

# The Bible and the Religions of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece



# The Bible and the Religions of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece

By

Robert Ignatius Letellier

**Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing**



The Bible and the Religions of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece

By Robert Ignatius Letellier

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2023 by Robert Ignatius Letellier

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-0216-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0216-1

# CONTENTS

<b>List of Figures .....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>xiv</b>
<b>The Religion of Ancient Egypt .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1. The Periods of Egyptian History.....	1
2. Cosmology .....	2
3. Isis and Osiris, the Concept of Kingship.....	3
4. How the World Functions.....	6
5. The Temple .....	8
6. The Funerary Rituals.....	10
7. The Book of the Dead .....	14
The Papyrus of Ani (c. 1420 BC) .....	14
The Papyrus of Hunefer (c. 1370 BC).....	19
The Papyrus of Anhaï (c. 1100 BC).....	19
<b>Ancient Egyptian Literature.....</b>	<b>21</b>
1. Narratives and Tales of Middle Egyptian Literature.....	21
King Cheops and the Magicians.....	21
The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant.....	21
The Shipwrecked Sailor .....	21
The Story of Sinuhe.....	21
2. Late Egyptian Stories.....	22
The Quarrel of Apophis and Seknenre .....	22
The Capture of Joppa .....	22
The Tale of the Doomed Prince .....	22
The Tale of the Two Brothers .....	22
The Contendings of Horus and Seth.....	22
The Blinding of Truth by Falsehood .....	23
Astarte and the Insatiable Sea .....	23
A Ghost Story.....	23
The Report of Wenamon .....	23
3. Instructions, Lamentations, and Dialogues .....	23
The Maxims of Ptahhotpe .....	23
The Teaching of the Vizier Kagemni .....	23

The Teaching for Merikare.....	24
The Teaching of King Ammenemes I to His Son Sesostris .....	24
The Loyalist Instruction from the Sehetepibre Stela .....	24
The Man Who Was Tired of Life .....	24
The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage.....	25
The Lamentations of Khakheperre-sonbe .....	25
The Prophecies of Nefertiti .....	25
The Instructions of Amenemope .....	25
4. Songs, Poetry, and Hymns .....	26
Poetry forms the oldest Religious Literature .....	26
Cycle of Songs in Honour of Sesostris III.....	27
The Victorious King.....	27
The Hymn to Aten.....	27
The Love Songs and The Song of the Harper .....	28
5. The Scribal Tradition and Several Incomplete Instructions .....	29
The Satire of the Trades; the Instruction of Dus-Khety .....	29
The Instructions of a Man for His Son .....	29
The Instruction of Hardedef.....	29
The Instruction of Amunnakehte.....	29
The Scribal Traditions in the Schools .....	29
<b>The Religion of Mesopotamia.....</b>	<b>30</b>
1. The Stele of the Vultures .....	33
2. The Cone of Entemmina .....	33
3. The Reform Decrees of Urukagina .....	34
4. The Statute of Gudea .....	35
<b>Sumerian-Babylonian Literature.....</b>	<b>40</b>
Creation.....	41
On the origin of Tooth-Decay .....	41
Creation from Above .....	42
The Battle between Summer and Winter .....	42
The Debate between the Bird and the Fish .....	42
Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Underworld.....	43
In Praise of the Hoe .....	43
Creation from Below by Marduk.....	43
Theology from Above.....	43
Prologue to the Debate between Tree and Reed .....	43
Introduction to U <sub>8</sub> and Ashnan (Ewe and Grain) .....	43
Enki and the World Order.....	43
The Legend of the Seven Sages .....	43

The Creation of Man.....	46
The <i>Enuma Elish</i> .....	48
The Sumerian King List.....	49
The Flood.....	49
<i>Atrahasis</i> .....	49
<i>Gilgamesh</i> .....	50
The Story of the Flood and the Book of Genesis .....	56
Schools.....	67
Man and His God.....	68
<i>Lublut</i> : “I will praise the Lord of Wisdom” .....	69
The Babylonian Theodicy.....	71
The Dialogue of Pessimism .....	71
How Did the Mesopotamians Pray?.....	71
Prayer to Every God .....	71
The Mari Letters (1800 BC) .....	72
Mesha.....	76
Ugarit .....	77
<b>The Religion of Ancient Greece.....</b>	<b>79</b>
Hesiod: <i>Theogony</i> .....	80
Homer: <i>Iliad</i> .....	82
Homer <i>Odyssey</i> .....	103
The Golden Age of Hesiod’s <i>Works and Days</i> .....	108
Hymns to Demeter and Apollo .....	109
Aeschylus: <i>Agamemnon</i> .....	112
Sophocles: The <i>Oedipus</i> Plays.....	114
Euripides: <i>The Bacchae</i> .....	117
Plato: <i>Symposium</i> .....	120
Aristotle: <i>Metaphysika</i> .....	122
Kallimachos: <i>Hymn to Delos</i> .....	123
Philosophical Developments.....	124
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>Notes .....</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>Index of Names, Places and Terms .....</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>Index of Scholars, Editors and Translators.....</b>	<b>159</b>

# LIST OF FIGURES

## Egypt

1. Map of Ancient Egypt
2. Provinces of Lower Egypt
3. Provinces of Upper Egypt
4. Egypt under Thuthmosis III
5. Egyptian gods
6. Hieroglyphic carvings of the gods
7. Osiris 1
8. Osiris 2
9. Osiris 3
10. Osiris 4
11. Isis 1
12. Isis 2
13. Isis 3 and The Sign of Isis
14. Horus
15. Ptah
16. Re
17. Hathor
18. Anubis 1
19. Anubis 2
20. Thoth
21. Bastet
22. Amon
23. Nekhebet 1
24. Nekhebet 2
25. Khnuma and the creation of man, infusing the Ka
26. The Ankh
27. The Ka
28. The Ba and the Ka
29. Ushabti figure
30. The Isis Knot amulet
31. The sign of infinity
32. Scarab
33. Scarab with Isis and Nephthys
34. Plan of Giza
35. Pharaoh Khasekhnwy, 2<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty (2700 BC)
36. The Sphinx 1
37. Sphinx (head of Rameses II)



38. The step pyramid of Zoser1
39. The step pyramid of Zoser2
40. Pyramid cross-section 1
41. Khufu/Cheops
42. The Pyramid of Cheops
43. The sarcophagus chamber
44. Mastaba 1
45. Mastaba 2
46. The Valley of the Kings
47. Colossi of Memnon
48. The Temple at Karnak
49. The temple obelisk
50. The temple columns1
51. The temple columns2
52. The main body of the temple
53. Painting the coffin
54. Mummification
55. Canopic jars
56. Pharaoh laid to rest
57. The funeral mask of Tutankhamen
58. The golden coffin of Tutankhamen
59. The mummy of Seti I
60. The head of Seti I
61. The Judgement of the Dead
62. The Weighing of the Soul
63. Pharaoh crowned
64. Pharaoh in battle (Rameses II)
65. The reconstructed face of Rameses II
66. Ancient Egyptian scribe

## **Mesopotamia**

1. Map of the Ancient Near East
2. The oldest cities
3. The River People
4. The River Tigris at Mosul
5. Cuneiform writing
6. Ancient picture writing
7. Code of Hammurabi
8. Clay tablet
9. Clay tablet, medical recipe
10. Cylindrical seal
11. Making bricks
12. Foundation statuettes
13. The White Temple of Uruk 1
14. The White Temple of Uruk 2

15. The Ziggurat of Ur
16. Temple columns
17. Temple sanctuary
18. Procession to the Temple
19. Ivory knife handle
20. Lyre
21. Gudea 1
22. Gudea 2
23. Susa II
24. Sargon III
25. Ashurbanipal
26. The Gates of Babylon
27. Procession of Lions
28. The Standard of Ur
29. Winged spirits
30. Winged ivory sphinx (Nimrud)
31. Human-headed winged bull. Stone statue (Nimrud)
32. Lilith
33. Ishtar creates the water of life
34. Ishtar empowers Gudea
35. Ningirsu
36. Enlil
37. *The Enuma Elish*
38. Humbaba in *Gilgamesh*
39. The 'Flood Tablet', from the Library of Ashurbanipal
40. Tablet XI of *Gilgamesh*

## Greece

1. The gods of Greece
2. Zeus 1
3. Zeus 2
4. Zeus and Ganymede
5. Poseidon
6. Hermes
7. Hades and Proserpina
8. Dionysus
9. Demeter
10. Apollo
11. Ares
12. Artemis
13. Athena
14. Aphrodite

## **Hesiod**

1. Hesiod *Works and Days*, *Das Goldene Zeitalter* (Lucas Cranach der Älter)
2. The Fall of the Titans (Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem, 1596-98)
3. The Mutilation of Uranus by Saturn (Giorgio Vasari and Cristofano Gherardi c.1560)
4. Punishments of Atlas Typhoeus, Prometheus (Laconic bowl 550 BC)
5. The Birth of Minerva (René-Antoine Houasse, 1688)
6. The Birth of Venus (Adolphe Bouguereau, 1879)
7. Pandora's box opened (Frederick Stuart Church)

## **Homer**

### ***The Iliad***

1. Homer
2. Iliad mosaic Pompei
3. Iliad Italian landscape
4. Iliad warfare
5. Iliad the Trojan War
6. Iliad MS (Book 1 lines 468-463)
7. Iliad Apollo and Hera
8. The Grecian ships 1
9. The Grecian ships
10. Battle scene
11. Agamemnon's Dream
12. Iliad duel
13. Agamemnon and Paris
14. The Wrath of Achilles (Michael Martin Drolling)
15. Achilles and Petroklos
16. Achilles and Hector 1
17. Achilles and Hector 2
17. Achilles Slays Hector (Peter Paul Rubens)
18. Hypnos and Thanatos (Sleep and Death)
19. Iliad MS
20. Iliad frontispieces (John Ogilvy 1660)
21. Iliad Canto 8

### **The Odyssey**

1. Odysseus
2. Odysseus 2 (Joseph Noel Paton 1864)
3. Odysseus 3 (Alice and Martin Provensen 1956)
4. Odysseus' ship 1
5. Odysseus' ship 2

6. Odysseus' ship 3
7. Athena
8. Poseidon
9. The Cyclops
10. The Giants 1
11. The Giants 2 (José Martin)
12. The Giants 3
13. Circe
14. Odysseus visits the Underworld
15. The Sirens 1 (red-and-black vase)
16. The Sirens 2
17. The Sirens 3
18. The Sirens 4
19. Odysseus on Ogygia detained by Calypso (Jan van Brueghel the Elder)
20. Odysseus seduced by Calypso
21. Demodokos sings of Troy (John Flint 1810)
22. Demodokos sings (Francesco Hayez)
23. Penelope and the Suitors (John William Waterhouse)
24. Athena reveals Ithaca to Odysseus (Giuseppe Bottani)
25. Odysseus' homecoming 1 (Nausiaä)
26. Odysseus' homecoming 2 (dogs)
27. Odysseus and Eurycleia (Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein)
28. Ulysses and Telemachus kill Penelope's Suitors (William Desgeorge)
29. Odysseus' homecoming 3 (the Suitors)
30. Odyssey MS 15c, John Rhosos
31. Demetrios Chalkondyles, first publisher 1488 (Domenico Ghirlandaio)
32. Homerus, *Odisea*, 1794
33. Odysseus, Villa Romana de la Olmeda, mosaic 4<sup>th</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> cc.

## The Dramatists

### Aeschylus

1. Aeschylus
2. Shrine of Demeter at Eleusis
3. Theatre of Dionysus
4. Orestes and Iphigenia, mosaic
5. The Murder of Agamemnon (Pierre-Narcisse Gerin, 1817)
6. The Danaids kill their husbands
7. The death of Aeschylus
8. *Aeschyli Tragediae septem*, 1552

## **Sophocles**

1. Sophocles
2. Sophocles seated, in relief
3. The actor Euaion in *Andromenda*, 4<sup>th</sup> c BC
4. *Oedipus at Colonnas* (Theodore Giroust, 1788)

## **Euripides**

1. Euripides
2. Euripides seated, 2<sup>th</sup> c. AD
3. *The Bacchae*, Casa dei Vettii, Pompeii
4. Medea about to kill her children (Eugene Delacroix, 1862)
5. Euripides, statue, Semper Oper, Dresden, 19<sup>th</sup> c.

## **Kallimachos/Callimachus**

1. Kallimachos
2. The Library at Alexandria
3. Zeus Camiros
4. Vergil reading Kallimachus to Augustus

## **The Philosophers**

1. Plato Roman copy of a portrait bust c. 370 BC
2. Socrates
3. Aristotle, Roman copy of Greek bronze by Lysippos, c. 330 BC
4. School of Athens fresco by Raphael: Plato (left) holds his *Timaeus* while he gesturing to the heavens; Aristotle (right) gestures to the earth while holding a copy of his *Nicomachean Ethics* in his hand.
5. Plutarch, bust at Chaeronea
6. The Temple of Apollo at Delphi

# INTRODUCTION

The history of the People of God, and hence of the Bible, was determined by great, decisive, events of permanent implication for the life of the Hebrew tribes and then the for the nation of Israel. The movement of Jacob and his family to the land of Goshen to be with his son Joseph led in time to their enslavement by the Egyptians and their eventual escape from bondage under the leadership of Moses. Their miraculous escape through the Red Sea is known as the Exodus, and serves as the symbolic prototype of liberation from servitude. The Forty Years in the Wilderness that followed saw the bestowal of the Ten Words to Moses in the theophany on Mount Sinai. This was a cogent summary of the Torah, the 640 laws and statutes that would shape the People and point them to the Path of mercy and justice that leads to the divine peace *shalom*. The encounter with the Egyptians was thus of inexpressible importance to the psyche of the nation.

When Israel came forth from Egypt,  
Jacob's sons from an alien people,  
Judah became the Lord's temple.  
Israel became his kingdom. (Psalm 114)

Their history moved through the primitive days of the Conquest of Canaan, the rule of the Judges until the establishment of the monarchy by the Prophet Samuel, and the blueprint for a kingship of service under David. The division of the Kingdom after death of Solomon weakened the People politically, and saw them fall prey to the power politics of the Assyrians (722 BC and the abolition of the Northern Kingdom of Israel) and Babylon (597 BC and the invasion by the Babylonians that saw the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, and end of the Kingdom of Judah. The most important people were taken as captives to Babylon, this forming the second great even to enduring impact on the history and mentality of the People who now became as Jews. The destruction of the institutions of nationhood and religious practice saw the emergence of new concepts of worship and national identity, to the consolidation of the memories and traditions of the People by the priests that would eventually be shaped into the Scriptures.

By the rivers of Babylon  
There we sat and wept,  
Remembering Zion;  
On the poplars that grew there  
We hung up our harps. (Psalm 137)

The sixty years of the Exile in the heart of Babylonia saw another osmotic cultural encounter that would have enduring for the History of Religion. Once again the Exile and the Return became metaphors for the spiritual life of the nation—enslavement and liberation.

When the Lord delivered Zion from bondage  
It seemed like a dream.  
Then was our mouth filled with laughter.  
On our lips there were songs. (Psalm 126)

But the memories of the Babylonian Captivity lived on in the new language of Aramaic, in the memories of the lush Hanging Gardens of Babylon (paradise), and the myths learned from their captors (about the Great Flood of primordial times) that inspired the story of Noah in Genesis 8—9).

The People were allowed to the return to the Holy Land and to rebuild the Temple and the Holy City of Jerusalem (see Ezra and Nehemiah). But they would never regain political freedom. They were now vassals of the Persians, and in time of the Greeks who, under Alexander the Great (356-323 BC), invaded the Persian Empire and took Jerusalem in 322. Alexander's early death saw his vast conquests divided among his three great generals with Seleucus (d. 280 BC) taking Syria and Babylonia. His son Antiochus Epiphanes (215-163 BC) launched the third decisive event in the history of the People of God: his attempt to Hellenize the Jews, to extirpate the Jewish religion and replace it with Greek practice and culture. It provoked the great campaign of resistance under the Maccabee family (168 BC) and the heroes Mattathias, Simon, Jonathan and Judas Maccabeus (as recounted in detail in 1 & 2 Maccabees). The success of this resistance led to a brief interlude of self-rule under the priestly kings and John Hyrcanus (134 BC), and later the Idumean family of Herod the Great (74-4 BC), all now vassals of the Romans who took Jerusalem under Pompey the Great (66 BC).

Once again the heritage of the conquerors, this time of the Greeks, would be pervasive in the Hellenic lingua franca of the commonwealth of the Eastern Mediterranean, with thousands of Jews dispersed throughout the

Levant, heralding in New Testament times and the missionary journeys of Greek-speaking Paul of Tarsus to the Synagogues of Greece and Asia Minor. Paul was brought into close contact with the Greek religion. In Lystra he and Barnabas, having healed a cripple, were thought to be gods: “‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men’. Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, because he was the chief speaker, they called Hermes” (Acts 14:11-12). The Preaching of Paul created resistance in Ephesus, and caused a riot among the craftsmen who made silver shrines of Diana whose principal temple was in the city: “...when they heard this they were enraged, and cried out, ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’ So the city was filled with confusion,” (Acts 19:28-29). In Athens Paul famously addressed the philosophers at the Areopagus:

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him, as he saw that the city was full of idols ... so he argued in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there. Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him. And others said, ‘What would this babblers say?’” (Acts 17:16-18).

Contact with the Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Greeks, all entailing great social movement, pain, conflict, but also some kind of positive resolution, left indelible marks on the mentality of the People of God, and the genesis of the Scriptures—whether this be the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint or the New Testament. Language, culture, notions of divinity, human frailty, morality, law, sinfulness, forgiveness and redemption, the very notion of holy writings, are all interwoven into the history of the Bible. The influence of the three ancient cultures of the Ancient Middle East, Greece and then Rome, forms the context of the emergent Scriptures which through the ages continue to shape notions of theology and morality and the ordering of whole societies through the ages..

For the monotheistic Jews, these polytheistic cultures were anathema. The Hebrew attitude is summed up in Psalm 115:

**The Impotence of Idols and the Greatness of God**

Not to us, O LORD, not to us,  
but to thy name give glory,  
for the sake of thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness!

<sup>2</sup> Why should the nations say,  
“Where is their God?”

<sup>3</sup> Our God is in the heavens;  
he does whatever he pleases.

<sup>4</sup> Their idols are silver and gold,  
the work of men’s hands.



- <sup>5</sup> They have mouths, but do not speak;  
eyes, but do not see.
- <sup>6</sup> They have ears, but do not hear;  
noses, but do not smell.
- <sup>7</sup> They have hands, but do not feel;  
feet, but do not walk;  
and they do not make a sound in their throat.
- <sup>8</sup> Those who make them are like them;  
so are all who trust in them.
- <sup>9</sup> O Israel, trust in the LORD!  
He is their help and their shield.
- <sup>10</sup> O house of Aaron, put your trust in the LORD!  
He is their help and their shield.
- <sup>11</sup> You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD!  
He is their help and their shield.
- <sup>12</sup> The LORD has been mindful of us; he will bless us;  
he will bless the house of Israel;  
he will bless the house of Aaron;
- <sup>13</sup> he will bless those who fear the LORD,  
both small and great.
- <sup>14</sup> May the LORD give you increase,  
you and your children!
- <sup>15</sup> May you be blessed by the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth!
- <sup>16</sup> The heavens are the LORD's heavens,  
but the earth he has given to the sons of men.
- <sup>17</sup> The dead do not praise the LORD,  
nor do any that go down into silence.
- <sup>18</sup> But we will bless the LORD  
from this time forth and for evermore.  
Praise the LORD!

But the religions of these nations which surrounded Israel and so radically affected its very nature and being, cannot not be so easily dismissed as empty idolatry. The nations were all ontologically affected by their very geography—whether this was the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia (with Ur of the Chaldeans being birthplace of Abram/Abraham, ‘Our Father in Faith’, Genesis 11:26-12:3), with the huge forces of nature embodied in the great embracing rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates who brought fertility and also flood; or by the more regulated but equally vital artery of the River Nile bringing life and fruitfulness to Egypt out of the desert; or, in the case of the Hellenic people, by the mountains and caves of Greece, the peninsulas and islands of the Aegean Sea and the mystique of sailing and war-ships, travel and wandering across the enchanted isles.

All these people had deeply held beliefs, all worshipped pantheons of gods, all with different characteristics and perceptions. All worked on the vital assumptions and stories of creation and its inherent moral consequences and/or contingent ethical demands. Their gods reflect the nature of the people who invented them: their racial characteristics, their geography and environment, their understanding of humanity and the world around them, their environment and the destiny of the world. All their pantheons are related either to the forces of nature, or to the mysteries of human nature and psychology. All the gods and their histories provide protologies (explanations about the origins of the world and its purpose), and eschatologies (understanding the mysteries of death, judgment, heaven and hell). Notions of the spirit, the soul, and the possibility of afterlife are all found in varying degrees of explanation. The issues of morality are also present: ambiguously for the Sumerian/Babylonians; a call to responsibility in life for the Egyptians; a complex aspect of the human condition and psyche for the Greeks. But all had their modes of worship, their cultic places, rituals, holy spaces and sacred temples. All of these cultures left a literature that reveals so much about their understanding of life, religion and faith—whether secular or sacred. These texts are mirrors into their very souls. All these cultures relate life and its fullness to faith and religious practice. And many of these factors obviously had influence on the more abstract concept of divinity practiced by the Jews, with its call to holiness and moral righteousness enshrined in sacred Law. But notions of afterlife and resurrection would only come slowly over the centuries, and may be seen as part of the heritage of the ancient cultures the Jews were exposed to by the exigencies of their tumultuous history (see Daniel 12:1-4).

## **The Egyptians**

The Mesopotamian spring floods of the Euphrates and Tigris were different from the overflowing of the River Nile which happened regularly every year, which men could prepare for and indeed welcome for the rich fertility the alluvial waters brought to the land. All life in Egypt depended on the Nile and its unfailing bounty.

The sacred cities of Egypt (Memphis, Thebes), were built on one (Eastern) side of the Nile, while on the other (Western) side rose another city: the city of the dead (the pyramids at Giza, the Valley of the Kings at Luxor). When the Egyptians became convinced that they, as well as the pharaohs and the important officials, had a life after death, the cult of the dead

became one of the most essential parts of their lives. The Egyptians had such a love of life that they were prepared to do anything to secure it for eternity.

The Egyptian religion included the worship of many gods, who were adored in many forms. Egypt had one of the largest and most complex pantheons of gods of any civilization in the ancient world. Over the course of Egyptian history hundreds of gods and goddesses were worshipped. The characteristics of individual gods could be hard to pin down. Most had a principal association (for example, with the sun or the underworld) and form. But these could change over time as gods rose and fell in importance and evolved in ways that corresponded to developments in Egyptian society. There was the sun-god Re (or Ra) who in the shape of a man, was called Atum, and as scarab beetle, the symbol of the sunrise and eternal movement of the sun, was known as Kheper or Khepri. Khnemu was the god who formed mankind and gods and their Ka (soul) on his potter's wheel. Then there was Amun, the great god of Thebes. When the Theban pharaohs came to power, he was identified with Re the sun-god. Ptah was the creator of Memphis and the patron of craftsmen. Thoth, the ibis-headed god, was the inventor of writing and the scribe of Anubis, the jackal-god, patron of embalmers. The most important goddess was Hathor, the goddess of love and plenty. There were also lesser gods, with each city having their own patron gods or goddesses. Many animals were worshipped either as gods or as symbols of the various gods.

But the most popular of all gods were three who formed a divine family. These were Isis, Osiris and Horus. They represented nature in all its aspects from season to season. The story went that Osiris, the heavenly god, ruled happily over Egypt until his evil brother Seth (the god of chaos, violence, desert and storm) killed him by treachery and threw his body into the sea shut in a trunk. Isis sought out her husband and when she found his body persuaded Re to bring him back to life. But Osiris was not able to return to this world completely, and stayed in the underworld where he reigned as king. Their son Horus grew up, and wishing to avenge his father challenged Seth to a great battle in which both received terrible wounds. Seth accused Horus of not being the rightful heir to Osiris, but a tribunal of gods recognized the right of the young ruler.

Like all Mediterranean myths, in which god dies annually and is reborn (like the Phoenician Tammuz), Osiris represents the passage of the summer. In the autumn, it gives its fruits and dies, and after the winter it is reborn with the spring.

The Temple was at the centre of life, a portico to transcendence. Two massive pylons flanked the entrance to an open courtyard. Through the doorway there was a great chamber supported by rows of columns, dark like a forest, covered in decoration. This was the central part of the divine temple, full of grandiose solemnity. The most sacred room was at the end, a small space, sacred, entered by priests and the Pharaoh only. This was the sanctuary where the god was always present, where the priests could converse with him and hear his commands.

The Egyptians were devoted to their life here on earth, and after death they looked forward to continuing their terrestrial life rather than a different heavenly one. To be certain of not losing touch with the world, they invented two souls. The first was called Ba and dwelt in the heavenly home of the gods in the form of a bird. The second, called Ka, kept his human shape and could come back to earth. Although the first was considered more noble, the Egyptians were more interested in the second, and devoted all their attention to it.

First of all, the Egyptian had to prepare himself for the judgement of the gods. Every dead person had to present himself before a tribunal of the gods to be judged. There he would find a great scale, on one side of which were weighed up all his sins, and on the other side his good deeds. If his sins outweighed his good deeds, he had to beware. There would be nothing in the afterlife but darkness and punishment. But there was a way out of this difficulty. The Egyptians knew many magic spells which, when written in hieroglyphics and placed beside the dead man in his tomb, would secure him a safe-passage into the afterlife. Then his Ka could return to earth and take on a new life, rather like Osiris. When his Ka returned, the person would find his body intact, or at least a painted statue of himself. And he would be able to enjoy the pleasures of this world because he would find in his tomb, either real or pictured, everything he liked and needed. He would find food, drink, furniture, trees, flowers and animals of every kind. For the Egyptians, preparing for death meant making ready everything that pleased him in life.

For this reason the Egyptian prepared for himself on the other bank of the Nile, in the city of the dead, a convenient tomb, full of furniture where he could be comfortable, and another room above which was open. On the walls of the open room would be pictured all the happy events of the life he had lived. Thus his soul could relive them at his own pleasure.

## **The Mesopotamians (Sumerians/Babylonians)**

To the Sumerians, the first great civilization of land between the Tigris and the Euphrates, and the first builders of cities, the king was particularly the one who talked with the gods, and who told the people what the gods wished them to do. Everything that happened in the Sumerian city—work in the city or the fields, the laws and justice—were directed by the god of the city. The god was the real master of the city. The Sumerians believed that the battles they fought were conducted by their gods against the gods of their enemies. Their victories were the victories of their gods. For this reason the most important gods in Mesopotamian history were those whose followers were victorious: first Enlil, the Sumerian god; then Marduk, the Babylonian god; and then Ashur, the god of Assyrians.

Like all the ancient peoples, the Sumerians had a profound sense of the divine. They did not love their gods; on the contrary, they were frightened of them. They did not understand them. They felt in continual awe of them, and they also felt continually that they must pacify and placate them since they felt that the gods were against the nature of mankind. Their gods were violent and rough, and were, in fact, real expressions of natural forces, before which man felt himself small and weak. One could hope for little from the gods in this life, and even less in the next. For them, death led inevitably to a sad, dark world where there was no joy.

The temple was huge and dominant, a high rectangular building with various doors leading off it, the front decorated with mosaics, the pillars white and red. Behind the temple was a tower called the *ziggurat*. It was built on a foundation of clay painted over with black bitumen, and was a sort of pyramid of stairways and terraces.

It little mattered what god was being worshipped. It could be An, the god of the sky; or Enlil, the god of the earth and storms who became increasingly respected and of greater importance. Enki was the god of the underworld who carried a long septre surmounted by a ram's head; or it could be Utum, god of the sun, with flames leaping from his shoulders; or Inanna, goddess of love and war. Later the other peoples of Mesopotamia (the Babylonians and Assyrians) worshipped the same gods but under different names; An was known as Anu, Enki as Ea, Utu they called Shamash, and Inanna was famous everywhere as Ishtar. They were mysterious and solemn, connected with the dark forces of nature and the splendour of the changing seasons.

Mesopotamia was a fertile land, but it was also a severe one. It was infested with fierce animals, especially lions that wandered through countryside, to the great peril of the unwary human. The people believed that these beasts were certainly sent against them by a cruel spirit or demon. Furthermore, the two rivers that provided the country with its palm-trees and crops, could also bring disaster. In the springtime, when the waters were full from the melting snows off the mountains, the rivers might break their banks and flood over the fields, destroying villages, carrying away animals, turning vast tracts of land into wide, black, empty lakes. Terrible devastation and suffering could result, and the people lived in fear of their lives and livelihoods. These floods were haphazard, unpredictable, terrifying. They seemed like an explosion of anger on the part of the elements (hence the gods) for the follies of mankind, punishment for human misdeeds.

Among the various myths of the Sumerians was a frightening one about the ancient anger of the gods which caused them to cover the whole earth with a great flood. All mankind and the animals would have drowned if Enki, the god of the waters and the underworld, had not warned the sage Utnapishtim, who lived in the city of Shuruppak, of the disaster the gods were preparing. He was instructed to build a boat so that he and his wife, with animals of every kind, were saved from the deluge that followed, and when the waters subsided, the world could reproduce itself from them.

The people of Mesopotamia lived with this fear of the gods whose anger might erupt at any moment. The principal duty of the king was to intercede for the people with the gods, to interpret their commands and to placate their anger.

## **The Greeks**

The ancient religion and practices of the Greeks were characterized by a belief in multiple humanlike gods under one supreme god and by an absence of dogma. The worship of the sky god Zeus began as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, but Greek religion in the established sense began around 750 BC and lasted for over a thousand years. The Greeks had numerous gods who controlled various natural or social forces, and different deities were worshiped in different localities.

The Greek gods of Mount Olympus were cruel and fickle, passionate and vindictive, jealous and insecure, petty and insane. They represent an attempt by the ancient Greeks to explain the chaos of the universe through

human nature. Thus, like every deity invented before and since, these gods and goddesses are embodiments of human solipsism. The stories of their battles, bickering, and sexual conquests have indelibly influenced the course of Western language and narrative. Describing the complex genealogies of the gods led the poet Hesiod from the begetting of the Titans and of Aphrodite under all her titles and aspects, to Apollo, Hermes and the reign of Zeus, touching along the way upon the affairs of Pan, nymphs, satyrs, cosmogonies and the birth of mankind, until he reached the ineffable mystery of Dionysus

Everything in the city of Athens was dominated by the Acropolis, a high rocky crag 1000 ft. long and 500 ft wide. The name means 'city on the height', and people had lived there ever since the new Stone Age. At the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> c. BC, when bronze was slowly giving way to iron, and the Greeks were besieging Troy, the palaces of the Athenian kings stood there, surrounded by a wall made of blocks so huge that later people thought it had been constructed by giants. Even when the Athenians dispensed with kings, the Acropolis still remained the fortress of the city, was occasionally used as a stronghold by tyrants, and in 480 BC was held for two weeks against the Persians when the rest of the city had been captured. When, however, at the promptings of Themistocles, the whole city was surrounded by walls, the Acropolis lost its importance as a fortress and became the religious centre of Athens.

Some temples were built elsewhere in the 5<sup>th</sup> c.; for example, the best preserved of all Greek temples, that of Hephaestus, god of the smiths, was built to the West of the Agora, but the main centre for the new temples was the Acropolis.

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and the works of Hesiod who lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. BC, tell us something about the gods for whom these temples were built. There was Zeus the supreme god, who with his wife Hera, dwelt in splendour among the misty peaks of Mount Olympus. He had brothers and sisters: Poseidon, god of the sea, Hades, the brooding god of death, Demeter the corn-spirit, and Hestia, goddess of the hearth who protected the home. Then there were the sons and daughters: Athena, the warrior goddess, but also patron of the arts, and protector of Athens; Apollo the god of light and music and guider of oracles; the rather cold and cruel Artemis, goddess of the chase; Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty, with the child Eros as a faithful attendant, and the crippled god of fire, Hephaetus as her husband; Hermes of the winged feet and sly tongue, messenger of the gods, who protected travelers; and the war-god, the

brawny but stupid Ares. There were scores of other gods: each craft or profession, each stream or glade, had a deity or spirit, nymph or satyr. It was said that nature was crowded with them to overflowing.

Greek painters always portrayed their gods and goddesses in human form, (not as in Egypt and other Eastern countries with the heads or bodies of jackals and other beasts). This is because they thought of their gods as glorified human beings with all their faults and virtues. The gods were cleverer and stronger than ordinary human beings and they were immortal, but they also quarreled and bickered and told lies in a very human way. The Athenians adopted Athena, one of the most respectable of Zeus's children, as their patron goddess. They offered her rich gifts, slaughtered fine animals before her altars, and honoured her with festivals. In return they expected her to protect their city and give it victory in war. Seldom, however, is there any indication that they believed the goddess was concerned with the character of her worshippers, nor did Athena offer any reward for a righteous life. The most Athenians could look forward to was a shadowy existence among the ghosts of Hades's underworld. Athena's worshippers, gave her so much while she promised little and was neglectful in the performance of her duties. The fact and the scandalous behavior of her siblings meant that some Athenians doubted her existence, but to most citizens she was real enough, and for many centuries sacrifice continued to be offered in her home on the Acropolis.

The Acropolis was, however, hardly a fit home for a daughter of Zeus. The temples had been burned down by the Persians before the Battle of Salamis, and most of them still lay in blackened ruins. Pericles, leader of Athens for nearly 30 years after 460 BC, determined not only that Athena should be re-housed in splendour, but that the Acropolis as a whole should be refurbished in a manner that befitted the capital of a great empire. The work, began at a time when Athens under Pericles's leadership dominated Greece, was not finished until long after his death when in the last years of the century, Athens had been beaten to her knees by a triumphant Sparta. Although the war against Sparta held up the building programme, it was not allowed to interrupt the religious life of Athens. Athena continued to be celebrated as she had done for the past 150 years in her great festivals. The brilliant white marble of the Parthenon standing against the blue Mediterranean sky, serenely presided over the illustrious city, a symbol of a particular vision of life and a mythology of exquisite beauty.



For the great poet Friedrich von Schiller (1750-1805), the passing of the Greek religion and all it stood for was a matter of the deepest regret and sorrow.

While our beautiful world was still governed  
By guiding rays from your eternal light,  
When men and nations were still happily led,  
—Beautiful beings from fairy lands bedight—  
When still your sacred worship shone,  
How different was the world by our gaze found,  
When man your temples so happily crowned  
Oh fair Amathusia [Aphrodite]!

When the magic of poetry's fair garbs  
Still wound around the truth's dizzying heights,  
Through creation streamed life's happy fullness—  
Such things once felt no longer greet our sights.  
To press against the bosom of a chaste  
Nature filled all with high nobility,  
Each eye enlightened with ability  
Could trace in her a Godly face.

A higher prize strengthened the wrestler  
On the labouring path of true virtue;  
And those who accomplished great deeds  
Climbed their way up to the Olympian blue.  
Before the one who claimed each vanquished soul  
All the Gods bowed in silence solemnly,  
And the sailor from Neptune's silvery sea  
Saw the twins in the starry bowl.

Oh beautiful world, where art thou flown?  
Oh face of nature's purest bloom, return!  
Now only in the fairy land of song  
Still lives the image for which we yearn.  
And barren mourn once blooming fields,  
No Godhead lights up nature's visage;  
How from the world's every living image,  
Naught but a shadow yields!

But all such blooms have long since vanished,  
The spring of beauty chilled by northern winds;  
Where for one truth to have itself enriched,  
Authority, a world of Gods rescinds.

Weeping, I search in vain the starry spheres  
For Selena—no longer can one find you!  
Nothing is heard from the airy blue,  
Save for the sound of falling tears.  
A stranger made to all the joy she yields,  
Nevermore to be enchanted by her grace. (*Die Götter Griechenlands*, 1788)

# THE RELIGION OF ANCIENT EGYPT

## 1. The Periods of Egyptian History

### 1. The Old Kingdom (4<sup>th</sup> —6<sup>th</sup> dynasties)

The 1<sup>st</sup> —3<sup>rd</sup> dynasties are archaic

Memphis

Cheops and the Pyramids of Giza

2400-2100 BC

The First Intermediate Period (2100-2000 BC)

Abraham came to Egypt at the end of the period, obscure.

### 2. The Middle Kingdom, 12<sup>th</sup> —17<sup>th</sup> dynasties)

The Classical period of Ancient Egypt

2000-1800 BC

Sesostris, Amenemhat

Thebes

The Second Intermediate Period (1700 BC)

The invasion of the Hyksos

Perhaps the Philistines

### 3. The New Kingdom (18<sup>th</sup> —20<sup>th</sup> dynasties)

The most important period

1600-1100 BC

Amenophis, Thutmosis, Ramses

Moses and the Exodus of the Israelites?

The Third Intermediate Period (1100-100 BC)

Priestly Period

Successions of invasions by the Assyrians, Persians, and Greeks until  
350 BC

Egypt was essentially a religious nation. Herodotus wrote that the Egyptians were the most religious people in history. Religion and temple were central to the life of the nation. In Ancient Egypt there were no palaces, only temples and tombs, necropolises.

## 2. Cosmology

The priests provided a cosmology. There were three great systems, created in the proto-historical period of the first three dynasties. The stories existed before the pyramids (3000 BC).

### The System of Heliopolis

This was the first capital with a very intellectual source of all religious understanding in Egypt. First there was a chaos of inert water (*nun*). The sun emerged of its own volition at Heliopolis (*benben*—Semitic “to emerge”). The Sun had three names:

- 1) In the morning (*Kheper*), a scarab pushing a ball of dung
- 2) At noon (*Re*)
- 3) At sunset (*Atum*)

Re at the centre of the universe oversaw all creation, the elements and the gods.

RE			
Chu (air)			Tefnut (water)
Geb (earth)			Nut (heaven)
Set/Seth	Osiris	Isis	Nephthys
(fecundity, vegetation)		(love, mother)	

### The System of Hermapolis

This emerged from the battle between two cities of priests. This system was more poetic. The world was born at Hermapolis. The Sun, to emerge from chaos, had to be the creator of the chaos. There were four couples of snakes and frogs, the prehistoric gods.

## **The System of Memphis**

This is historical, from the first reigns at Memphis. This was a synthesis of the two existing systems. Ptah wanted to create the world, his intelligence and his will were involved. The creation came by his word. This is close to the world of Genesis. Ptah united the two divergent aspects of the universe. This was an intellectual religion more than a popular faith. The story of **Osiris and Isis** came to play an important part in this system as the priests tried to synthesize intellectual and popular elements.

### **3. Isis and Osiris, the Concept of Kingship**

Osiris lived with Isis in his golden temple. His brother Seth was jealous, and killed him. Isis made a sepulchre for her husband, but Seth cut Osiris into 14 pieces and scattered them all over Egypt. Isis searched for them, found them, and by the force of her love, put them together again and brought Osiris back to life. Their child was Horus who became the avenger of his father. His battle with Seth lasted across the decades before Horus finally cornered Seth in the desert, and became King of Egypt. The Greek text of this story is found in Plutarch.<sup>1</sup>

Of all the tales told of the gods, the one that meant most for the Ancient Egyptians was the story of Osiris who was killed by his brother Set and who rose again to new life. Geb, god of the earth, and Nut, goddess of the heavens, had two sons Osiris and Set, and two daughters, Isis and Nephthys. Isis and Osiris became one couple, and Nephthys and Set another. Set received the desert and the sky above for his portion, Osiris the Nile and the fruit-bearing earth. Osiris became king over Egypt, and was so a good a ruler that all loved him. Osiris lived with Isis in his golden temple. But Set envied his brother and resolved to kill him. He had a handsome box made, just large enough for Osiris who was taller than all others. Then, when Osiris had invited him to a banquet, he took the chest with him, and a band of conspirators as well. He promised the splendid chest to the one who it fitted exactly. When Osiris tried it, Set quickly closed the lid, and the conspirators threw the chest into the Nile. Osiris drowned, and was carried away by the current. His unhappy wife Isis wandered all over the earth until at last she found the dead Osiris. She broke out into lamentations: "Come to your house, you whose heart stands still. God and men turn the faces unto you. I call to you until my voice is heard unto heaven!" Isis made a sepulchre for her husband, but Seth cut Osiris into 14 pieces and scattered them all over Egypt. Isis searched for them, found them, and by the force of her love, put them together again. Then Anubis, the god who reigns, on the threshold between here and the hereafter, wrapped the body in mummy bands and buried it. But after

Osiris's death, Isis bore a son who was named Horus. When Set sought to kill the child of Osiris also, Isis hid him in the thickets of reeds in the Delta. Their child was Horus who became the avenger of his father. When Horus was born he met his father's murderer. His battle with Seth lasted for centuries before Horus finally cornered Seth in the desert. They fought, Set fell, but Horus lost an eye. Thoth, the god of wisdom, placed this eye upon Osiris's heart, which was then given sight, and Osiris saw that another life existed. The resurrected Osiris became King in the Land of the Western Ones, where men go after death. The living Horus, however, assumed the rulership of Egypt, and henceforth every Pharaoh was known as Living Horus as long as he wore the crown of the Two Lands. When he moved to the Land of the Western Ones he became Osiris.<sup>2</sup>

Osiris was the god who created a happy world, a golden age of peace and fertility. The war between Horus and Seth represents the struggle against the desert. Egypt was a nation surrounded by enemies. Fourteen cities in Egypt received pieces of Osiris. These became the centres of a cult. The reunification of the pieces by Isis was the origin of mummification, concern for life after death, for the dawn. **Horus became the model for the perfect kingship.** The story became the origin and understanding of creation, geography, national consciousness, religion, cult, and kingship.

**HYMN TO OSIRIS.** "Homage to thee, Osiris, Lord of eternity, King of the Gods, whose names are manifold, whose forms are holy, thou being of hidden form in the temples, whose Ka is holy. Thou art the governor of Tattu (Busiris), and also the mighty one in Sekhem (Letopolis). Thou art the Lord to whom praises are ascribed in the tome of Ati, thou art the Prince of divine food in Anu. Thou art the Lord who is commemorated in Maati, the Hidden Soul, the Lord of Qerrt (Elephantine), the Ruler supreme in White Wall (Memphis). Thou art the Soul of Ra, his own body, and hast thy place of rest in Henensu (Herakleopolis). Thou art the beneficent one, and art praised in Nart. Thou makest thy soul to be raised up. Thou art the Lord of the Great House in Khemenu (Hermopolis). Thou art the mighty one of victories in Shas-hetep, the Lord of eternity, the Governor of Abydos. The path of his throne is in Ta-tcheser (a part of Abydos). Thy name is established in the mouths of men. Thou art the substance of Two Lands (Egypt). Thou art Tem, the feeder of Kau (Doubles), the Governor of the Companies of the gods. Thou art the beneficent Spirit among the spirits. The god of the Celestial Ocean (Nu) draweth from thee his waters. Thou sendest forth the north wind at eventide, and breath from thy nostrils to the satisfaction of thy heart. Thy heart reneweth its youth, thou producest the [....] The stars in the celestial heights are obedient unto thee, and the great doors of the sky open themselves before thee. Thou art he to whom praises are ascribed in the southern heaven, and thanks are given for thee in the northern heaven. The