, however, they were killed and eaten by the inhabitants. The hippopotamus was sacred only in the nome of Papremis. The legend of the phoenix has often been told. Herodotus saw it only in painting.

I will here make a digression, mentioning an incident in the life of Vespasian, not long before the destruction of Jerusalem, 70 A. D., related by Tacitus (*Historiae*, IV, 81), when Vespasian was at Alexandria, waiting for the monsoon winds. A blind man knelt down before him, saying that he had been urged by a monition of the god Serapis (Osiris), "whom that nation," says Tacitus, "devoted to superstitions, worshiped above all others," and prayed the emperor to moisten his chin and eyes with spittle. Vespasian, after much consultation with physicians, did what the sufferer requested, and he was healed. Vespasian then began to believe in the Egyptian god. The most famous sanctuary was at the western mouth of the Nile, Kanobos. In Seneca's time the cult of Isis and Osiris had been long established at Rome; "the lamentation of Isis seeking her lost hus-

5) The sacred animals, says Brugsch, had the epithet "the revived deity" and were considered a visible manifestation of the same.

band and the joy of the finding celebrated by the faithful" (Seneca, *Fragm.*, 35, ed. Haase) with long-established rites.⁶⁾

Let us hear Strabo on the Serapeion (the temple of Serapis) at the Canopic Mouth. In his time, that of Augustus and Tiberius (p. 795), it seemed to be neglected, because the new sanctuaries built in honor of Augustus's victory over Antony (31 B. C.) were now in the forefront of governmental attention — "ancient things have been neglected." Rome had no interest in glorifying the ancient dynasties.

The pyramids, temples, obelisks, were really tombs of the Egyptian kings, and when one ponders their tremendous size, the work of millions of men, whom it often took decades to complete it, then one realizes that, apart from the ruling castes of priests and soldiers, the bulk of the Egyptian people were no better than serfs. But there was one mighty monument of the past, described very accurately by both Herodotus (II, 148) and Strabo (811), which we may well incorporate in this study. According to Lepsius only masses of *débris* and a few columns remain. It was not far from Lake Moeris, near the so-called town of the crocodiles, called by the Egyptians Sobek-Shel. It was the labyrinth. The Hera temple of Samos, Herodotus says, or the Artemisium at Ephesus did not reach the stupendous proportions of the Egyptian edifice. This labyrinth, he claimed, even excelled the pyramids. It was a place for national gatherings of priests and priestesses from all the nomes of Egypt, for sacrifices and the giving of verdicts in litigation. There were twelve courts, or halls, with pillars confronting one another, six towards the north and six towards the south, all surrounded by one outer wall, and some of the chambers were underground, some above, 3,000 in all. Herodotus passed through the upper ones. There were caskets there of the kings (mummies) who built the labyrinth, also mummies of sacred crocodiles. The turns and curves were very intricate as one passed into the courts from the chambers. Hieroglyphs were sculptured on the walls. At one corner there was a pyramid of 240 cubits.

In time the worship of Isis and Serapis seems to have outlived the rest, and under the Antonines (about 150 A. D.) Pausanias found such temples in Greece proper. Thus at Corinth, on the way to Acrocorinth, he saw one sanctuary of the "Egyptian" Isis and two of Serapis, one of which was called the "Canopic" Serapis (Pausanias, II, 4. 6.) In Phocis, forty stadia (five miles) from Tithorea, he saw

6) Tacitus, *Annales*, XV, 44: "*Sed per urbem etiam, quo cuncta undique atrocia aut pudenda confluunt celebranturque.*" The same historian on the difference between the Egyptians and Jews, *Hist.*, V, 5: *Judaei mente sola unumque numen intelligunt; profanos, qui deum imago mortalibus materiis in species hominum effingunt; summum illud et aeternum neque imitabile neque interiturum; igitur nulla simulacra urbis suis, nedum templis stant.*

an adyton (forbidden shrine) of Isis, "the most sacred of all that have been built by Greeks for the Egyptian goddess." Only those were permitted to enter the adyton whom Isis herself invited through a dream. There were two great public festivals (*παρηγύσεις*) for Isis at Tithorea, in spring and in autumn. Swine and goats were excluded from the sacrifices. (Paus., X, 32. 14.) The tears of Isis made the Nile rise. It meant death for any one not initiated to enter the adyton.

In the temple of Dionysos at Corinth there was also a cult figure of Isis which only the priests were allowed to unveil. (Pausanias, II, 13. 7.) At Athens there was a temple of Serapis, established by a Ptolemy. Pausanias adds: "The most famous one is at Alexandria, the most ancient at Memphis, which not even the priests may enter before they bury the Apis." (I, 18. 4.) In Corinth the mystic service was performed in a temple built for Isis and Serapis. Demeter was identified with Isis. (II, 34. 10.) Pausanias saw shrines also in Lacedaemon. (III, 14. 5; 22, 9.)

I now come to the most important part of my present study, viz., the long essay by Plutarch of Chaeronea. (He lived about 50—120 A. D., first at home, went to Rome in middle life, and was greatly honored by Emperor Hadrian.) This is the essay entitled *De Iside et Osiride*. We must not forget that Plutarch was a Platonist and always endeavored to interpret a higher, spiritual meaning into the paganism by which he was surrounded.

This monograph is dedicated to a lady Klea, who was a believer in Isis. It is an elaborate essay of eighty chapters and might be entitled "The Theology of a Greek Thinker after Christ."

God (*τὸ θεῖον*) is not rich through silver and gold nor strong through thunder and lightning, but through knowledge and insight (ch. 1). Typhon is the enemy of true knowledge. The Isiac believers are buried with a special garment (3). The priests wore linen and shaved closely because the pure must not be touched by the impure, something that woolen garments involve. Flax grows from the immortal earth (4). The priests must not eat mutton, but must even avoid salt during the time when they serve. The Apis must not drink Nile water because it fattens (5). No wine is to be used in the worship of the sun (Ra) when the sun looks down on his priests. The kings drank a little, being priests, from Psammetichus on (6). The priests never touch fish. On the first day of the eighth month all the Egyptians eat fried fish before their homes. The priests burn fishes, but do not eat them for a mystic reason of their secret religion (7). The onion the priests do not eat because it ripens in the declining moon, nor do they eat pork because Typhon at full moon discovered the body of Osiris in a casket (8). The kings were appointed or chosen from the ranks of priests or soldiers. If from the latter, the

new king at once was ranged with the priests and their philosophy, which was very obscure and full of mystery, as they themselves signified by placing sphinxes before the temples. The sanctuary of Isis (Demeter) at Sais once had this inscription: "I am all that has been and is and will be, and no mortal has lifted my robe." There were various explanations of the name Amun, or Ammon, a concealed divinity, Plutarch suggests (9). Among Greek visitors to Egypt, Plutarch mentions Solon, Thales, Plato, and especially Pythagoras, who was fond of giving a mystic garb to his doctrines; often his sayings resemble Egyptian hieroglyphics. So the monad is called Apollo, the dyad (2) Artemis, the hebdomad (7) Athena, the first cube Poseidon. At Thebes there were figures of judges without hands, signifying that Justice cannot be bribed. The beetle (*scarabaeus*) on seal-rings of warriors signified bravery; they held that there were no female *scarabaei* (10). When Egypt represented Hermes as a dog, they meant that Hermes was watchful and sleepless, determining friend and foe by insight. So the priest called the Persian King Ochus (*Artaxerxes*, III, 1) Knife because he slew the Apis and feasted on his meat (11). The five days added to the 360 of the twelve months were connected with the following: On the first one of the five Osiris was born, on the second Arueris (Apollo), on the third Typhon, tearing through the womb, on the fourth Isis, on the fifth Nephthys (Aphrodite). The third was held to be an evil day, — no courts, etc., — a *dies nefastus*. Osiris wedded Isis (12). Now, Osiris was king of Egypt and brought civilization, laws, crops, and religion. The Greeks identified him with Dionysos. Typhon then made a plot, aided by seventy-two fellow-conspirators, and by Aso, queen of Ethiopia. He built a fine chest (*λάραξ*), measured to fit the size of Osiris, induced Osiris to lie down in it, fastened down the lid with strong bolts, and poured molten lead into it, put the chest on the Nile, where by the Tanitic mouth it was carried into the sea — which mouth has since become odious to the Egyptians, an abomination — on the 17th day of the month Athyr, when the sun passes through the Scorpion, when Osiris had ruled or lived, twenty-eight years (13). Isis now cut off one of her locks and assumed a garb of mourning, where now is the town Kopto. In her wanderings she sought the chest. The god Anubis guarded her; hence the divine honor shown to dogs. Ultimately Isis became wet nurse to a queen's infant near Byblos (15). But to shorten the story: the chest was found, but Typhon broke the body of Osiris into fourteen parts. Isis sailed in a boat of papyrus, seeking them; hence the many burial-places of Osiris in Egypt. But Isis failed to find the genitals of Osiris, and so she made a wooden phallos (18). Then Horos, the son of Osiris and Isis, brought Osiris up from Hades. Then followed a desperate contest between Horos and the wicked Typhon, which

Horos won. But Isis let Typhon go, and Horos, angry, tore the royal adornment from his mother's head. But Hermes put a cow's head in the place. Horos was declared a legitimate son by the gods, and he defeated Typhon in two further contests (19).

These, Plutarch says, are the main points of the contest—many disgusting features, he admits. Typhon is satanic, but he paid the penalty. The patience and silence of Isis in her long sufferings should be a consolation to all sufferers. She and Osiris ruled the departed spirits, as do Pluto and Persephone in the Greek legends (27). (Plutarch did not know the etymology of Serapis; Rawlinson gives it as Asir-Apis.) We now come nearer to the substance of the story. Greek thinkers suggested this solution: Osiris was the Nile, Isis was the land of Egypt, the soil, she uniting with the Nile. Typhon was the sea, into which the Nile flows, thus disappearing. The soil of Egypt, receiving the rising Nile, is fertilized by the stream (32). We need not dwell on Greek parallels, of which Plutarch cites many. Hot winds from Ethiopia favor Typhon; they cause drought (39).—In a way Plutarch was a pantheist; he says: "The genesis and composition of this world is from opposite forces, not indeed of equal strength; but power is with the better. Still it is impossible that the evil element should perish utterly, since it abounds in the body and also in the soul of the universe, always maintaining a contest against the better. Now, in the soul, mind, and reason the leader and master of all the best is Osiris, and on the earth, in wind and water, in heaven and the stars, that which is arranged and established and wholesome in seasons and temperatures and periods is an effluence and apparent image of Osiris. But Typhon is the passionate and irrational element of the body, the element bringing on diseases" (49). They call on sun and moon in their hymns of Osiris; they call on him who is concealed in the arms of the sun. At the winter solstice they carry the cow around the temple; the change of the sun (after December 21) is called the searching for Osiris. Some identify Osiris with the sun and Isis with the moon; the images of Isis have the horns of the crescent. In chap. 53 Plutarch resumes his Platonic interpretation, which we may fairly put aside as well as various etymologies, quite impossible on the face of them. Everything, we repeat, revolved around the Nile, Buto, Memphis; and still Plutarch rejects the purely physical explanations (66) and calls this material view superstition (67). Then the festivals—where the average participants, while proclaiming silence, utter and think of the gods the most evil-sounding things (*τὰ δυσσημότατα*) (68). In a way Plutarch himself condemns the actual religiosity of the paganism around him. He says people call the processes of growth and harvests directly gods instead of phenomena of nature. He also quotes Xenophanes of Kolophon, who said that the Egyptians, if they believed in gods,

should not mourn them, and if they mourned them, they should not consider them gods; and it was ridiculous also to pray while mourning that the crops should again produce and complete themselves in order that they might again be consumed and mourned for (70). In the next chapter Plutarch touches upon a matter for which Christian scholars must be grateful to him; he condemns it that the Greeks call the bronzen, painted, and marble works and cult figures (*dyálματα*) which they worshiped gods and that they dare to say that "Lachares stripped Athena," that "Dionysos cut off the golden locks of Apollo," and that Jupiter Capitolinus was burned down and destroyed in the civil war." Without being aware of it, they bring in and accept wrong opinions associated with the names, and that, says Plutarch, is what happened to the Egyptians in connection with the beasts they venerated. "The average Egyptians cultivate the animals themselves and treat them as gods." The moral results and influences on the minds of the Egyptians must be bad, the keener thinkers among them becoming atheists (71). He goes on analyzing and condemning the worship of the animals. He was not quite Platonic in this condemnation. His idea is that, when the souls of men have left the bodies, "they witness, without satiety the beauty not utterable for men" (78).

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Streitet die Verstorung Pharaos nicht mit Gottes Gerechtigkeit und Gnade?

Nur und deutlich hat Gott in seinem Wort geoffenbart, daß sein guter gnädiger Heilswille alle Menschen umfaßt; daß Gott keinen Menschen von vornherein zur ewigen Verdammnis bestimmt und aussersehen habe. Wir weisen nur hin auf die bekannten Stellen 1 Tim. 2, 4: „Gott will, daß allen Menschen geholfen werde und zur Erkenntnis der Wahrheit kommen“; 2 Petr. 3, 9: „Gott will nicht, daß jemand verloren werde, sondern daß sich jedermann zur Buße lehre.“ Ehe man die Lehre von einem ewigen Verwerfungsdekret als biblisch bezeichnen könnte, müßte in diesen Schriftstellen das gerade Gegenteil gelehrt werden. Gott müßte gesagt haben: Gott will nicht, daß allen Menschen geholfen werde. Petrus müßte geschrieben haben: Gott will, daß jemand verloren werde und daß nicht jedermann sich zur Buße lehre. Solange aber diese Sprüche in Gottes Wort stehen, ja solange der Eid gilt, den Gott schon im Alten Testament geschworen hat: „So wahr als ich lebe, spricht der Herr Herr, ich habe keinen Gefallen am Tode des Gottlosen, sondern daß sich der Gottlose bekehre von seinem Wesen und lebe“, Hesek. 33, 11, so lange ist auch die Lehre, daß Gott von Ewigkeit beschlossen habe, gewisse Menschen zu verwerfen, und daß dieses Verwerfungsdekret die Ursache der Verstorung irgendeines Men-