

THE MYSTERIES OF ISIS AND OSIRIS.

BY HENRY RIDGELY EVANS.

I.

EGYPT!—cradle of mystery! For centuries the giant Sphinx of Gizeh, half buried in the shifting sand of the desert, kept guard over the treasures of the ancient land of Mizraim. Fast locked were the secrets of hierophant and sage, for no mortal was able to unravel the meaning of the hieroglyphics painted upon the walls of the ruined temples. Illuminated papyri were found in the coffins of mummies, but no one could decipher the strange text. It was indeed a “dead-letter” to the modern savant. Finally the hour and the man came. An ingenious Frenchman named Champollion solved the mystery of the sacred script of Egypt, through the medium of the Rosetta stone. But this is a “twice-told tale” to the archæologist, and needs no repetition here. Translations of mural inscriptions and papyrus scrolls followed each other in rapid succession. A flood of light was thrown upon the history, religion, and literature of ancient Egypt. “The key to the hieroglyphics,” says Miss Edwards, “is the master-key that opens every door. Each year that now passes over our heads sees some old problem solved. Each day brings some long-buried truth to light.”

The fact was developed that the inhabitants of the Nile Valley were intensely religious, slaves, in fact, to the peculiar cults of the country. A ceremonial worship of the most extravagant nature occupied the attention of king, priests, and people. At Memphis, Thebes, Karnak, Abydos, and Philæ ponderous temples to the gods and goddesses reared their heads to the blue sky. The shattered remains of these mighty monuments are the admiration of the modern traveller. We view them with a feeling akin to awe, remembering the words of an Egyptian king, who thus expressed himself regarding one of these stupendous structures: “Built for eternity, time shrinks before it.” Though immemorial years have touched

the temples of the gods with comparative lightness, the ruthless hand of man has shivered the heads of colossi, and overturned pylon and pillar. Memphis, the mighty city—the home of the great Temple of Ptah—was pulled to pieces centuries ago. Says Miss Edwards: “And this is all that remains of Memphis, eldest of cities—a few huge rubbish-heaps, a dozen or so of broken statues, and a name!”

When night, with its blue-black canopy, studded with brilliant stars, has fallen upon the world of the Orient, these ancient ruins seem to breathe forth mystery as the earth exhales moisture. The silvery moon, sacred disk of Isis, floods the faces of the colossi, images of the gods, and intensifies their grotesque shadows. In this solemn hour of repose and silence, a weird phantasmagoria presents itself to our entranced sight. We behold the ruins restored as if by magic; pylon and pillar, obelisk and avenue of sphinxes, all are intact as of old. Within the sacred enclosure—the *sanctum sanctorum*—we can hear the chant of the hierophants.

The candidate for the Mysteries presents himself at the bronze doors that lie dark and fast-sealed between the twin towers of the tall propylon. Carved above the portal is the winged disk, emblem of the sun and of eternal life. “Seek and ye shall find! knock and it shall be opened unto you!”

Suddenly the bronze doors swing back with a noise like thunder; the trembling neophyte enters into the gloomy building. Behind him close the doors with a hollow clang. We would enter, but, alas, there is no admission to the profane. The moon passes behind a cloud, there gradually comes a faint light in the east; the dawn is breaking—the young god Horus is making ready to sail the heavens in his mystic boat. The desert dream is at an end; the huge temple lies once more in fragments, the shadow-haunted home of owl and bat. Upon the bank of the sacred lake, where in the olden days the funeral barge of Osiris floated, a solitary crane stands, brooding upon the desolate scene. The utter loneliness of the place depresses the heart. We realise to its fullest extent the vanity of earthly hopes. Where are priests and initiates, and the myriad souls that lived, loved, and died so many centuries ago? Are they still wandering through the shadowy realms of Amenti, or have they found the blissful “Pools of Peace” in the kingdom of the divine Osiris? Ah, who can tell! But this one fact we know: they have vanished like dreams.

In the private museum of Herr Graf, of Vienna, is a remarkable collection of memorial portraits which were found attached

to mummies. They are of the Ptolemaic period. One of these pictures is that of a young man—a Grecian, upon whose left breast is a golden clasp, supposed by Egyptologists to be the badge of initiation into the Mysteries of Isis. This may or may not be true, but it is interesting to think that it is so. About his head is a laurel wreath, such as Apuleius describes as having been worn by initiates. Through what ordeals did this young Grecian pass; what mysterious visions greeted his sight? What were the Mysteries of Isis?

Like the poor *fellah* in Elihu Vedder's wierd painting, shall we propound the question to the Sphinx, then pressing our ear against the mouth of the stone monster wait patiently for an answer to the riddle? Alas, the Sphinx is dumb! Let us rather delve into the wisdom of ancient and modern times—that which remains to us, inscribed upon scrolls of parchment and papyri—for a solution to the vexed problem.

II.

J. R. S. Sterrett¹ describes the Mysteries of the ancient world as “the secret worship of various gods, to which one might be admitted only after having passed certain purifying initiatory trials or degrees that varied in number in different mysteries. In addition to what was universally known about any god, there were also certain facts and tenets of such a character that they might be divulged to the initiated alone. . . . A clue to the general character of mysteries is given by Plato (*Rep.* 2, 378), who tells us that whatever is vicious, immoral, or disgraceful in the stories about the gods ought either to be buried in silence or else be told only in Mysteries, from which the mob must be excluded by making the sacrifice of a huge and unprocurable victim the condition of initiation.”

The Mysteries of Isis and Osiris, then, must have been sacred rites designed to teach certain occult, or esoteric, doctrines. Before proceeding further to discuss the Mysteries it will be necessary to treat briefly of the essentials of belief among the early dwellers in the Nile Valley.

Like all primitive peoples, the Egyptians began as polytheists. Gradually they rose to more metaphysical conceptions of the nature of the gods and the universe; but says Maspero,² “the lofty thoughts remained the property of a small number of priests and instructed people; they did not penetrate the mass of the popula-

¹ *Johnson's Universal Encyclopædia*, Vol. VI., p. 47.

² *Hist. de l'Orient*, 4th ed., pp. 279-288.

tion." The common people forever remained in brutal ignorance, blindly worshipping the forces of nature as actual gods, and animals as incarnations of these divinities. Their animal worship probably originated in totemism.

The solar cult was a most prominent one in the land of Mizraim. J. Norman Lockyer, the English astronomer, gives it as his opinion that the Egyptians were absolutely dominated by the worship of the Sun and the accompanying Dawn. He says (*Dawn of Astronomy*, p. 23): "The ancient Egyptians, whether they were separated from, or more or less allied in their origin to, the early inhabitants of India, had exactly the same view of Nature-worship, and we find in their hymns and the lists of their gods that the Dawn and the Sunrise were the great revelations of nature and the things which were most important to man; and therefore everything connected with the Sunrise and the Dawn was worshipped.

Renouf, one of the latest writers on these subjects, says: "I fear Egyptologists will soon be accused, like other persons, of seeing the dawn everywhere," and he quotes with approbation this passage from Max Müller relating to the Veda: "I look upon the sunrise and sunset, on the daily return of day and night, on the battle between light and darkness, on the whole solar drama in all its details, that is acted every day, every month, every year, in heaven and in earth, as the principal subject."

As in India the Nature-worship portrayed in the Vedas was succeeded by the metaphysical conceptions of Deity and the human soul expounded in the Upanishads, so in Egypt the primitive worship was succeeded by more refined and subtle religious ideas. As has been already stated, the more exalted doctrines were in the possession of the privileged few,—the priests and philosophers, who obtained their knowledge in the Mysteries. There was an evolution of religion in Egypt as in other countries, but as Andrew Lang expresses it, "the peculiarity of Egypt, in religion and myth as in every other institution, is the retention of the very rudest and most barbarous things side by side with the last refinements of civilisation. . . . The soil of Egypt, when excavated, constantly shows that the Egyptians, who in the remote age of the pyramid-builders were already acquainted with bronze and even with iron, did not therefore relinquish the use of flint-knives and arrow-heads when such implements became cheaper than tools of metal, or when they were associated with religion. Precisely in the same way did the Egyptians, who, in the remotest known times, had imposing religious ideas, decline to relinquish the totems and beast-

gods and absurd or blasphemous myths which (like flint axes and arrow-heads) are everywhere characteristic of savages. . . . Thus the confusion of Egyptian religion is what was inevitable in a land where new and old did not succeed and supersede each other, but coexisted on good terms. Had religion not been thus confused, it would have been a solitary exception among the institutions of the country. The fact is, that the Egyptian mind, when turned to divine matters, was constantly working on, and working over, the primeval stuff of all mythologies and of all religions. First, there is the belief in a moral guardian and father of men; this is expressed in the sacred hymns. Next, there is the belief in 'a strange and powerful race, supposed to have been busy on earth before the making, or the evolution, or the emergence of man;' this is expressed in the mythological legends. The Egyptians inherited a number of legends of extra-natural heroes, not unlike the savage Qat, Cagn, Yehl, Pund-jil, Ioskeha, and Quahteht, the Maori Tutenganahan and the South Sea Tangaroa. Some of these were elemental forces, personified in human or bestial guise, some were merely idealised medicine-men. Their 'wanderings, rapes, and manslaughters, and mutilations,' as Plutarch says, remained permanently in legend. When these beings, in the advance of thought, had obtained divine attributes, and when the conception of abstract divinity had become pure and lofty, the old legends became so many stumbling-blocks to the faithful. They were explained away as allegories (every student having his own allegorical system), or the extra-natural beings were taken (as by Plutarch) to be 'demons, not gods.' " ¹

Rawlinson, speaking of the exoteric and esoteric phases of the Egyptian religion, says: " It appears to be certain that the Egyptian religion, like most other religions in the ancient world, had two phases or aspects: one, that in which it was presented to the general public or vast mass of the population; the other, that which it bore in the minds of the intelligent, the learned, the initiated. To the former it was a polytheism of a multitudinous and in many respects of a gross character; to the latter it was a system of combining strict monotheism with a metaphysical and speculative philosophy on the two great subjects of the nature of God and the destiny of man, which sought to exhaust those deep and unfathomable mysteries. Those who take the lowest view of the Egyptian religion admit that 'the idea of a single self-existent deity' was in-

¹ *Myth, Ritual, and Religion*, Vol. II., pp. 108, 109, 110.

² *History of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. I., p. 323.

volved in the conceptions which it set forth, and to be found not unfrequently in the hymns and prayers of the Ritual. It is impossible that this should have been so, unless there were a class of persons who saw behind the popular mythology, understood its symbolical or metaphysical character, and were able in this way to reconcile their conformity to the established worship with the great truths of natural religion which, it is clear, they knew and which they must have cherished in their heart of hearts.

“The primary doctrine of the esoteric religion undoubtedly was the real essential Unity of the Divine Nature. The sacred texts taught that there was a single Being, ‘the sole producer of all things both in heaven and earth, himself not produced of any,’—‘the only true living God, self-originated,’—‘who exists from the beginning,’—‘who has made all things, but has not himself been made.’ This Being seems never to have been represented by any material, even symbolical, form. It is thought that He had no name, or if He had that it must have been unlawful either to pronounce or write it. He was a pure spirit, perfect in every respect,—all wise, almighty, supremely good.

“The gods of the popular mythology were understood, in the esoteric religion, to be either personified attributes of the Deity, or parts of the nature which He had created, considered as informed or inspired by Him. Num or Kneph represented the creative mind, Phthah the creative hand, or act of creating; Maut represented matter, Ra the sun, Khons the moon, Seb the earth, Khem the generative power in Nature, Nut the upper hemisphere of heaven, Athor the lower world or under hemisphere; Thoth personified the Divine wisdom; Ammon, perhaps, the Divine mysteriousness or incomprehensibility; Osiris (according to some) the Divine goodness. It is difficult in many cases to fix on the exact quality, act, or part of nature intended; but the principle admits of no doubt. No educated Egyptian priest certainly, probably no educated layman, conceived of the popular gods as really separate and distinct beings. All knew that there was but one God, and understood that when worship was offered to Khem, or Kneph, or Phthah, or Maut, or Thoth, or Ammon, the One God was worshipped under some one of His forms, or in some one of His aspects. It does not appear that in more than a very few cases did the Egyptian religion, as conceived of by the initiated, deify created beings, or constitute a class of secondary gods who owed their existence to the supreme god. Ra was not a Sun-Deity with a distinct and separate existence, but the supreme God acting in the

sun, making His light to shine on the earth, warming, cheering, and blessing it; and as Ra might be worshipped with all the highest titles of honor, as indeed might any god, except the very few which are more properly called *genii*, and which correspond to the angels of the Christian system. Such is Anubis, the conductor of souls in the lower world, and such probably are the four 'genii of the dead,' Amset, Tuamutef, Hapi (Apis), and Kebhisnauf, who performs so conspicuous a part in the ceremonial of Amenti.

"It is difficult to decide what were the esoteric views of the Egyptians with regard to Evil. Several deities, as Set, or Sutech, Nubi, or (as Wilkinson reads the name) Omboo, and Apepi or Apophis, the great serpent, seem to be personifications of evil; and the strongest antagonism is represented as existing between these and the favorite divinities of the Egyptians, as Ammon, Khem, Phthah, Ra, Osiris; but whether, as among the Persians, two original Principles, one of Good, and the other of Evil, were intended, or whether Evil was viewed as 'a necessary part of the universal system, inherent in all things equally with good, and so as one aspect of the Divine nature,' is to some extent doubtful. It is hard to believe that, if the pantheistic notion, by which Sin and Evil generally are to be considered to be equally of the essence of God with goodness, had been the real belief of the Egyptian priesthood, their protests in favor of virtue and against vice of all kinds could have been so strong and earnest as they are. It is also difficult to imagine that the priests would have allowed the general obliteration of the monumental emblems of Set, which is noticed by Egyptologists, if they had viewed him as really an aspect of the Supreme Being. Perhaps the Egyptian priests at no time thought out the problem of the origin and nature of evil, but were content with indistinct and hazy notions upon the subject. Perhaps their views varied at different times, inclining during the earlier ages to the pantheistic doctrine, in the later to the Persian tenet of Two Principles.

"The continuance of the soul after death, its judgment in another world, and its sentence according to its deserts, either to happiness or suffering, were undoubted parts both of the popular and of the more recondite religion. It was the universal belief that, immediately after death, the soul descended to the lower world and was conducted to the Hall of Truth (or 'of the Two Truths'), where it was judged in the presence of Osiris and the forty-two *dæmones*, the 'Lords of Truth' and judges of the dead."

The eminent scholar M. Emmanuel de Rougé held the same

views as Rawlinson on the belief of the unity of Deity among the ancient Egyptians. He says:

“But how reconcile the Unity of God with Egyptian polytheism? History and geography will perhaps elucidate the matter. The Egyptian religion comprehends a quantity of local worships. The Egypt which Menes brought together entire under his scepter was divided into nomes, each having a capital town; each of these regions has its principal god designed by a special name; but it is always the same doctrine which reappears under different names. One idea predominates, that of a single and primeval God; everywhere and always it is One Substance, self-existent, and an unapproachable God.”

M. de Rougé then says that from, or rather before, the commencement of the historical period, the pure monotheistic religion underwent the phase of Sabeism; the Sun, instead of being regarded as the symbol of life, was taken as the manifestation of God Himself. Polytheism developed itself and progressed without interruption until the time of the Ptolemies—the Greek rulers of the country.

Says de Rougé: “It is, therefore, more than five thousand years since, in the Valley of the Nile, the hymns began to the Unity of God and the immortality of the soul, and we find Egypt in the last ages arrived at the most unbridled polytheism.” Add to this the grossest forms of phallic worship, and you have a picture of degradation seldom equalled in the religious history of mankind.

Says P. Le Page Renouf (*Hibbert Lectures*, 1879) “the magnificent predicates of the one and only God, however recognised by Egyptian orthodoxy, never in fact led to actual monotheism. They stopped short in pantheism—namely, in the doctrine that ‘all individual things are nothing but modifications, affections, of the One and All, the eternal and infinite God-world; that there is but one universal force in Nature, in different forms, in itself eternal and unchangeable.’

“This doctrine is perhaps most clearly expressed in a hymn upon the walls of the temple in the oasis of El Kargeh:

“‘The gods salute his royal majesty as their Lord, who revealeth himself in all that is, and hath names in everything from ‘mountain to stream. That which persisteth in all things is Amon. ‘This lordly god was from the very beginning. He is Ptah, the ‘greatest of the gods.... Thy secret is in the depths of the secret ‘waters and unknown. Thou hast come on the road, thou hast ‘given light in the path, thou hast overcome all difficulties in thy

‘mysterious form. Each God has assumed thy aspect; without shape is their type compared to thy form. To thee, all things give praise when thou returnest to the nether world at even. Thou raisest up Osiris by the radiance of thy beams. To thee, those give praise who lie in their tombs. . . . and the damned rise up in their abodes. . . . Thou art the King, thine is the kingdom of heaven, and the earth is at thy will. The gods are in thine hand, and men are at thy feet. What god is like to thee? Thou hast made the double world, as Ptah. Thou hast placed thy throne in the life of the double world, as Amon. Thy soul is the pillar and the ark of the two heavens. Thy form emanated at first whilst thou shinest as Amon, Ra, and Ptah. Shu, Tefnut, Nut, and Chonsu are thy form, dwelling in thy shrine under the types of the ithyphallic god, raising his tall plumes, king of the gods. . . . Thou art Mentu Ra. Thou art Sekar; thy transformations are into the Nile. Thou art Youth and Age. Thou givest life to the earth by thy stream. Thou art heaven, thou art earth, thou art fire, thou art water, thou art air, and whatever is in the midst of them.’

“I believe, therefore, that, after clearly approaching the point at which polytheism might have turned into monotheism, the religious thought of Egypt turned aside into a wrong track. And this was followed by a decided and hopeless course of retrogression. Those elements of the Egyptian religion which the Greeks and the Jewish and Christian writers looked upon with such disgust, had existed from the first, but in a very subordinate position; they now became nearly predominant. . . . If pantheism strongly contributed to the development of this animal worship, and to all the superstition therewith connected, it also led to a simple materialism. . . . Man had formerly been led to associate the earth and sun and sky with the notion of infinite power behind these phenomena; he now retraced his steps and recognised in the universe but the mere phenomena.”

Tiele (*Manuel de l'histoire des religions*, p. 46) controverts the above opinion, as follows: “It is certainly erroneous to consider Egyptian religion as a polytheistic corruption of a prehistoric monotheism. It is more correct to say that, while polytheistic in principle, the religion developed in two absolutely opposite directions. On one side, the constant introduction of new gods, local or foreign; on the other, a groping after a monotheism never absolutely reached. The learned explained the crowd of gods as so many incarnations of the one hidden uncreated deity.” [TO BE CONTINUED.]