

STUDIES
IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

(SUPPLEMENTS TO *NUMEN*)

XXX

THE RAINBOW

A COLLECTION OF STUDIES
IN THE SCIENCE OF RELIGION



LEIDEN
E. J. BRILL
1975

207.08
M112
V.20

THE RAINBOW

A COLLECTION OF STUDIES
IN THE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

BY

C. J. BLEEKER

Emeritus Professor of the History and the
Phenomenology of Religions
Amsterdam



LEIDEN
E. J. BRILL
1975

SOME CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION

History of religions is both a fascinating and a difficult discipline. It opens a wide world to the alert student which presents to his astonished eyes an endless variety of religious ideas and customs. There is hardly a science which enlarges man's spiritual horizon to such a degree as history of religions does. It gives the highest satisfaction when one manages to understand the significance of strange forms of belief. But frequently the facts show a sphinxlike nature. Sometimes evidence is scarce. In other cases texts are hardly translatable; and when you can translate the words, it is conceivable that one may not understand their meaning. Then the student of history of religions realizes that religious people possess a secret. How to elicit the hidden meaning of religious notions and rites, how to reach the core and kernel of a certain religion, of religion in general?

It is no wonder that the question of the right method of inquiry arises. And today, once again, this question is brought to the center of discussion. Two indications of this revived of interest are the symposium on "The Methodology of the Science of Religion", held 27-31 August 1973 in Turku in Finland under the patronage of the International Association for the History of Religions, and the series of publications entitled "Religion and Reason", which are devoted to "Method and Theory in the Study and Interpretation of Religion".

The present author would be the last to underestimate the importance of such methodological researches. But by experience he knows that discussions on the matter tend to become lengthy, confused and unprofitable. Unfortunately the trite saying applies here that talking about method is often like eternally sharpening your knife while you do not get anything to eat.

Therefore I am convinced that the right method of studying history of religions can best be demonstrated by showing how you actually get hold of the essence of a certain historical religion. The essence of a religion can be approached in different ways. Scholars either try to formulate a succinct definition or give a lengthy description of the religion in question. I propose to follow another procedure i.e. to pay attention to the characteristic features of the relevant religion. In this case it is the ancient Egyptian religion, which is my special field of research. This gives me the advantage of being able to refer

continuously in my argument to my own studies; I can make use of previous formulations. In my opinion this example of how one tackles the problems of the study of a given religion can be enlightening for the study of the religions of Antiquity as such and *mutatis mutandis* for the study of the other religions of the world as well.

In order to visualize the characteristic features of the ancient Egyptian religion one should walk in a tripartite path. First it is necessary to consider the nature of the sources, and to inquire about the kind of information they present or do not offer. Second, the Egyptologist should make himself conscious of the picture of the Egyptian religion which he has gradually acquired. It sounds paradoxical that in order to detect the characteristic features of this religion one should first draw up a general picture of the same religion. This is only an apparent paradox. On closer and critical inspection, it is evident that the Egyptologist interprets the significance of certain gods or cultic acts against the background of what he understands to be the typical features of the religion. Usually this side of the study of the Egyptian religion is left in the dark. Methodological clarity is increased when one becomes conscious of the fact, that the general picture of a religion gives depth to the study of its specific features, and that the study of the specific characteristics enriches the general view of the religion. Thus there is a interpenetration. Third, the real task, i.e. the description of the characteristic features can be taken up. But here a question arises: is there a criterium to determine the actual characteristic features of a religion? The answer must be: nobody can prove theoretically that what he singles out as characteristic actually has this function. There is however a double guarantee: first we may trust that the experienced researcher will search diligently, sharply and without error and, second the self-evidence of the results of the study should convince even a sceptical reader that the researcher can not be far from the mark.

I. A FEW METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A) The first question which arise, concerns the nature of the texts which supply the knowledge about the ancient Egyptian religion. It appears that there are the following categories of religious texts: (1) hymns devoted to gods and pharaohs; (2) rituals, e.g. the order of the daily cult; the litany, the texts of the hourly service and of the "mysteries" of Osiris, and the texts of the cult of Hathor and Horus; (3) the texts which express the idea of the sacral kingship, in relation

to the birth and the ascension to the throne of the pharaoh; (4) funeral texts, of which category the pyramid texts, the coffin texts and the book of the dead are the principal representatives; (5) magic spells; (6) books of wisdom; and (7) legends with a mythological and religious strain.

In this connection there is no point in digressing about all the philological difficulties which the Egyptologist encounters when he tries to read the texts in order to get insight into the nature of the ancient Egyptian religion. We can skip this item. It will serve our interests better to envisage the nature, the typical traits and the function of these texts directly. Several important remarks in this matter are in order.¹

First, the texts in question are products of a literary religious tradition. They are holy books, but they do not form a canon, i.e. a fixed list of books which are supposed to contain divine truth and which therefore possess authority. Elsewhere I have elaborated this theme at some length; I refer here to that study of mine.² From this inquiry the conclusion can be drawn that the Egyptians have never written books in order to develop certain religious doctrines. There was no official statement about correct belief. The religious texts served the cultic and religious needs.

Next, apart from the famous Shabaka text³ which contains a myth of creation in the shape of a kind of Logos doctrine, meant as an eulogy on Ptah of Memphis, mythological or theological expositions are nowhere to be found. H. Frankfort has rightly pointed out that no text contains the myth of creation in extenso.⁴ The only references are to what happened at the creation. The same holds true for the myth of Osiris. If Plutarch had not written his well known story about the fortunes of Osiris, it would not have been easy to get a clear picture of this myth. For the texts contain only casual references to the myth. Moreover these quotations sometimes contradict each other.

No one who is acquainted with the character of the Egyptian literature will expect to find a text with broad mythological speculations. For the Egyptians never pursued the epic and the dramatic

¹ C. J. Bleeker, *Haibor and Thoth, Two Key Figures of the Ancient Egyptian Religion*, 1973, p. 4 sq.

² C. J. Bleeker, "Religious Tradition and Sacred Books in Ancient Egypt" (*Holy Book & Holy Tradition*, edited by F. F. Bruce & E. G. Rupp, 1968).

³ K. Sethe, *Dramatische Texte zu altaegyptischen Mysterienspielen*, 1928.

⁴ H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, 1948, p. 124 sq.

literary genre, but were masters in writing poetry (hymns and lyrical poems), and in telling short stories. In religious respect, they lacked the mythical imagination in which the Sumerians, the Babylonians and the Greek excelled. They are akin in this matter to the Romans whose religion is poor in myth. This fact is one of the considerations which at the time has led me to doubt whether ancient Egypt ever had theologians in the true sense of the word. This is generally accepted without any proof.⁵

The importance of the latter remark on the nature of the texts is far reaching. It places the Egyptian gods into a new light. As in the course of this argument will appear more clearly, a number of gods are a-mythical, in the sense that no myth of any scope is connected to them. Their nature must be inferred from certain attributes and symbols. This latter fact draws our attention to a source of information which is usually neglected and, with respect to which W. B. Kristensen has recognized the significance, i.e. symbolic representations.⁶ In his pictorial phantasy, his visual imagination the Egyptian apparently has often interpreted his religious knowledge and insight in symbols rather than in mythological paraphrases.

It should also be realized that the texts which are generally mentioned are related to the official religion, especially to the cult of the state. Even the funeral texts which take their origin from one of the personal events of life, i.e. death, bear a somewhat impersonal character. That means that we hardly know the personal conviction and the piety of the Egyptians as individuals. Yet there are some testimonies thereof, to be found on the memorial stones of the Theban necropolis, which give a look into what has been called "the religion of the poor",⁷ and in the hymns in honour of Hathor and Horus which as I pointed out testify to the religious feelings of people of a higher standing.⁸ But these are exceptions. The type and the function of the bulk of the texts can be defined in no better way than by stating that they have their "Sitz im Leben" in the cult, in the strict and in the general sense of the word. It follows that the religion of

⁵ C. J. Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals, Enactments of Religious Renewal*, 1967, p. 12 sq.

⁶ W. B. Kristensen, *Het leven uit de dood*, 1949; *Verzamelde Bijdragen tot de kennis van de antieke godsdiensten*, 1947.

⁷ A. Erman, *Denksteine aus der thebanischen Gräberwelt* (Sitzungsberichte der Berl. Ak. der Wiss, 1911); B. Gun, "The Religion of the Poor" (*J.E.A.* III).

⁸ C. J. Bleeker, "Thoth in den Altägyptischen Hymnen" (*Ex Orde Religionum, Studia Geo Widengren oblata I*, 1973); "Der religiöse Gehalt einiger Hathor-Lieder" (*Z.A.S.*, 9 Band, zweites Heft, 1973).

ancient Egypt is mainly of a cultic nature and that to a high extent the religious ideas can be deduced from the cultic acts and the short accompanying texts. Anyone who is not convinced of the truth of this thesis should look at the representations in the temples and in the graves. He will not fail to detect an endless series of cultic acts and especially of offering scenes.

B) The second methodological principle prescribes that close attention should be paid to ancient Egyptian religious terminology. For this matter I may refer to a study of mine on "Einige Bemerkungen zur religiösen Terminologie der alten Ägypter" which has been published elsewhere recently.⁹ Therefore I can be brief. My starting point was a remark of S. Morenz that in the Egyptian language the notions "religion", "belief", "piety" do not occur, a remarkable fact, because these notions belong to the basic elements of common religious terminology. The fact suggests that the Egyptians had not yet reached the stage of religious reflection on which these notions arise. This conclusion is confirmed by the information supplied in the volume "Ägyptisch-Deutsch" of the wellknown "Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache", in which the words are arranged in categories. Under the rubric "religion" one finds many words for all things that belong to the cult, but no real doctrinal terms. Yet it cannot be doubted that the Egyptians had a religious terminology. This can be detected in a number of typical religious notions and especially in religious nuances of wellknown words. The quoted study gives examples, with reference to the gods, religious anthropology, the cult, and the conception of the world. This means that in order to get hold of the typical Egyptian way of thinking one should forget one's own conceptions. That is not so easy because a dictionary of the ancient Egyptian religious terminology is still lacking.

C) The word "history of religions" suggest the idea that the main task of the discipline is to sketch the historical development of the different religions. In regard to certain religions, such as Judaism and Christianity this work can actually be done. However in the study of the ancient Egyptian religion the search for a historical perspective is irrelevant. For this religion possessed a pattern which from the beginning of historical times until the last period of the Egyptian culture has maintained its dominant position. The ancient Egyptian had no dynamic world conception in the modern sense of the world but his view of the universe and society was static. He was convinced

⁹ Travels in the World of the Old Testament, 1974.

that Ma-a-t, the world order, which had been established at creation would eternally be valid, notwithstanding temporary chaos, lawlessness and social dissolution.¹⁰

This does not imply that in the course of the three thousand years of the Egyptian history no alterations took place.¹¹ Primarily in the cultural, social and political sector they are clearly observable. Also changes occurred in religion, f.i. in the democratization of religious life—with the effect that immortality (once the prerogative of the pharaohs) was also conceded to common people—, in the queer worship of animals in the last phase of the Egyptian religion. Furthermore significant periods can be mentioned, such as the reformation of Amenophis IV-Echnation. Folkreligion led its own life as always. A special tone is stricken by the books of wisdom. Curious phenomena are the critical judgment of society and culture, uttered by the so called pseudo-prophets, and the doubts about the sense of life which is voiced in a few texts.

Yet all these phenomena do not detract from the validity of the main religious pattern. The conclusion from this fact is of paramount importance for the way in which the religio-historical facts are to be handled. Though historical nuances should not be neglected, the Egyptologist has the full right to collect his material from different periods of the Egyptian religion in order to reconstruct the image of a god, a myth or a rite. This principle helps him considerably, because the facts concerning a certain theme are generally so scarce that they only become intelligible when pieces of evidence from different periods are combined.

II. THE NATURE OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION

A description of all the facets of the ancient Egyptian religion would exceed the scope of this article. It suffices here to pay attention to the following four typical and constitutive qualities.¹²

A) The religion of ancient Egypt belongs to the category of ancient religions. In the first place this means that it is a dead religion. Its adherents cannot be interrogated about the purport of concepts and custom which are incomprehensible to us. Secondly it means that the knowledge of the deity which the Egyptians had, was not acquired through the medium of prophetic pronouncements, but was derived

¹⁰ C. J. Bleeker, "The Pattern of the Ancient Egyptian Culture" (*Cahiers d'histoire mondiale*, 1965).

¹¹ Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth*, p. 7 sq.

¹² *Idem*, p. 10 sq.

from nature, from the cosmos. This does not signify that the gods were the deification of certain natural phenomena. They acted as independent, spiritual beings. It is important to note that the religious knowledge derived from nature gave rise to an image of God totally different from that of the great world religions.

In ancient Egypt thought was greatly fascinated by the dualism of life and death. The contrast between the fertile Nile valley and the arid desert as a antithesis made the Egyptians consider life and death as mutual enemies. Still they were convinced that these two powers could be reconciled, namely in the divine life which overcomes death. Hence the Egyptian gods are beings who die and thereupon demonstrate their divinity by resurrection and renewal after death.

B) In sociological respect there are two types of religion. In the first case the religious and the secular community are identical. The second type creates a religious community, a church, which now and then may come into conflict with the social order and the state. The ancient Egyptian religion belonged to the first type. It was a folk religion. This finds its expression in the fact that the pharaoh was both the ruler of the state and the highpriest. By birth people belonged to the community of the worshippers of the gods. The voice of the individual is seldom heard. The state religion prevails.

In other words, the ancient Egyptian religion was the ferment of a homogeneous culture. Different parts of life and culture, such as science, art, social life, ethics, polity were not autonomous, as is the case in modern history. Instead they formed a great homogeneous complex on which religion had put its stamp.

The divine norm of this complex was Ma-a-t, the order called into existence at the beginning of time by Re, the creator. Ma-a-t was a polyvalent notion. It signified truth, justice, order in the society and was thus a concept. But Ma-a-t also assumed the shape of a goddess and represented the cosmic order. Ma-a-t had also cultic implications: the highest offer was that of Ma-a-t. This order manifested itself in the regularity of the sunrise and sunset and in the mysterious happening in which life overcomes death and celebrates its resurrection, in the processes of nature.¹³

C) Like all other ancient religions the Egyptian religion is a polytheism, though certain monotheistic tendencies can be discerned in it. Polytheism always gives the impression of being a disorderly complex of important and insignificant gods. A first degree of order is created if

¹³ C. J. Bleeker, *De beteekenis van de Egyptische godin Ma-a-t*, 1929.

one applies the distinction made by R. F. Spencer in contemporary Eastern religions between "The Great Tradition" and "The Little Tradition". In the first category he places leading mythological and theological ideas. The second comprises the folk religion. In Egypt innumerable *dii minores* of merely local importance and usually of quite colourless figure, similarly occur. These have little value for the research in the history of religions. The gods of "The Great Tradition" should form the subject of religio-historical study.

Now the Egyptian scholar-priests brought some semblance of order into the confusion of gods by arranging them into certain systems, in triads: a god, a goddess and a younger god as their son, or in groups of nine or twelve gods. It would seem to me that such systems have only formal value and do not disclose the inner structure of Egyptian polytheism. My belief is that a functional structure can be discovered in it.¹⁴ I do believe that the multiplicity of Egyptian gods falls into order when they are grouped together according to function. Then it appears that a certain apportioning of roles has taken place among the gods by which practically all sectors of life and world are covered. To my mind the chief notions of the ancient Egyptian religion were creation, maintenance of the world order, procreation and eternal life. It is not difficult to order the prominent gods according to the function which they fulfil in the scheme of these notions.

Obviously the ogdoad of Hermopolis and Re fulfil the function of creation. Ma-a-t guards over the maintenance of the world order, a task undertaken by Ptah in a different way. Also Thoth exerts this function in his own way, by making peace between gods in conflict and by restoring the balance of order and justice. Min of Koptos is the typical god of procreation. Hathor also belongs in this category, though she is a deity of a more complex nature. Osiris is the god who bestows eternal life on the dead. Mostly he is called the god of resurrection. This is only partly true, because after being murdered by Seth he actually becomes the monarch of the realm of the dead, the god who presides over the judgment of the dead, giving eternal life to those who could stand the test of the balance.

D) Man has often been called a barrel of contradictions. And yet every strong personality possesses a character with a homogenous structure. Gods have all sorts of qualities too and engage in activities which hardly seem compatible with one another. Nevertheless the present author is convinced that the nature of the Egyptian gods is

¹⁴ Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth*, p. 18.

not a random collection of qualities brought together by incidental circumstances and events, but that each godly figure conceals a meaningful and homogeneous structure. It should be the task of the Egyptologist to detect the organic entity of the gods—and also of the cultic acts. The Egyptians were no fools. They certainly did not worship gods who should be nothing more than a peg on which to hang a number of haphazardly collected qualities.

III. SOME CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

This short article gives me the liberty to choose those features of the ancient Egyptian religion which obviously are significant. The best way to present them is to deal with them in the order of the following scheme: A) Gods, B) Anthropology, and C) Cult

A) Gods

Generally Re and Osiris are considered to be the most outstanding gods of the Egyptian pantheon. I have not the remotest intention of belittling their importance. However there are in my opinion other gods who are striking personifications of the ancient Egyptian sentiment. I have in mind the following gods: Hathor and Thoth, Min, Sokaris, and "Tefnet".

a) Hathor and Thoth seldom appear in the same mythological context or the same cultic scene. Yet they are ideologically connected with one another and they impersonate together some essential traits of the Egyptian faith.¹⁵

Hathor was a mighty goddess and a versatile personality. She appears in many guises. Alternately she is a cow-goddess, a tree-goddess, a patroness of love, of song and dance, and a bestower of abundance, a sky-goddess, a sun eye, a royal goddess and moreover she is concerned with foreign lands. She could pride herself in her great popularity, especially with women. The beautiful hymns dedicated to her are convincing proofs of this. These songs also reveal that Hathor could evoke sincere piety.

There can be no doubt that such a mighty goddess had a homogeneously composed character. As cow-goddess she is the personification of the primeval, creative and divine power. She is the motherly being who promotes fertility. As tree-goddess she has the same function, for the tree is the manifestation of self-renewing life. Little wonder that she was loved both by the living and the dead. The

¹⁵ Idem.

deceased hoped to be of service to her so that they might attain a blessed destiny in the life hereafter. The living allowed themselves to be swept along in her whirl-wind traces, for Hathor is the goddess of enthusiasm. She loves music, song and dance and revels in happy feasts. At times her cult assumed an ecstatic character.

In addition to this élan so characteristic of her, Hathor remains faithful to the cosmic order. As sun-eye she chastises the evil-doers and the rebellious. As royal goddess she protects the king, whose duty it is to maintain order in society. In these qualities Hathor is closely akin to Ma-a-t.

Hathor presents a striking instance of an a-mythical deity. There is hardly a myth connected to her. Her nature must be deduced from the hymns, from cultic phrases and from her attributes and symbols.

In a polytheistic religion like that of ancient Egypt it is inevitable that Hathor should come into contact with many gods and goddesses. She has close relationship with Nut, Tefnet, Isis and Ma-a-t so that she is even identified with some of them. Later various husbands are ascribed to her: Shu, Harakte, Amon and especially Horus of Edfu who is incorrectly said to be her typical companion. In actual fact she guards her independence. She is too powerful a personality to be forced into any mythic context.

The polarity of her being already referred to is aptly formulated in the Egyptian expression that Hathor can be wrathful as Sechmet and as gay as Bast. Sechmet is the irascible goddess of Memphis. Bast, the patroness of Bubastis mostly shows the cheerful side of her nature which made her so loved. On the one hand Hathor is a martial and grim goddess. On the other hand her favour and benevolence are highly commended. The dynamism of her divine vitality commands respect. Her wrath is much to be feared, but can be allayed. Then she reveals herself as a lovable being, as the giver of the good things of life.

Thoth is not a god of the moon, but a moon-god i.e. he manifests himself in and through the moon. In common with all moon-gods Thoth is enveloped in an atmosphere of mystery. There is even a demoniacal trait in his character. However he is mainly characterised by great wisdom and profound insight. Therefore he is the ideal god to find and maintain the order in the world of the gods, and in the regions of men. He is competent to do so, for as secretary and deputy of Re he is authorised to act as legislator. He is "the lord of the laws". The merits of Thoth for the human community can best be

characterised by calling him a "cultural hero". He is the founder of the culture. He gave mankind the spoken word and created a diversity of languages. He introduced the art of writing and is therefore highly esteemed by the guild of clerks. The ritual of the cult derives from him. He is the patron of the physicians.

His significance for the gods can best be measured from the way he settles their conflicts and manages to maintain peace. He reconciled the sun-eye with Re. He separates the fighting Horus and Seth and he heals their wounds. In particular he restores intact the eye of Horus. He pacifies the savage goddess Tefnet and persuades her to come to Egypt, where she is transformed into an amiable goddess. After Osiris is murdered he helps to resuscitate Osiris. In the legal proceedings between Osiris and Seth and between Horus and Seth, he acts as advocate of Osiris and Horus and ensures their vindication. It is on this mythic example that the deceased pins his hopes to be vindicated in a like manner. The function of Thoth among the gods and the mortals can be briefly characterised by the Egyptian verbs *šhtp* and *šm^c-hrw*. He abhors disorder and restores equilibrium (*šhtp* = *htp* = *peace*). On the other hand he sees that justice is done to gods and mortals (*šm^c-hrw* = *m^c-hrw* = *righteous*). Finally the hymns testify by their warm tone of attachment to the affection which the Egyptian felt for Thoth.

One could say that the list of Egyptian gods is headed by Re as creator of the world system. Osiris closes it as the bestower of eternal life. The actual religious life is to a large extent governed by Hathor and Thoth, being respectively the goddess of creative élan and spiritual transport, and the god who establishes peace and continually restores world harmony. Hathor and Thoth can be compared to Dionysos who excites ecstasy and Apollo who urges obedience to meaningful order. The grandeur of both the Greeks and the Egyptians consists in their conviction that there ultimately should be an equilibrium between the forces and the ideas represented by respectively these two pairs of gods.

b) Next it is worth while to pay attention to Min, the god of Koptos.¹⁶ Though it is not excluded that Min from southern regions has immigrated to Egypt, he was already worshipped in prehistoric times in Koptos and Achmin, and may therefore be considered as one of the oldest Egyptian gods. In several respects he is a curious god.

¹⁶ C. J. Bleeker, *Die Geburt eines Gottes, Eine Studie über den ägyptischen Gott Min und sein Fest*, 1956.

Whereas many Egyptian gods are pictured as an animal or with the head of a animal, Min appears from the first in an anthropomorphic shape and never takes on another guise. His figure shows archaic features. The most conspicuous trait is that he is represented regularly as an ithyphallic mummy. It is wellknown that the worship of the phallus was wide spread in antiquity, also in Egypt. This phenomenon should not be understood as an outcome of the worship of voluptuousness, but must be taken as a sign of the worship of the divine creative power. As mummy Min is a dead god. The ithyphallic mummy is the mythological expression of the paradoxical truth that Min has the capacity, even as dead god, to create new life. Thereby he proves his divinity through his power to create *ex nihilo*.

Min has been identified with Horus, the sky god and with Amon, the mightly god of Thebes. Isis has been called his mother or his consort. Actually these mythological connections are of no importance and do not alter his nature. In actual fact Min is a solitary, independent figure. He is the typical example of an a-mythical god.

This does not mean that he stood outside ordinary life. On the contrary, both in the court of the pharaoh and with the common people he was held in high esteem. This is proved both by the fact that he was a royal god and by the beautiful hymns sung in his honour. As royal god Min protected the king and the commonwealth. In the hymns he is praised as the bestower of fertility to man and animal. That he is a typical god of fertility is expressed in one of the oldest representations: Min is standing in his conventional shape on a pedestal; the pedestal is clearly a mound of fertile earth, while plants are luxuriantly growing behind him.

There are several gods of fertility in Egypt. The specific character of Min as god of fertility can best be understood by studying his great festival, the so called *pr.t*, — the exodus, the procession, a festival which will be described at some length later on. This festival is called the birth of Min. No mother is present at this birth. Yet Min periodically celebrates his birth. It is the spontaneous birth of the dead god who proves that he is able to renew himself.

c) One of the most intriguing gods is Sokaris.¹⁷ He is less known and not by far so popular as Osiris with whom he is often connected and even identified. One can define his character by comparing him with a number of gods with whom he is related. These gods are Ptah of Memphis, the creator, the artist; Osiris, a god of many qualities;

¹⁷ Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals*, p. 51 sq.

Horus, the sky god, the valiant warrior; Nefertem, the young sun-god; Khnum, who also acts as creator and pours out the fertilizing water; and Shesmu, the preparer and donor of oil and wine. Sokaris lacks the transparent rationality of Ptah, the versability of Osiris, the martial valour of Horus, the charm of youthfulness characteristic of Nefertem and the orientation towards earthly life encountered in Khnum and Shesmu. Compared with these gods he is of an inscrutable nature, striking but onesided in being, passive in appearance, a rather gloomy figure, primarily concerned with the underworld. In other words he is, in fact, more a god of death than of the dead, as Osiris was. It cannot be doubted that he is a chthonic god. The ritual of "breaking open the earth", which preceded the sowing and which was performed in the course of his festival makes it clear that he was concerned with the fertile soil. His residence was situated in the fourth and fifth hours of the netherworld. This domain is described as being hermetically sealed. The sun god, who passes through the netherworld cannot perceive Sokaris. The text declares: "Invisible and imperceptible is the secret image of the land which contains the flesh of this god (Sokaris)". This phrase expresses his ineffable character. In the fourth hour an important act takes place: Thoth hands over the wedjat-eye to Horus-Sokaris. The wedjat-eye is "the healthy eye" which symbolises the unconquerable divine life. The remarkable thing is that this eye is called Sokaris. Since the handing over takes place in the underworld, it can only mean, that, by it, Sokaris is characterised as a god, who potentially possesses the triumphant divine life. Osiris dies and after death manifests his spontaneous vitality. Sokaris resides in death and possesses potentially rejuvenating life.

d) Finally the goddess whom I provisionally called "Tefnet". This is a complicated story. In the preceding pages it has been told that Thoth reconciled the sun eye with Re, healed the eye of Horus, and pacified the savage goddess Tefnet. These short communications refer to myths which are nearly inextricably intertwined and in which some goddesses, notably Tefnet and Hathor are identified. In order to understand the background of these myths one should know that the Egyptians conceived of the heaven as a great face with the sun as the right eye and the moon as the left eye. To these eyes myths were connected which together with the myth about a foreign savage goddess, formed a curious complex.

In my opinion Egyptologists have not managed to clarify this queer complex. Yet it seems to me that one can recognize three myths which

are typologically different and originally independent. There was for the first the myth of the sun eye. According to one version the sun eye left Re, went astray and was brought back by Thoth. In the other conception Re sent out the sun eye in the shape of Hathor to chastise rebellious people. At its return when it found another eye in its place, it became furious and could only be pacified after it had received a raised seat at the front of Re. There is reason to presume that the first version of the myth symbolizes an extra-ordinary event, namely the eclipse of the sun. It was natural to think that the moon god Thoth went out to seek the sun eye which disappeared. The second version of this first type of the myth of the sun eye can be interpreted as presenting the scorching sun which can burn merciless in the Near East.

Secondly it is not difficult to recognize a moon myth in the famous story of the fight of Horus and Seth in which they wounded each other fiercely; notably an eye of Horus was torn out. Thoth gave the eye back to Horus and healed it. This is the wedjat eye. The myth describes the waning and the waxing of the moon.

Thirdly there is a myth of a goddess most frequently named Tefnet, who lives in far regions in the South and who by the persuasive power of Thoth is induced to come to Egypt and who was changed there into a beautiful and amiable goddess, often called Hathor. Some Egyptologists believe that this myth is identical with the story of the sun eye which went abroad. But this is another idea. Apparently this goddess does not know Egypt. She comes from "the god's land" or the other world. The significance of the myth is as follows: the savage, wrathful goddess represents the *mysterium tremendum* of the god-head; after having decided to leave the other world and to enter into the human sphere, she adjusts herself to the measure of man and becomes a benevolent deity.¹⁸

B) Anthropology

It is incorrect to ask how the ancient Egyptians thought about the relationship of body and soul.¹⁹ The concept of an invisible soul was alien to the Egyptian. He possessed no psychology in the modern sense of the word, only a religious anthropology. In the first place, man has a body, or to use a better term: he is a body. For his person

¹⁸ Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth*, p. 119 sq., 123 sq., 127 sq.

¹⁹ C. J. Bleeker, "The Religion of Ancient Egypt" (*Historia Religionum* I, 1969, p. 93 sq.).

and his life are highly dependent on the condition of his body, especially after death. Hence the careful embalmment of the body in order to guarantee the deceased's continued existence. Furthermore he was convinced that various spiritual potencies, in Egyptology commonly called "souls", were present in man. We find here the curious conception of a "plurality of souls". It was to these powers that man owed his wellbeing on earth and his continued existence after death.

As these "souls" have repeatedly been the object of research,²⁰ I can be brief in enumerating them. Of extreme importance to man is his heart (*ʿib*), for this is the organ of physical life. But the heart is also the seat of consciousness and moral perception. In Spell 30A of the *Book of the Dead* the deceased addresses his heart and admonishes it not to testify against him in the judgment of the dead. The principal "soul" of man is his *kʿ*. Not only man, but also gods and even buildings possess a *kʿ*. The *kʿ* helps and protects man and makes him powerful. Various theories have been formulated about the essence of the *kʿ*: a "Doppelgänger", a genius, a totem sign. There are some elements of truth in all these explanations. This much is clear, that *kʿ* was a divine being. The significance of *kʿ* becomes manifest especially in death. The conception of the *bʿ* places a different accent on the spiritual being of man. The *bʿ* expresses man's desire for liberty, his will-power and also the indestructibility of his spirit which cannot be subdued by death. The last conception to be mentioned is the *ʿhw*. The substantive *ʿhw* means: splendour, spiritual power, capacity. With regard to man, the *ʿhw* manifests itself only after death. The *ʿhw* is the glorified deceased. One can say that the main object of the cult of the dead and of the festivals of the dead is to render *ʿhw* (*ʿhw*) the deceased.²¹

The conception "anthropology" has a double meaning. In the first place it indicates the view of the structure of the physical-spiritual being of man. Secondly it can also mean the evaluation of man in respect to his ethical-religious worth. As regards the last anthropological conception the Egyptians differed considerably from the Semites. The latter conceived of man as the slave of the sovereign gods, as a mortal, sinful being. The Egyptians, on the contrary, felt an affiliation with the high gods. It is surprising to read in the funeral texts how the deceased quite naturally identifies himself with the high gods. This in no way implies that he imagines himself to be the equal of

²⁰ C. J. Bleeker, *De overwinning op de dood*, 1942.

²¹ Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals*, p. 124.

the gods. For other pronouncements express deep respect, indeed an awe for the majesty of the deity. It expresses the expectation that after death the deceased will partake of the divine life.

This optimistic view on the worth of man does not imply that man is considered to be a perfect being. The Egyptian knew that man has several vices and is not always to be trusted. What about the Egyptian feelings of sin and guilt?²² It proves that the Egyptian language has ten words to designate "sin" and six to express the concept of "guilt". Closer study reveals that the words for "sin" can, in certain circumstances be translated as: crime, injustice, calamity, suffering, damage, foolishness. The words for "guilt" also cover the following conceptions: mistake, failing, offence, damage. It is therefore questionable whether the Egyptians used these words in their purely ethical and religious sense. In this connection the testimonies of the Theban necropolis, which have already been mentioned, are highly valuable. For they contain utterances of the sense of sin and guilt and of the confidence in the mercy of the gods. On closer examination it becomes clear that these words do not originate from a feeling of unholiness, but that they are aroused by the fact that the persons in question are afflicted by calamity and illness. Only in a few cases do we meet a sincere sense of the sinful nature of man. Accordingly, H. Frankfort has spoken of "the absence of the concept of sin" in ancient Egypt. This is right, provided that one understands that according to the ancient Egyptian belief man can escape from sin by living in harmony with Ma-a-t. Both man's happiness and his virtue are guaranteed if he acts and lives in harmony with Ma-a-t. This requires wisdom. It is endangered by foolishness. Nevertheless man is considered capable of leading a virtuous and happy life.

In regard to the future of man it is well known that also here the Egyptians cherished a plurality of representations of life after death which according to our sense of logic exclude each other, while the Egyptians obviously felt no contradiction. Six conceptions can be distinguished. First, the deceased are thought to live in their graves. Second, the dead sojourn in the underworld in a dreary existence. Third, the deceased dwell in regions which can be called "islands of the blessed". Fourth, the stars are considered to be the abode of the deceased. For the fifth, the deceased is permitted to travel in the boat of Re and may thereby participate in the triumphant sun-life. Finally

²² C. J. Bleeker, "Guilt and Purification in Ancient Egypt" (*Numen*, Vol. XIII, Fasc. 2).

the most impressive conception is the trial before Osiris and the bench of fourty two judges. The deceased strives to demonstrate his purity and righteousness by making a sort of "negative confession". If the act of weighing of his heart against the feather, the emblem of Ma-a-t, turns out to be favourable, Thoth declares him to be *ma-a-kheru*, this means that his voice, his life is in harmony with Ma-a-t, so that he may acquire eternal life.²³

Attention should be paid for a moment to a personality of exceptional quality, i.e., the pharaoh. It needs hardly to be mentioned that the pharaoh, as son of Re, is a sacral king.²⁴ One side of his dignity is sometimes forgotten. As sacral king he also is the high priest, the mediator between the world of the gods and the domain of mortal men.²⁵ His wife, the queen, plays a greater part than is ordinarily realized. This is why this volume contains a treatise on "The Position of the Queen in Ancient Egypt". This treatise argues that the queen is more important in a sense than the pharaoh himself, because she gives birth to the crown prince together with her divine consort, the sun god. This guarantees his divine descent and his sacral dignity.

C) Cult

This subject has two aspects: (1) the ordinary cult, and (2) the festivals. Leaving all details about the sanctuary, sacred persons, sacred objects, sacred acts and also the order of the daily cult aside,²⁶ we shall focus attention on the characteristic traits of the two forms of cult.

a) Ordinary cult

In the cultic formulae, especially in the offering texts, allusions to certain myths are found repeatedly. This raises the question of the function of myth in the ancient Egyptian religion and cult. This really is a complicated question. Prolonged discussion has been held about the relation between myth and ritual and about the question whether a so called "mythical-ritual pattern" is discernable in Ancient Egypt.²⁷ If we take the remarks about the nature of the Egyptian texts, made

²³ Bleeker, *Ma-a-t*.

²⁴ A. Moret, *Rois et Dieux d'Egypte*, 1922; H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods. A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as an Integration of Society and Nature*, 1948.

²⁵ C. J. Bleeker, "La fonction pontificale du Roi-Dieu" (*The Sacred Bridge*, 1963).

²⁶ *Historia Religionum* I, p. 73 sq.

²⁷ Bleeker, *Harbor and Thoth*, p. 14 sq.

in chapter I as a starting point, it is not difficult to state the problem in a few sentences. Certainly numerous references to myths, e.g. of Re and of Osiris occur in the cultic texts. The cultic acts are not done arbitrarily. They have a mythic sanction. Cult was no meaningless game. People worshipped the gods according to the mythical knowledge they had of these divine beings. There is thus a relation between myth and rite. But it would be overemphasizing the significance of myth, were one to conclude that we can discover a fullfledged "pattern". As has already been argued the Egyptians were no creators of myth in the form of a well balanced story. Their myths had no fixed and clear cut contours. The references may even contradict each other. That means that though cult is theoretically determined by the idea of myth the references can vary. This conclusion also holds good for the festivals.

Another question of equal importance is the magic purport of the cultic acts.²⁸ Here again we come upon an intricate problem. Immediately the questions arise: what is magic? is magic compatible with religion? It is neither possible nor necessary here to discuss these questions exhaustively. It suffices to state that magic can nowhere be disassociated from religion. It is evident that the Egyptians assigned a magical effect to the ceremonies of the cult. For the reason they conceived the rites as actualizations of a mythical truth which possessed creative power. The cultic acts should be accompanied by the magic word, by an incantation which actualizes the power, inherent in the mythical idea. This creative word has been embodied in two gods i.e. in *Hu*, the creative word who together with *Sia*, the wisdom, assisted at the creation of the world, and in *Heka*, the goddess of magic power, who is represented as handing over the symbol of life (*ꜥnh*).

There has been much talk about the mysteries which should have existed in ancient Egypt and about the esoteric wisdom which the priests possessed. In order to unravel these unfounded contentions it is useful to state the fact that the texts never mention closed societies which guarded esoteric knowledge. The mysteries proper first came into being in the Hellenistic epoch. Yet the notion of mystery (*ἔλεος*) occurs frequently. People declare that they have been initiated into certain mysteries. The injunction is given that one should not reveal what has been seen in the mysteries of the temples. Certain parts of the temple were inaccessible for ordinary mortals. The principle act

²⁸ Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals*, p. 43.

of the festival of Min of Koptos, his raising on a flight of steps or platform has not been depicted. Obviously it was a mysterious happening. These facts make us understand that the Egyptians realized the unfathomable nature of their gods and gave expression to this conviction in the cult.²⁹

b) Festivals

The festivals constitute the highlights of cultic life, and therefore merit a separate treatment. From the very earliest times religious festivals have been held in Egypt. This is demonstrated by the Palermo stone which mentions a list of the principal festive events during the first five dynasties. Later on the festivals became very numerous. According to the calendar of the temple of Ramses III celebrations were held on one hundred and sixtytwo days. It is evident that there is no point in enumerating all these festivals nor in attempting to describe the principal ones. May it suffice to remark that there were three categories of festivals: (1) festivals of the gods, (2) festivals of the king, (3) festivals of the dead. These three categories can be distinguished typologically, though in practice they were often linked together. The third category gives no reason for special remarks. Let me present some instances of the first and the second category.

A glorious festival was undoubtedly the festival of Min of Koptos, already referred to, which is depicted in the temple at Medinet Habu. The pictures show how the pharaoh in his litter and the image of Min accompanied by royal princes, priests and high dignitaries set forth in a solemn procession to celebrate the festival. Unfortunately the texts and the representations do not enable us to reconstruct the course of the festivities. However there can be no doubt about the principal acts of the festival. They are three in number: (1) the elevation of Min on his stairway as a manifestation of his "birth", (2) a harvest ritual, (3) the renewal of the pharaoh's dignity.³⁰

To these three points some short explanatory comments may be given. In regard to the first point it is useful to know that *expressis verbis* this festival is called the festival of the stairway and that the text says: "how mighty is Min on his stairway". One sees clearly how servants bear the parts of this stairway in the procession. The stairway is the stylized reproduction of the hill, which is the symbol of the resurrection of divine life, since at the creation a hill rose from the

²⁹ C. J. Bleeker, "Initiation in Ancient Egypt" (*Initiation*, 1965); *Egyptian Festivals*, p. 45 sq.

³⁰ Bleeker, *Min*.

primeval ocean, the hill from which Re instituted the world order. The act of elevating Min on his stairway dramatizes his victory over the forces of death. It has already been mentioned that this festival was called his birth. It is curious that we find no picture of this act. Obviously it was a mystery in the sense of what has been said in the preceding paragraph. The second act, the harvest ritual, fits perfectly in with the festival of Min, who is an outspoken god of fertility. The pictures show how the pharaoh reaps the first sheaf of corn. This is a symbolic act. The pharaoh acts here as "the first harvester" who starts the harvest which Min has bestowed on men. The third act is closely linked with the second. It actualizes the renewal of the dignity of the king. There is a scene in which birds are set free. The accompanying texts tells that these birds should go to the four points of the compass in order to declare that the pharaoh has received the white crown and the red crown (respectively for South Egypt and North Egypt). This means that his royal dignity has been renewed, obviously as a reward for his cares for the harvest and, more generally, for his government of the commonwealth.

After the preceding explanation of the so called *prt* of Min it is quite appropriate to pay attention to the principal festival of the king, i.e. the *hb sd*.³¹ This is an ancient festival, celebrated with archaic rites which have given rise to a series of studies without unanimity amongst Egyptologists about the meaning of this mysterious festival. One thing is pretty sure: it has wrongly been called a jubilee of the pharaoh. In that case it ought to be a repetition of the well known coronation ceremonies. One can discover no trace of these. It appears that the scarce descriptions of the festival, dating from quite different periods of the Egyptian history, show a number of variations. If we leave minor differences out of account, it is easy to recognize the constant features. The *hb sd* was celebrated according to a double ritual, namely one for South Egypt and one for North Egypt. The pharaoh wore an ancient garment. An important act seems to be that the king is seated in a chapel alternatively adorned with the crown of South and North Egypt. Sometimes the pharaoh performs a cultic dance. In another case the *dd*-pillar, connected with Osiris and symbol of resurrection, is raised, and a ritual fight takes place. In another instance the pharaoh bestowed privileges on Thebes upon decree.

In order to detect the significance of this festival one should remember that the renewal of the royal dignity took place yearly

³¹ Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals*, p. 91 sq.

at the Min festival. This cannot be the meaning of the *hb šd*, for it was celebrated at irregular times. In my opinion we will not be far from the truth if we assume that the word *šd* means garment, to wit a sacerdotal garment. It is striking that the archaic garment which the pharaoh dons, plays such an important part. The conclusion is, the *hb šd* is the festival of the garment, in the sense of a re-investiture. This means that the pharaoh at his festival was re-instituted in his office as high priest.

The famous goddess Hathor has celebrated quite a series of festivals, too many to deal with. However there is one festival which deserves closer attention: her glorious voyage to Edfu in order to visit the local Horus in the month of Epiphi. Thanks to recent research we are pretty well informed about the course of this festival which lasted fourteen days. However there is difference of opinion about its significance. There are scholars who argue that at the first meeting of Hathor and Horus a *ἔπος γαμος* has taken place. I have tried to prove in a painstaking argument that this explanation is absolutely out of the question.³² Horus is not the consort *par excellence* of Hathor. Moreover she is too independent to tolerate a unique partner beside her. At an accurate reading of the texts it appears that there is no proof that the gods in question celebrated an *ἔπος γαμος*. A comparison of this festival with well known examples of the *ἔπος γαμος* in Mesopotamia makes it crystal clear that in Egypt the mythical-ritual presuppositions are lacking. It is true that the festival is called "the festival of the beautiful meeting". But this includes no more than a visit out of friendship. Apparently there were different motives for the celebration of this festival: the commemoration of the victory of Horus on his enemies, the stimulation of fertility, the worship of the dead. Hathor is at home in this spiritual climate. She appears as sun eye, as goddess of fertility, as patroness of the dead.

This critical analysis of Hathor's visit to Edfu is a distinct indication of the tendency of this article. To the question of the right method of studying the ancient Egyptian religion there is only one answer: the Egyptologist should put aside the usual religio-historical apparatus of terms; he should listen unbiasedly and critically to what the Egyptians tell him. This is the kingly way to get insight into the core and kernel of this remarkable and profound religion.

Finally a question should be raised about whether there is any

³² Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth*, p. 93 sq.

logical connection between the various festivals, and whether they can be placed in chronological order. It is evident that many local and less important festivals were celebrated according to local traditions. Here we have only the great festivals in view. In this matter A. H. Gardiner has paved the way by putting forward the view that a purposeful connection must have existed between certain festivals that were dominated by three factors: (1) seasonal activities, (2) kingship, (3) certain mythical ideas.³³ It is possible to reconstruct this festival scheme in part. Evidence shows that the beginning of the Nile floods was celebrated with a festival. So, 1 Thoth was New Year's day, and it was a great celebration. In the rhythm of the year the festivals in Khoiak, in my opinion, dedicated to Sokaris followed on the occasion of the preparation of the soil and the sowing of the seed. On 1 Tybi the time of flowering began. This date marked a new beginning. This is why it was admirably suited for the coronation, for it introduced a new period in the life of the country. The harvest festival took place in Pachon, under the protection of Min.

In Epiphi the festive visit of Hathor to Edfu took place, as we heard, a series of ceremonies which were of paramount importance at least for the inhabitants of the south part of Egypt. The only pertinent question which remains, is whether the Osiris festivals and the *hb sd* can be fitted into this scheme. This is a difficult question. There is no clear picture yet of the nature and the mutual relationship of the various Osiris ceremonies, and the significance of the Osiris-festival has been exaggerated. What makes the question the more complicated is that various data are mentioned. Since the *hb sd* was celebrated at irregular intervals, no starting point for study can be found in the cycle of the seasons or in the regular course of the life of the king or his people. The motive must have been particularly urgent. Undoubtedly Frankfort is right in saying of these state festivals: "They marked, in fact, a critical phase in the people's relationship with the gods and aimed at a reintegration, a readjustment or a renewal".³⁴ This holds good also for the *hb sd*. We saw that the intention was the renewal of the sacerdotal dignity of the pharaoh. The irregularity of the festival makes us understand that there were cogent reasons for the celebrations. As to the cause of this urgency the Egyptologist unfortunately must once again be content with a *non liquet*.

³³ A. H. Gardiner, Notice on: J. G. Frazer, "The Golden Bough, Adonis, Attis, Osiris" (*J.E.A.* 2, 1914).

³⁴ H. Frankfort, "State Festivals, in Egypt and Mesopotamia" (*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, 1952).