

THE RELIGION OF EGYPT.*

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WE know more about the religion of the early Egyptians than about any other ancient religion. Its development can be traced back three or four thousand years; we can read its sacred texts, mythical narratives, hymns, rituals, and the Book of the Dead in the original, and we can ascertain its various ideas as to the nature of the divine powers and of future life. A great number of monuments have preserved for our inspection the pictures of divinities and representations of liturgic scenes, while numerous inscriptions and papyri enlighten us in regard to the sacerdotal organization of the principal temples. It would seem that the enormous quantity of documents of all kinds that have been deciphered in the course of nearly an entire century should have dispelled every uncertainty about the creed of ancient Egypt, and should have furnished exact information with regard to the sources and original character of the worship which the Greeks and the Romans borrowed from the subjects of the Ptolemies.

And yet, this is not the case. While of the four great Oriental religions which were transplanted into the Occident, the religion of Isis and Serapis is the one whose relation to the ancient belief of the mother country we can establish with greatest accuracy, we know very little of its first form and of its nature before the imperial period, when it was held in high esteem.

One fact, however, appears to be certain. The Egyptian worship that spread over the Greco-Roman world came from the Serapeum founded at Alexandria by Ptolemy Soter, somewhat in the manner of Judaism that emanated from the temple of Jerusalem. But the earliest history of that famous sanctuary is surrounded by such a thick growth of pious legends, that the most sagacious investigators have lost their way in it. Was Serapis of native origin,

* Translated from the French by A. M. Thielen.

or was he imported from Sinope or Seleucia, or even from Babylon? Each of these opinions has found supporters very recently. Is his name derived from that of the Egyptian god Osiris-Apis, or from that of the Chaldean deity Sar-Apsi? *Grammatici certant*.¹

Whichever solution we may adopt, one fact remains, namely, that Serapis and Osiris were either immediately identified or else were identical from the beginning. The divinity whose worship was started at Alexandria by Ptolemy was the god that ruled the dead and shared his immortality with them. He was fundamentally an Egyptian god, and the most popular of the deities of the Nile. Herodotus says that Isis and Osiris were revered by every inhabitant of the country, and their traditional holidays involved secret ceremonies whose sacred meaning the Greek writer dared not reveal.²

Recognizing their Osiris in Serapis, the Egyptians readily accepted the new cult. There was a tradition that a new dynasty should introduce a new god or give a sort of preeminence to the god of its own district. From time immemorial politics had changed the government of heaven when changing that of earth. Under the Ptolemies the Serapis of Alexandria naturally became one of the principal divinities of the country, just as the Ammon of Thebes had been the chief of the celestial hierarchy under the Pharaohs of that city, or as, under the sovereigns from Sais, the local Neith had the primacy. At the time of the Antonines there were forty-two Serapeums in Egypt.³

But the purpose of the Ptolemies was not to add one more Egyptian god to the countless number already worshiped by their subjects. They wanted this god to unite in one common worship the two races inhabiting the kingdom, and thus to further a complete fusion. The Greeks were obliged to worship him side by side with the natives. It was a clever political idea to institute a Hellenized Egyptian religion at Alexandria. A tradition mentioned by Plutarch⁴ has it that Manetho, a priest from Heliopolis, a man of advanced ideas, together with Timotheus, a Eumolpide from Eleusis, thought out the character that would best suit the newcomer. The result was that the composite religion founded by the Lagides became a combination of the old creed of the Pharaohs and the Greek mysteries.

¹ Cf. Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire des Lagides*, I, p. 102.

² Herodotus, II, 42, 171.

³ Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, ed. Parthey, p. 216.

⁴ *Idem*, 28.

First of all, the liturgic language was no longer the native idiom but Greek. This was a radical change. The philosopher Demetrius of Phalerum, who had been cured of blindness by Serapis, composed poems in honor of the god that were still sung under the Cæsars several centuries later.⁵ We can easily imagine that the poets, who lived on the bounty of the Ptolemies, vied with each other in their efforts to celebrate their benefactors' god, and the old rituals that were translated from the Egyptian were also enriched with edifying bits of original inspiration. A hymn to Isis, found on a marble monument in the island of Andros,⁶ gives us some idea of these sacred compositions, although it is of more recent date.

In the second place, the artists replaced the old hieratic idols by more attractive images and gave them the beauty of the immortals. It is not known who created the figure of Isis draped in a linen gown with a fringed cloak fastened over the breast whose sweet, meditative, graciously maternal face is a combination of the ideals imagined for Hera and Aphrodite. But we know the sculptor of the first statue of Serapis that stood in the great sanctuary of Alexandria until the end of paganism. This statue, the prototype of all the copies that have been preserved, is a colossal work of art made of precious materials by a famous Athenian sculptor named Bryaxis, a contemporary of Scopas. It was one of the last divine creations of Hellenic genius. The majestic head, with its somber and yet benevolent expression, with its abundance of hair, and with a crown in the shape of a bushel, bespoke the double character of a god ruling at the same time both the fertile earth and the dismal realm of the dead.⁷

As we see, the Ptolemies had given their new religion a literary and artistic shape that was capable of attracting the most refined and cultured minds. But the adaptation to the Hellenic feeling and thinking was not exclusively external. Osiris, the god whose worship was thus renewed, was more adapted than any other to lend his authority to the formation of a syncretic faith. At a very early period, in fact before the time of Herodotus, Osiris had been identified with Dionysus, and Isis with Demeter. M. Foucart has endeavored to prove in an ingenious essay that this assimilation was not arbitrary, that Osiris and Isis came into Crete and Attica during the prehistoric period, and that they were mistaken for

⁵ Cf. Diogenes Laertius, V, 5, § 76.

⁶ Kaibel, *Epigr.*, 1028 = Abel, *Orphica*, p. 295.

⁷ Amelung, "Le Serapis de Bryaxis," *Revue archéol.*, II (1903), p. 178.

Dionysus and Demeter⁸ by the people of those regions. Without going back to those remote ages, we shall merely say with him that the mysteries of Dionysus were connected with those of Osiris by far-reaching affinities, not simply by superficial and fortuitous resemblances. Each commemorated the history of a god governing both vegetation and the underworld at the same time, who was put to death and torn to pieces by an enemy, and whose scattered limbs were collected by a goddess, after which he was miraculously revived. The Greeks must have been very willing to adopt a worship in which they found their own divinities and their own myths again with something more poignant and more magnificent added. It is a very remarkable fact that of all the many deities worshiped by the Egyptian districts those of the immediate neighborhood or if you like, the cycle of Osiris, his wife Isis, their son Harpocrates and their faithful servant Anubis, were the only ones that were adopted by the Hellenic populations. All other heavenly or infernal spirits worshiped by the Egyptians remained strangers to Greece.⁹

In the Greco-Latin literature we notice two opposing attitudes toward the Egyptian religion. It was regarded as the highest and the lowest of religions at the same time, and as a matter of fact there was an abyss between the always ardent popular beliefs and the enlightened faith of the official priests. The Greeks and Romans gazed with admiration upon the splendor of the temples and ceremonial, upon the fabulous antiquity of the sacred traditions and upon the erudition of a clergy possessed of a wisdom that had been revealed by divinity. In becoming the disciples of that clergy, they imagined they were drinking from the pure fountain whence their own myths had sprung. They were overawed by the pretensions of a clergy that prided itself on a past in which it kept on living, and they strongly felt the attraction of a marvelous country where everything was mysterious, from the Nile that had created it to the hieroglyphics engraved upon the walls of its gigantic edifices.¹⁰ At the same time they were shocked by the coarseness of its fetichism and by the absurdity of its superstitions. Above all they felt an unconquerable repulsion at the worship of animals and plants, which had always been the most striking feature of the vulgar Egyptian religion and which, like all other archaic devotions,

⁸ P. Foucart, "Le culte de Dionysos en Attique," *Mém. Acad. des Inscr.*, XXXVII (1904).

⁹ With the exception of Zeus Ammonius who was but half Egyptian.

¹⁰ Friedländer, *Sittengesch.*, II, 144 f.

seems to have been practised with renewed fervor after the accession of the Sais dynasty. The comic writers and the satirists never tired of scoffing at the adorers of the cat, the crocodile, the leek and the onion. Juvenal says ironically: "O holy people, whose very kitchen-gardens produce gods."¹¹ In a general way, this strange people, entirely separated from the remainder of the world, were regarded with about the same kind of feeling that Europeans entertained toward the Chinese for a long time.

A purely Egyptian worship would not have been acceptable to the Greco-Latin world. The main merit of the mixed creation of the political genius of the Ptolemies consisted in the rejection or modification of everything repugnant or monstrous like the phallophories of Abydos, and in the retention of none but stirring or attractive elements. It was the most civilized of all barbarian religions; it retained enough of the exotic element to arouse the curiosity of the Greeks, but not enough to offend their delicate sense of proportion, and its success was remarkable.

It was adopted wherever the authority or the prestige of the Lagides was felt, and wherever the relations of Alexandria, the great commercial metropolis, extended. The Lagides induced the rulers and the nations with whom they concluded alliances to accept it. King Nicocreon introduced it into Cyprus after having consulted the oracle of the Serapeum,¹² and Agathocles introduced it into Sicily at the time of his marriage with the daughter-in-law of Ptolemy I (298).¹³ At Antioch, Seleucus Callinicus built a sanctuary for a statue of Isis sent to him from Memphis by Ptolemy Euergetes.¹⁴ In token of his friendship Ptolemy Soter introduced his god Serapis into Athens, where the latter had a temple at the foot of the Acropolis¹⁵ ever after, and Arsinoë, his mother or wife, founded another at Halicarnassus, about the year 307.¹⁶ In this manner the political activity of the Egyptian dynasty was directed toward having the divinities, whose glory was in a certain measure connected with that of their house, recognized everywhere. Through Apuleius we know, that under the empire the priests of Isis mentioned the ruling sovereign first of all in their prayers.¹⁷

¹¹ Juvenal, XV, 10.

¹² Macrobius, *Sat.*, I, § 16.

¹³ Holm, *Gesch. Siziliens*, I, p. 81.

¹⁴ Libanius, *Or.*, XI, 114.

¹⁵ Pausan, I, 18, 4.

¹⁶ Dittenberger, *Or. gr. inscr. sel.*, No. 16.

¹⁷ Apuleius, *Metam.*, XI, 17.

And this was simply an imitation of the grateful devotion which their predecessors had felt toward the Ptolemies.

Protected by the Egyptian squadrons, sailors and merchants propagated the worship of Isis, the goddess of navigators, simultaneously on the coasts of Syria, Asia Minor and Greece, in the islands of the Archipelago,¹⁸ and as far as the Hellespont and Thrace.¹⁹ At Delos, where the inscriptions enable us to study this worship somewhat in detail, it was not merely practised by strangers, but the very sacerdotal functions were performed by members of the Athenian aristocracy. A number of funeral bas-reliefs, in which the deified dead wears the *calathos* of Serapis on his head, prove the popularity of the belief in future life propagated by these mysteries. According to the Egyptian faith he was identified with the god of the dead.²⁰

Even after the splendor of the court of Alexandria had faded and vanished; even after the wars against Mithridates and the growth of piracy had ruined the traffic of the Ægean Sea, the Alexandrian worship was too deeply rooted in the soil of Greece to perish, although it did become endangered in certain seaports, like Delos. Of all the gods of the Orient, Isis and Serapis were the only ones that retained a place among the great divinities of the Hellenic world until the end of paganism.²¹

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It was this syncretic religion that came to Rome after having enjoyed popularity in the eastern Mediterranean. Sicily and the south of Italy were more than half Hellenized, and the Ptolemies had diplomatic relations with these countries, just as the merchants of Alexandria had commercial relations with them. For this reason the worship of Isis spread as rapidly in those regions as on the coasts of Ionia or in the Cyclades.²² It was introduced into Syracuse and Catania during the earliest years of the third century by Agathocles. The Serapeum of Pozzuoli, at that time the busiest seaport of Campania, was mentioned in a city ordinance of the year 105 B. C.²³ About the same time an Iseum was founded at Pompeii, where the decorative frescos attest to this day the power of expansion possessed by the Alexandrian culture.

¹⁸ *Revue archéologique*, I (1905), p. 341.

¹⁹ Ruhl, "De Sarapide et Iside," *Graccia cultis*, 1906.

²⁰ Ravaissou, *Gazette archéologique*, I, pp. 55 f.

²¹ Harnack, *Ausbreitung des Christentums*, II, p. 274.

²² Diels, *Vorsokratiker*, II, p. 480.

²³ CIL, X, 1781, I, 15-16.

After its adoption by the southern part of the Italian peninsula, this religion was bound to penetrate rapidly to Rome. Ever since the second century before our era, it could not help but find adepts in the chequered multitude of slaves and freedmen. Under the Antonines the college of the *Pastophores* recalled that it had been founded in the time of Sulla.²⁴ In vain did the authorities try to check the invasion of the Alexandrian gods. Five different times, in 59, 58, 53, 50 and 48 B. C., the senate ordered their altars and statues torn down,²⁵ but these violent measures did not stop the diffusion of the new beliefs. The Egyptian mysteries were the first example at Rome of an essentially popular religious movement that was triumphant over the combined resistance of the public authorities and the official clergy.

Why was this Egyptian worship the only one of all Oriental religions to suffer repeated persecutions? There were two motives, one religious and one political.

In the first place, this cult was said to exercise a corrupting influence pervasive of piety. Its morals were loose, and the mystery surrounding it excited the worst suspicions. Moreover, it appealed violently to the emotions and senses. All these factors offended the grave decency that a Roman was wont to maintain in the presence of the gods. The innovators had every defender of the *mos maiorum* for an adversary.

In the second place, this religion had been founded, supported and propagated by the Ptolemies; it came from a country that was almost always hostile to Italy during the last period of the Republic;²⁶ it issued from Alexandria, whose superiority Rome felt and feared. Its secret societies, made up chiefly of people of the lower classes, might easily become clubs of agitators and haunts of spies. All these motives for suspicion and hatred were undoubtedly more potent in exciting persecution than the purely theological reasons, and persecution was stopped or renewed according to the vicissitudes of general politics.

As we have stated, the chapels consecrated to Isis were demolished in the year 48 B. C. After Cæsar's death, the triumvirs decided in 43 B. C. to erect a temple in her honor out of the public funds, undoubtedly to gain the favor of the masses. This action would have implied official recognition, but the project appears never to have been executed. If Antony had succeeded at Actium,

²⁴ Apuleius, *Metam.*, XI, 30.

²⁵ Seeck, *Hermes*, XLIII (1908), p. 642.

²⁶ Manicheism suffered persecution for similar reasons later.

Isis and Serapis would have entered Rome in triumph, but they were vanquished with Cleopatra; and when Augustus had become the master of the empire, he professed a deep aversion for the gods of his former enemies. Moreover, he could not have suffered the intrusion of the Egyptian clergy into the Roman sacerdotal class, whose guardian, restorer and chief he was. In 28 B. C. an ordinance was issued forbidding the erecting of altars to the Alexandrian divinities inside the sacred enclosure of the *pomerium*, and seven years later Agrippa extended this prohibitive regulation to a radius of a thousand paces around the city. Tiberius acted on the same principle and in 19 A. D. instituted the bloodiest persecution against the priests of Isis that they ever suffered, in consequence of a scandalous affair in which a matron, a noble and some priests of Isis were implicated.

All these police measures, however, were strangely ineffectual. The Egyptian worship was excluded from Rome and her immediate neighborhood in theory if not in fact, but the rest of the world remained open to its propaganda.²⁷

With the beginning of the empire it slowly invaded the center and the north of Italy and spread into the provinces. Merchants, sailors, slaves, artisans, Egyptian men of letters, even the discharged soldiers of the three legions cantoned in the valley of the Nile contributed to its diffusion. It entered Africa by way of Carthage, and the Danubian countries through the great emporium of Aquileia. The new province of Gaul was invaded through the valley of the Rhone. At that period many Oriental emigrants went to seek their fortunes in these new countries. Intimate relations existed between the cities of Arles and Alexandria, and we know that a colony of Egyptian Greeks, established at Nimes by Augustus, took the gods of their native country thither.²⁸ At the beginning of our era there set in that great movement of conversion that soon established the worship of Isis and Serapis from the outskirts of the Sahara to the vallum of Brittany, and from the mountains of Asturias to the mouths of the Danube.

The resistance still offered by the central power could not last much longer. It was impossible to dam in this overflowing stream whose thundering waves struck the shaking walls of the *pomerium* from every side. The prestige of Alexandria seemed invincible. At that period the city was more beautiful, more learned, and better policed than Rome. She was the model capital, a standard to

²⁷ Cf. Drexler in Roscher, *Lexikon*, s. v. "Isis," II, col. 409 f.

²⁸ Hirschfeld, *CIL*, XII, p. 382.

which the Latins strove to rise. They translated the works of the scholars of Alexandria, imitated her authors, invited her artists and copied her institutions. It is plain that they had also to undergo the ascendancy of her religion. As a matter of fact, her fervent believers maintained her sanctuaries, despite the law, on the very Capitol. Under Cæsar, Alexandrian astronomers had reformed the calendar of the pontiffs, and Alexandrian priests soon marked the dates of Isis holidays upon it.

The decisive step was taken soon after the death of Tiberius. Caligula erected the great temple of Isis Campensis on the Campus Martius probably in the year 38.²⁹ In order to spare the sacerdotal susceptibilities, he founded it outside of the sacred enclosure of the city of Servius. Later Domitian made one of Rome's most splendid monuments of that temple. From that time Isis and Serapis enjoyed the favor of every imperial dynasty, the Flavians as well as the Antonines and the Severi. About the year 215 Caracalla built an Isis temple, even more magnificent than that of Domitian, on the Quirinal, in the heart of the city, and perhaps another one on the Coelian. As the apologist, Minucius Felix, states, the Egyptian gods had become entirely Roman.³⁰

The climax of their power seems to have been reached at the beginning of the third century; later on the popular vogue and official support went to other divinities, like the Syrian Baals and the Persian Mithras. The progress of Christianity also deprived them of their power, which was, however, still considerable until the end of the ancient world. The Isis processions that marched the streets of Rome were described by an eye witness as late as the year 394,³¹ but in 391 the patriarch Theophilus had consigned the Serapeum of Alexandria to the flames, having himself struck the first blow with an ax against the colossal statue of the god that had so long been the object of a superstitious veneration. Thus the prelate destroyed the "very head of idolatry," as Rufinus put it.³²

As a matter of fact, idolatry received its death blow. The worship of the gods of the Ptolemies died out completely between the reigns of Theodosius and Justinian³³ and in accordance with the sad prophecy of Hermes Trismegistus³⁴ Egypt, Egypt herself,

²⁹ Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, Munich, 1902, pp. 71 f.; 289 f.

³⁰ Minucius Félix, *Octav.*, 22, 2.

³¹ *Rev. his. litt. relig.*, VIII (1903), p. 422, n. 1.

³² Rufinus, II, 24.

³³ Harnack, *Ausbr. des Christent.*, II, pp. 147 f.

³⁴ Ps.-Apul., *Asclepius*, 34.

lost her divinities and became a land of the dead. Of her religions nothing remained but fables that were no longer believed, and the only thing that reminded the barbarians who came to inhabit the country of its former piety, were words engraved on stone.

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This rapid sketch of the history of Isis and Serapis shows that these divinities were worshiped in the Latin world for more than five centuries. The task of pointing out the transformations of the cult during that long period, and the local differences there may have been in the various provinces, is reserved for future researches. These will undoubtedly find that the Alexandrian worship did not become Latinized under the empire, but that its Oriental character became more and more pronounced. When Domitian restored the Iseum of the Campus Martius and that of Beneventum, he transferred from the valley of the Nile sphinxes, cynocephali and obelisks of black or pink granite bearing borders of hieroglyphics of Amasis, Nectanebus or even Rameses II. On other obelisks that were erected in the propyleums even the inscriptions of the emperors were written in hieroglyphics.³⁵ Half a century later that true dilettante, Hadrian, caused the luxuries of Canopus to be reproduced, along with the vale of Tempe, in his immense villa at Tibur, to enable him to celebrate his voluptuous feasts under the friendly eyes of Serapis. He extolled the merits of the deified Antinous in inscriptions couched in the ancient language of the Pharaohs, and set the fashion of statues hewn out of black basalt in the Egyptian style.³⁶ The amateurs of that period affected to prefer the hieratic rigidity of the barbarian idols to the elegant freedom of Alexandrian art. Those esthetic manifestations probably corresponded to religious prejudices, and the Latin worship always endeavored to imitate the art of temples in the Nile valley more closely than did the Greek. This evolution was in conformity with all the tendencies of the imperial period.

By what secret virtue did the Egyptian religion exercise this irresistible influence over the Roman world? What new elements did those priests, who made proselytes in every province, give the Roman world? Did the success of their preaching mean progress or retrogression from the standard of the ancient Roman faith? These are complex and delicate questions that would require minute analysis and cautious treatment with a constant and exact observation of shades. I am compelled to limit myself to a rapid sketch,

³⁵ Cf. *Notizie degli scavi di ant.*, 1904, pp. 107 f.

³⁶ Gregorovius, *Gesch. des Kaisers Hadrian*, pp. 222 f.

which, I fear, will appear rather dry and arbitrary, like every generalization.

The particular doctrines of the mysteries of Isis and Serapis in regard to the nature and power of the gods were not, or were but incidentally, the reasons for the triumph of these mysteries. It has been said that the Egyptian theology always remained in a "fluid state,"³⁷ or better in a state of chaos. It consisted of an amalgamation of disparate legends, of an aggregate of particular cults, as Egypt herself was an aggregate of a number of districts. This religion never formulated a coherent system of generally accepted dogmas. It permitted the coexistence of conflicting conceptions and traditions, and all the subtlety of its clergy never accomplished, or rather never began, the task of fusing those irreconcilable elements into one harmonious synthesis.³⁸ For the Egyptians there was no principle of contradiction. All the heterogeneous beliefs that ever obtained in the various districts during the different periods of a very long history, were maintained concurrently and formed an inextricable confusion in the sacred books.

About the same state of affairs prevailed in the Occidental worship of the Alexandrian divinities. In the Occident, just as in Egypt, there were "prophets" in the first rank of the clergy, who learnedly discussed religion, but never taught a theological system that found universal acceptance. The sacred scribe Cheremon, who became Nero's tutor, recognized the stoical theories in the sacerdotal traditions of his country.³⁹ When the eclectic Plutarch speaks of the character of the Egyptian gods, he finds it agrees surprisingly with his own philosophy,⁴⁰ and when the neo-Platonist Iamblichus examines them, their character seems to agree with his doctrines. The hazy ideas of the Oriental priests enabled every one to see in them the phantoms he was pursuing. The individual imagination was given ample scope, and the dilettantic men of letters rejoiced in molding these malleable doctrines at will. They were not outlined sharply enough, nor were they formulated with sufficient precision to appeal to the multitude. The gods were everything and nothing: they got lost in a *sfumato*. A disconcerting anarchy and confusion prevailed among them. By means of a scientific mixture of Greek, Egyptian and Semitic elements "Hermetism"⁴¹ endeavored to create

³⁷ In the words of Mr. Wiedemann.

³⁸ Naville, *La Religion des anciens Egyptiens*, 1906, pp. 89 f.

³⁹ Otto, *Priester und Tempel*, II, p. 216.

⁴⁰ Cf. Decharme, *Traditions religieuses chez les Grecs*, pp. 486 f.

⁴¹ Cumont, *Mon. myst. Mithra*, I, p. 49, n. 2.

a theological system that would be acceptable to all minds, but it seems never to have imposed itself generally on the Alexandrian mysteries which were older than itself, and furthermore it could not escape the contradictions of Egyptian thought. The religion of Isis did not gain a hold on the soul by its dogmatism.

It must be admitted, however, that, owing to its extreme flexibility, this religion was easily adapted to the various centers to which it was transferred, and that it enjoyed the valuable advantage of being always in perfect harmony with the prevailing philosophy. Moreover, the syncretic tendencies of Egypt responded admirably to those that began to obtain at Rome. At a very early period henotheistic theories had been favorably received in sacerdotal circles, and while crediting the god of their own temple with supremacy, the priests admitted that he might have a number of different personalities, under which he was worshiped simultaneously. In this way the unity of the supreme being was affirmed for the thinkers, and polytheism with its intangible traditions maintained for the masses. In the same manner Isis and Osiris had absorbed several local divinities under the Pharaohs, and had assumed a complex character that was capable of indefinite extension. The same process continued under the Ptolemies when the religion of Egypt came into contact with Greece. Isis was identified simultaneously with Demeter, Aphrodite, Hera, Semele, Io, Tyche and others. She was considered the queen of heaven and hell, of earth and sea. She was "the past, the present and the future,"⁴² "nature the mother of things, the mistress of the elements, born at the beginning of the centuries."⁴³ She had numberless names, an infinity of different aspects and an inexhaustible treasure of virtues. In short, she became a pantheistic power that was everything in one, *una quae est omnia*.⁴⁴

The authority of Serapis was no less exalted, and his field no less extensive. He also was regarded as a universal god of whom men liked to say that he was "unique": *Εἰς Ζεὺς Σάραπις*. In him all energies were centered, although the functions of Zeus, of Pluto or of Helios were especially ascribed to him. For many centuries Osiris had been worshiped at Abydos both as author of fecundity and lord of the underworld,⁴⁵ and this double character early caused him to be identified with the sun, which fertilizes the earth during its diurnal course and travels through the subterranean realms at

⁴² Plutarch, *De Isid.*, 9.

⁴³ Apuleius, *Metam.*, XI, 5.

⁴⁴ CIL, X, 3800.

⁴⁵ We have indicated this above.

night. Thus the conception of this nature divinity, that had already prevailed along the Nile, accorded without difficulty with the solar pantheism that was the last form of Roman paganism. This theological system, which did not gain the upper hand in the Occident until the second century of our era, was not brought in by Egypt. It did not have the exclusive predominance there that it had held under the empire, and even in Plutarch's time it was only one creed among many.⁴⁶ The deciding influence in this matter was exercised by the Syrian Baals and the Chaldean astrology.

The theology of the Egyptian mysteries, then, followed rather than led the general influx of ideas. The same may be said of their ethics. It did not force itself upon the world by lofty moral precepts, nor by a sublime ideal of holiness. Many have admired the edifying list in the Book of the Dead, that rightfully or otherwise sets forth the virtues which the deceased claims to have practised in order to obtain a favorable judgment from Osiris. If one considers the period in which it appears, this ethics is undoubtedly very elevated, but it seems rudimentary and even childish if one compares it with the principles formulated by the Roman jurists, to say nothing of the minute psychological analyses of the stoical casuists. In this range of ideas also, the maintenance of the most striking contrasts characterizes Egyptian mentality which was never shocked by the cruelties and obscenities that sullied the mythology and the ritual. Like Epicurus at Athens, some of the sacred texts actually invited the believers to enjoy life before the sadness of death.⁴⁷

Isis was not a very austere goddess at the time she entered Italy. Identified with Venus, as Harpocrates was with Eros, she was honored especially by the women with whom love was a profession. In Alexandria, the city of pleasure, she had lost all severity, and at Rome this good goddess remained very indulgent to human weaknesses. Juvenal harshly refers to her as a procuress,⁴⁸ and her temples had a more than doubtful reputation, for they were frequented by young men in quest of gallant adventures. Apuleius himself chose a lewd tale in which to display his fervor as an initiate.

But we have said that Egypt was full of contradictions, and when a more exacting morality demanded that the gods should make man virtuous, the Alexandrian mysteries offered to satisfy that demand.

At all times the Egyptian ritual attributed considerable impor-

⁴⁶ Plutarch, *De Isid.*, 52.

⁴⁷ Naville, *La rel. des anc. Egyptiens*, pp. 170 f.

⁴⁸ Juvenal, VI, 489.

tance to purity, or, to use a more adequate term, to cleanliness. Before every ceremony the officiating priest had to submit to ablutions, sometimes to fumigations or anointing, and to abstain from certain foods and from incontinence for a certain time. Originally no moral idea was connected with this purification. It was considered a means of exorcising malevolent demons or of putting the priest into a state in which the sacrifice performed by him could have the expected effect. It was similar to the diet, shower-baths and massage prescribed by physicians for physical health. The internal status of the officiating person was a matter of as much indifference to the celestial spirits as the actual worth of the deceased was to Osiris, the judge of the underworld. All that was necessary to have him open the fields of Aalu to the soul was to pronounce the liturgic formulas, and if the soul declared its innocence in the prescribed terms its word was readily accepted.

But in the Egyptian religion, as in all the religions of antiquity,⁴⁹ the original conception was gradually transformed and a new idea slowly took its place. The sacramental acts of purification were now expected to wipe out moral stains, and people became convinced that they made man better. The devout female votaries of Isis, whom Juvenal⁵⁰ pictures as breaking the ice to bathe in the Tiber, and crawling around the temple on their bleeding knees, hoped to atone for their sins and to make up for their shortcomings by means of these sufferings.

When a new ideal grew up in the popular conscience during the second century, when the magicians themselves became pious and serious people, free from passions and appetites, and were honored because of the dignity of their lives more than for their white linen robes,⁵¹ then the virtues of which the Egyptian priests enjoined the practice also became less external. Purity of the heart rather than cleanliness of the body was demanded. Renunciation of sensual pleasures was the indispensable condition for the knowledge of divinity, which was the supreme good.⁵² No longer did Isis favor illicit love. In the novel by Xenophon of Ephesus (about 280 A. D.) she protects the heroine's chastity against all pitfalls and assures its triumph. According to the ancient belief man's entire existence was a preparation for the formidable judgment held by Serapis after death, but to have him decide in favor of the mystic, it was not

⁴⁹ Farnell, *Evolution of Religion*, London, 1905, pp. 88-192.

⁵⁰ Juvenal, VI, 522 f.

⁵¹ Friedländer, *Sittengesch.*, I, p. 510.

⁵² Plutarch, *De Isid.*, c. 2.

enough to know the rites of the sect; the individual life had to be free from crime; and the master of the infernal regions assigned everybody a place according to his deserts.⁵³ The doctrine of future retribution was beginning to develop.

However, in this regard, as in their conception of the divinity, the Egyptian mysteries followed the general progress of ideas more than they directed it. Philosophy transformed them, but found in them little inspiration.

* * *

How could a religion, of which neither the theology nor the ethics was really new, stir up at the same time so much hostility and fervor among the Romans? To many minds of to-day theology and ethics constitute religion, but during the classical period it was different, and the priests of Isis and Serapis conquered souls mainly by other means. They seduced them by the powerful attraction of the ritual and retained them by the marvelous promises of their doctrine of immortality.

To the Egyptians ritual had a value far superior to that we ascribe to it to-day. It had an operative strength of its own that was independent of the intentions of the officiating priest. The efficacy of prayer depended not on the inner disposition of the believer, but on the correctness of the words, gestures and intonation. Religion was not clearly differentiated from magic. If a divinity was invoked according to the correct forms, especially if one knew how to pronounce its real name, it was compelled to act in conformity to the will of its priest. The sacred words were an incantation that compelled the superior powers to obey the officiating person, no matter what purpose he had in view. With the knowledge of the liturgy men acquired an immense power over the world of spirits. Porphyry was surprised and indignant because the Egyptians sometimes dared to threaten the gods in their orations.⁵⁴ In the consecrations the priest's summons compelled the gods to come and animate their statues, and thus his voice created divinities,⁵⁵ as originally the almighty voice of Tot had created the world.⁵⁶

The ritual that conferred such superhuman power⁵⁷ developed in Egypt into a state of perfection, completeness and splendor unknown in the Occident. It possessed a unity, a precision and a per-

⁵³ Diodorus, I, 93.

⁵⁴ Porph., *Epist. ad Aneb.*, 29.

⁵⁵ G. Hock, *Griechische Weihegebräuche*, 1905, pp. 65 f.

⁵⁶ Cumont, *Recherches sur le manichéisme*, p. 24, n. 2.

⁵⁷ Iamblichus, *Myst.*, VI, 6.

manency that stood in striking contrast to the variety of the myths, the uncertainty of the dogmas and the arbitrariness of the interpretations. The sacred books of the Greco-Roman period are a faithful reproduction of the texts that were engraved upon the walls of the pyramids at the dawn of history, notwithstanding the centuries that had passed. Even under the Cæsars the ancient ceremonies dating back to the first ages of Egypt, were scrupulously performed because the smallest word and the least gesture had their importance.

This ritual and the attitude toward it found their way for the most part into the Latin temples of Isis and Serapis. This fact has long been ignored, but there can be no doubt about it. A first proof is that the clergy of those temples were organized just like those of Egypt during the period of the Ptolemies.⁵⁸ There was a hierarchy presided over by a high priest, which consisted of *prophetes* skilled in the sacred science, *stolistes*, or *ornatrices*,⁵⁹ whose office it was to dress the statues of the gods, *pastophores* who carried the sacred temple plates in the processions, and so on, just as in Egypt. As in their native country, the priests were distinguished from common mortals by a tonsure, by a linen tunic, and by their habits as well as by their garb. They devoted themselves entirely to their ministry and had no other profession. This sacerdotal body always remained Egyptian in character, if not in nationality, because the liturgy it had to perform remained so. In a similar manner the priests of the Baals were Syrians,⁶⁰ because they were the only ones that knew how to honor the gods of Syria.

In the first place a daily service had to be held just as in the Nile valley. The Egyptian gods enjoyed a precarious immortality, for they were liable to destruction and dependent on necessities. According to a very primitive conception that always remained alive, they had to be fed, clothed and refreshed every day or else perish. From this fact arose the necessity of a liturgy that was practically the same in every district. It was practised for thousands of years and opposed its unaltering form to the multiplicity of legends and local beliefs.⁶¹

This daily liturgy was translated into Greek, perhaps later into Latin also; it was adapted to the new requirements by the founders of the Serapeum, and faithfully observed in the Roman temples of the Alexandrian gods. The essential ceremony always was the

⁵⁸ Otto, *Priester und Tempel*, I, pp. 114 f.

⁵⁹ CIL, XII, 3061.

⁶⁰ Kan, *De Iove Dolicheno*, 1901, p. 33.

⁶¹ Moret, *Le rituel du culte divin journalier en Egypte*, Paris, 1902.

opening (*apertio*)⁶² of the sanctuary. At dawn the statue of the divinity was uncovered and shown to the community in the *naos*, that had been closed and sealed during the night.⁶³ Then, again as in Egypt, the priest lit the sacred fire and offered libations of water supposed to be from the deified Nile,⁶⁴ while he chanted the usual hymns to the sound of flutes. Finally, "erect upon the threshold"—I translate literally from Porphyry—"he awakens the god by calling to him in the Egyptian language."⁶⁵ As we see, the god was revived by the sacrifice and, as under the Pharaohs, awoke from his slumber at the calling of his name. As a matter of fact the name was indissolubly connected with the personality; he who could pronounce the exact name of an individual or of a divinity was obeyed as a master by his slave.⁶⁶ This fact made it necessary to maintain the original form of that mysterious word. There was no other motive for the introduction of a number of barbarian appellations into the magical incantations.

It is also probable that the toilet of the statue was made every day, that its body and head were dressed,⁶⁷ as in the Egyptian ritual. We have seen that the *ornatrices* or *stolistes* were especially entrusted with these duties. The idol was covered with sumptuous raiment and ornamented with jewels and gems. An inscription furnishes us with an inventory of the jewels worn by an Isis of ancient Cadiz;⁶⁸ her ornaments were more brilliant than those of Spanish madonna.

During the entire forenoon, from the moment that a noisy acclamation had greeted the rising of the sun, the images of the gods were exposed to the silent adoration of the initiates.⁶⁹ Egypt is the country whence contemplative devotion penetrated into Europe. Then, in the afternoon, a second service was held to close the sanctuary.⁷⁰

The daily liturgy must have been very absorbing. This innovation in the Roman paganism was full of consequences. No longer were sacrifices offered to the god on certain occasions only, but twice a day elaborate services were held. As with the Egyptians, whom Herodotus had termed the most religious of all peoples,⁷¹ devotion

⁶² Apuleius, XI, 22.

⁶³ Josephus, *Ant. Jud.*, XVIII, 3, 5, § 174.

⁶⁴ Juvenal, VII, 527.

⁶⁵ Cf. Apuleius, XI, 20.

⁶⁶ Cumont, *Mon. myst. Mithra*, I, p. 313, n. 4.

⁶⁷ Apuleius, *Metam.*, XI, 9.

⁶⁸ CIL, II, 3386.

⁶⁹ Apuleius, XI, 24.

⁷⁰ The ritual differed somewhat in this respect from that of Egypt.

⁷¹ Herodotus, II, 37.

assumed a tendency to fill out the whole existence and to dominate private and public interests. The constant repetition of the same prayers kept up and renewed faith, and, we might say, people lived continually under the eyes of the gods.

Besides the daily rites of the Abydos liturgy the holidays marking the beginning of the different seasons were celebrated at the same date every year.⁷² It was the same in Italy. The calendars have preserved the names of several of them, and of one, the *Navigium Isidis*, the rhetorician Apuleius⁷³ has left us a brilliant description on which, to speak with the ancients, he emptied all his color tubes. On March 5th, when navigation reopened after the winter months, a gorgeous procession⁷⁴ marched to the coast, and a ship consecrated to Isis, the protectress of sailors, was launched. A burlesque group of masked persons opened the procession, then came the women in white gowns strewing flowers, the *stolistes* waving the garments of the goddess and the *dadophores* with lighted torches. After these came the *hymnodes*, whose songs mingled in turn with the sharp sound of the cross-flutes and the ringing of the brass timbrels; then the throngs of the initiates, and finally the priests, with shaven heads and clad in linen robes of a dazzling white, bearing the images of animal-faced gods and strange symbols, as for instance a golden urn containing the sacred water of the Nile. The procession stopped in front of altars⁷⁵ erected along the road, and on these altars the sacred objects were uncovered for the veneration of the faithful. The strange and sumptuous magnificence of these celebrations made a deep impression on the common people who loved public entertainments.

But of all the celebrations connected with the worship of Isis the most stirring and the most suggestive was the commemoration of the "Finding of Osiris" (*Inventio, Eũpeois*). Its antecedents date back to remote antiquity. Since the time of the twelfth dynasty, and probably much earlier, there had been held at Abydos and elsewhere a sacred performance similar to the mysteries of our Middle Ages, in which the events of Osiris's passion and resurrection were reproduced. We are in possession of the ritual of those performances.⁷⁶ Issuing from the temple, the god fell under Set's blows;

⁷² Maspero, *Rev. critique*, II (1905), pp. 361 f.

⁷³ Apuleius, *Metam.*, XI, 7 f.

⁷⁴ Cumont, *Mon. myst. Mithra*, I, p. 315.

⁷⁵ Dessau, *Inscr. sel.*, 4353, 4445.

⁷⁶ Schäfer, *Die Mysterien des Osiris in Abydos unter Sesostri III*, Leipzig, 1904.

around his body funeral lamentations were simulated, and he was buried according to the rites; then Set was vanquished by Horus, and Osiris, restored to life, reentered his temple triumphant over death.

The same myth was represented in almost the same manner at Rome at the beginning of each November.⁷⁷ While the priests and the believers moaned and lamented, Isis in great distress sought the divine body of Osiris, whose limbs had been scattered by Typhon. Then, after the corpse had been found, rehabilitated and revived, there was a long outburst of joy, an exuberant jubilation that rang through the temples and the streets so loudly that it annoyed the passers-by.

This mingled despair and enthusiasm acted as strongly upon the feelings of the believers as did the spring-holiday ceremony in the Phrygian religion, and it acted through the same means. Moreover, there was an esoteric meaning attached to it that none but the pious elect understood. Besides the public ceremonies there was a secret worship to which one was admitted only after a gradual initiation. The hero of Apuleius had to submit to the ordeal three times in order to obtain the whole revelation. In Egypt the clergy communicated certain rites and interpretations only upon a promise not to reveal them. In fact this was the case in the worship of Isis at Abydos and elsewhere.⁷⁸ When the Ptolemies regulated the Greek ritual of their new religion, it assumed the form of the mysteries spread over the Hellenic world and became very like those of Eleusis. The hand of the Eumolpide Timotheus is noticeable in this connection.⁷⁹

But while the ceremonial of the initiations and even the production of the liturgic drama were thus adapted to the religious habits of the Greeks, the doctrinal contents of the Alexandrian mysteries remained purely Egyptian. The old belief that immortality could be secured by means of an identification of the deceased with Osiris or Serapis never died out.

Perhaps in no other people did the epigram of Fustel de Coulanges find so complete a verification as in the Egyptians: "Death was the first mystery; it started man on the road of the other mysteries."⁸⁰ Nowhere else was life so completely dominated by pre-occupation with life after death; nowhere else was such minute and

⁷⁷ Cf. Foucart, "Rech. sur les myst. d'Eleusis," *Mém. Acad. Inscr.*, XXXV, p. 37.

⁷⁸ *Idem*, pp. 19 f.

⁷⁹ Gruppe, *Griech. Mythol.*, p. 1574.

⁸⁰ *La cité antique*, Bk. I, II, fin.

complicated care taken to secure and perpetuate another existence for the deceased. The funeral literature, of which we have found a very great number of documents, had acquired a development equaled by no other, and the architecture of no other nation can exhibit tombs comparable with the pyramids or the rock-built sepulchers of Thebes.

This constant endeavor to secure an after-existence for one's self and relatives manifested itself in various ways, but it finally assumed a concrete form in the worship of Osiris. The fate of Osiris, the god who died and returned to life, became the prototype of the fate of every human being that observed the funeral rites. "As truly as Osiris lives," says an Egyptian text, "he also shall live; as truly as Osiris is not dead, shall he not die; as truly as Osiris is not annihilated, shall he not be annihilated."⁸¹

If, then, the deceased had piously served Osiris-Serapis, he was assimilated to that god, and shared his immortality in the underworld, where the judge of the dead held forth. He lived not as a tenuous shade or as a subtle spirit, but in full possession of his body as well as of his soul. That was the Egyptian doctrine, and that certainly was also the doctrine of the Greco-Latin mysteries.⁸²

Through the initiation the mystic was born again, but to a super-human life, and became the equal of the immortals.⁸³ In his ecstasy he imagined that he was crossing the threshold of death and contemplating the gods of heaven and hell face to face.⁸⁴ If he had accurately followed the prescriptions imposed upon him by Isis and Serapis through their priests, those gods prolonged his life after his decease beyond the duration assigned to it by destiny, and he participated eternally in their beatitude and offered them his homage in their realm.⁸⁵ The "unspeakable pleasure" he felt when contemplating the sacred images in the temple⁸⁶ became perpetual rapture when he was in the divine presence instead of in the presence of the image, and drawn close to divinity his thirsting soul enjoyed the delights of that ineffable beauty.⁸⁷

When the Alexandrian mysteries spread over Italy under the republic, no religion had ever brought to mankind as formal a promise of blest immortality as these, and this, more than anything

⁸¹ Erman, *Die ägyptische Religion*, Berlin, 1905, pp. 96-97.

⁸² Cf. Kaibel, *Inscr. gr.*, XIV, 2098.

⁸³ Reizenstein, *Archiv für Religionsw.*, VII (1904), 406 f.

⁸⁴ Apuleius, *Metam.*, 23.

⁸⁵ *Idem*, XI, 6 fin.

⁸⁶ *Idem*, c. 24.

⁸⁷ Plutarch, *De Isid.*, 78, p. 383 A.

else, lent them an irresistible power of attraction. Instead of the vague and contradictory opinions of the philosophers in regard to the destiny of the soul, Serapis offered certainty founded on divine revelation corroborated by the faith of the countless generations that had adhered to it. What the votaries of Orpheus had confusedly discovered through the veil of the legends, and taught to Magna Grecia,⁸⁸ namely, that this earthly life was a trial, a preparation for a higher and purer life, that the happiness of an after-life could be secured by means of rites and observances revealed by the gods themselves, all this was now preached with a firmness and precision hitherto unknown. These eschatological doctrines in particular, helped Egypt to conquer the Latin world and especially the miserable masses, on whom the weight of all the iniquities of Roman society rested heavily.

* * *

The power and popularity of that belief in future life has left traces even in the French language, and in concluding this study, from which I have been compelled to exclude every picturesque detail, I would like to point out how a French word of to-day dimly perpetuates the memory of the old Egyptian ideas.

During the cold nights of their long winters the Scandinavians dreamed of a Walhalla where the deceased warriors sat in well closed brilliantly illuminated halls, warming themselves and drinking the strong liquor served by the Valkyries; but under the burning sky of Egypt, near the arid sand where thirst kills the traveler, people wished that their dead might find a limpid spring in their future wanderings to assuage the heat that devoured them, and that they might be refreshed by the breezes of the north wind.⁸⁹ Even at Rome the adherents of the Alexandrian gods frequently inscribed the following wish on their tombs: "May Osiris give you fresh water."⁹⁰ Soon this water became, in a figurative sense, the fountain of life pouring out immortality to thirsting souls. The metaphor obtained such popularity that in Latin *refrigerium* became synonymous with comfort and happiness. The term retained this meaning in the liturgy of the church,⁹¹ and for that reason people continue to pray for the spiritual *rafrâichissement* of the dead although the Christian paradise has very little resemblance to the fields of Aalu.

⁸⁸ Cf. Diels, *Vorsokratiker*.

⁸⁹ Cf. Maspero, *Etudes égyptiennes*, I (1881), p. 189.

⁹⁰ Kaibel, *Inscr. gr.*, XIV, 1488, 1705, 1782, 1842.

⁹¹ Cf. Rohde, *Psyche*, II, p. 391.