**History**

**religion and cosmology in ancient Egypt**

Religion permeated all aspects of ancient Egyptian society, and there was no separation between church and state. The disciplines of science, magic, and what the Western world terms *religion* all functioned as one. There was no canon, nor was there any form of revelation. Because there was no set doctrine for the ancient Egyptians, there were many contrasting and contradictory ideas and concepts. This did not seem to trouble the Egyptians, who never took the time to systematize all of their beliefs. Instead, it was perceived as quite normal to consider, for example, Horus and Seth as both nephew and uncle and brothers at the same time. It seems that logic did not play a role in Egyptian religious practices.

**Egyptian Gods**

The ancient Egyptians had a pantheon of gods. These gods could be conceived of separately or in dyads (two deities), triads (three deities), ogdoads (eight gods), or enneads (nine gods). Horus and Seth, Osiris and Isis, and Isis and Nephthys are three examples of a dyad. These pairs of divinities regularly complemented each other and are innately connected. Likewise, sometimes a god or goddess was created to form a balanced, sexually paired couple, such as Sesh and Seshat.

Triads often take the form of a family, including father, mother, and child: for example, Ptah, Sakhmet, and Nefertum; Amun, Mut, and Khonsu; and Osiris, Isis, and Horus. Additionally, one god could have a variety of forms. For instance, the sun god manifests in the following three forms: Khepri, Ra, and Atum. Khepri is the form of the sun god when he is the sun disk rising in the eastern sky, the dawning sun. Ra is the form of the sun god in the middle of the day. Atum is the aspect of the solar deity that appears as the evening sun.

Ra may be considered Egypt's most important deity. He was a universal god, and most of Egypt's major divinities were associated with him at one point or another. Ra played five major roles in Egyptian theology: on earth, in heaven, in the underworld, in creation myths, and as divine father and protector of the king. The cult of Ra is first seen in the Second Dynasty (ca. 2770–ca. 2649 BCE), where his name is included in personal names. Likewise, in the Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2575–ca. 2465 BCE) the kings took the epithet "Son of Ra." By the Fifth Dynasty (ca. 2465–ca. 2323 BCE) Ra was firmly established as the state god, and Heliopolis was his cult center.

The number 8 was seen as potent in Egyptian theology. Sometimes the eight deities were not named, which demonstrates that the number was of more importance than the deity. Often the eight divinities consisted of four pairs and at other times as two sets of four. The so-called Hermopolis Ogdoad was one of the most important ogdoads, consisting of eight primeval gods: Nun and Nunet (water), Heh and Hehet (infinity), Keku and Kekut (darkness), and Tenem and Tanemet (invisibility or wind). In the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–ca. 1070 BCE) Amun and Amenet replaced the last pair.

The Egyptian ennead refers to nine gods. The Egyptians had numerous enneads, including the Great Ennead, the Lesser Ennead, and the Dual Ennead. The number 9 represented a large amount of something. The Ennead of Heliopolis was one of the more significant enneads, which consisted of Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys. Atum was envisaged as the father, while the rest were seen as the subsequent generations. In addition to the groupings, some gods, such as Amun and Ra, were combined to be one god, Amun-Ra, through a process of syncretism.

Each of the gods' names can be translated by either a word or a phrase. For example, Hathor means "mansion of Horus," Isis means "the seat/throne," Amun is "the hidden one," and Atum is "the complete one." The meaning of some divine names is clear, but the meaning of others remains a mystery. There were also local gods who had been connected with specific villages from time immemorial. These early associations can be seen in the examples of personal names that include the names of a divinity.

**Creation Myths**

Different creation myths in Egypt account for the existence of the world. Unfortunately, the funerary texts do not give detailed
The Pyramid Texts were first inscribed on the inside walls of the pyramids of some late Old Kingdom (ca. 2575–2134 BCE) kings and queens. With the democratization of religion beginning at the end of the Old Kingdom, this corpus of utterances was transferred to the private sphere. In the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–1640 BCE) the Coffin Texts emerged, consisting of a series of spells inscribed on coffins. The Coffin Texts are directly related to the earlier Pyramid Texts. During the New Kingdom the evolution of this group of texts appears in the form of the Book of the Dead. This book was written on papyri and was included among the grave goods in private burials; there are also some royal examples. Likewise appearing during the New Kingdom are various other books concerning the afterlife, such as the Amduat, the Book of Gates, and the Book of Caverns. These funerary texts are laden with mythological allusions, indicating that mythic stories were culturally important and demonstrating that both royal and private persons were familiar with the mythic traditions, possibly through oral means.

Different creation myths were formed at different theological centers. For example, the ennead was the focus of the creation myth that developed at the cult center of Heliopolis during the Old Kingdom. Atum, the "complete one," was first created alone in the Nun, or the watery abyss. There are a variety of ways in which his progeny were spawned, including masturbation, coughing, spitting, or sweating. Atum's successive generations make up the air (Shu), moisture (Tefnut), earth (Geb), and sky (Nut).

During the Middle Kingdom the ogdoad was the focus of the Hermopolis creation myth. The Hermopolis Ogdoad was made up of four frog-headed gods and four snake-headed goddesses. These were the primeval deities and were symbolic of the chaotic waters in which the world was created. Together they formed the original mound, lotus flower, or egg that existed prior to the sun god's birth. In a different version of the creation myth from the New Kingdom, Ptah (the creator god) was said to have fashioned the gods and human beings on his potter's wheel. Thebes, which was the cult center for the god Amun during the New Kingdom, embraced yet a different idea about how the world was created.

The Egyptians viewed the world as consisting of the earth and the sky. The earth was said to be the god Geb, while the sky was the goddess Nut. Funerary contexts often display the goddess Nut arching her body in imitation of the sky. Her rear was in the east and her head in the west. She would swallow the sun every evening, it would pass through her body, and she would give birth to the sun every morning. Shu was thought to hold up the sky. He also created the eight Heh gods to hold up Nut in her bovine form. Additionally, the earth was seen as masculine, while the sky was perceived as feminine. Anything that was not the earth or sky was considered the Duat, or netherworld. Many myths surround the original creator god. One version suggests that he was a great falcon who came forth from an egg; another proposes that he emerged from the great lotus flower that was in the Nun. Yet another version posits the existence of a primeval mound that appeared out of the Nun.

The Coffin Texts and the Book of Gates, among others, explain that humankind came from tears (from different gods, depending on the source). One Hymn to Amun states that Atum was responsible for the creation of everything that exists—"from whose eyes men came forth and from whose mouth gods came about." Likewise, he distinguished them by their character, created their life, and differentiated them from one another by the color of their skin. The Hymn to Aten states that this god "created the earth according to (his) wish, when (he) was alone, consisting of mankind, cattle, and all flocks." A document called the Instructions to Merikare explains that humankind was made in the image of god.

Other Religious Myths

Numerous popular myths recount interactions between the gods. The Contendings of Horus and Seth, for example, tells of the struggle between the gods Horus and Seth for the vacant position of king of Egypt that was left by the passing of Osiris, the god of death, resurrection, and fertility. In the end, Horus is victorious and assumes the office of his father. This story replicates the fashion in which a son would succeed his father as king of Egypt. Likewise, the living king was seen as the incarnation of Horus, while the dead king was imagined as Osiris. This story takes place entirely in the world of the gods.

Another example of a popular myth is The Destruction of Mankind, which also forms a portion of the Book of the Heavenly Cow inscribed in some New Kingdom tombs. In this myth the sun god Ra is angry with humankind for plotting rebellion against him. The major theme presented here is similar to that found in the biblical story of Noah's Ark and the flood: human wickedness and god's wrath. Further examples of popular myth consist of the Secret Name of Ra, the Myth of Isis and Osiris, and the Myth of Horus at Edfu.
Priests

The ancient Egyptian priest was not at all similar to the Christian idea of a priest. He did not preach to the masses and was not responsible for the spiritual well-being of the populace. He had a very specific job, and that was to maintain the cult of the god. This was, in fact, the job of the king; however, the king delegated this duty to the priesthood. The king was the one who needed to maintain the world as the gods had defined it; this also meant keeping the gods active through the maintenance of their cults. If the gods were happy, then Egypt would flourish. The priests were responsible for clothing the god, feeding the god, anointing the god, and other physical jobs that served the deity. This is why they were called the servants of the gods. Greek authors mistakenly called them prophets.

The physical presence of the gods existed only in the temples, which were not available to the masses as places of worship. They were the homes of the gods and allowed only limited access. The ancient Egyptian temple was made up of various pylons and courts that led to the holy of holies where the cult statue stood. A well-preserved example of an ancient Egyptian temple stands at Idfu and dates to the Ptolemaic Period (ca. 304–30 BCE). A large pylon stands at the front. Next one walks into the forecourt; then the pronaos, or outer entrance hall; the great pillared hall, which is flanked by auxiliary rooms; the hall of offerings; the central hall; and finally the sanctuary, or the holy of holies. Outer rooms surround the last three halls. These rooms have names like the Mansion of the Prince, Throne of the Gods, Mansion of Linen, and Chapel of Hathor. The entire temple complex was surrounded by a great wall. In general, the scenes on temple walls progress from public scenes, such as the king in battle, to scenes of the king's private relationship with the gods and the performance of cult rituals. The priests' job was to protect the deity who was located in the holy of holies. As one penetrated the inner rooms of the temple, the floors rose and the ceiling lowered so the focus was on the cult statue alone.

A priest had to undergo certain rites prior to being considered pure. Purifications in the form of a bath took place in the sacred lake belonging to the temple. Certain texts suggest that this was performed twice each day and twice each night while a priest was on duty. If there was no sacred lake, then another water source was used. Additionally, priests were required to rinse their mouths with a salt solution consisting of natron (a form of salts from dried lake beds) and water. Likewise, priests had to shave their bodily hair. There is also evidence to support the shaving of eyebrows and eyelashes.

Another ritual performed for the sake of cleanliness was circumcision, but this does not seem to have been a universal practice among Egyptian men. Once a priest began his work, however, he had to undergo the procedure. In the later periods this was a characteristic mark of a priest. Ancient Egyptian priests did not have to be celibate; however, they could not copulate in the temple and had to abstain from sex for a few days prior to beginning work in the temple. Priests did take wives and have families. Some priests even took more than one wife, though this was uncommon.

According to Greek and Roman sources, there were many dietary restrictions for priests. In actuality, the prohibited foods were not quite as numerous as the later sources would have one believe. Dietary rules depended on which deity the priest served. For example, if one worked in the hare nome, or province, and the hare was the sacred animal of that area, then one would not consume that sacred animal. Ancient sources reveal that some would eat the sacred animal of the neighboring nome in order to be unpleasant.

Finally, priests could not wear wool. Since this material came from living animals it would pollute the sacred areas within the temple. This, however, was not the case with panther skin, which was the characteristic garb for the high priests. Other distinguishing outfits worn by the priests consist of a sash for the lector priests (those who spoke the ritual texts in the temples), a "skin spangled with stars" for the priests of Heliopolis, and a special collar for the priests of Memphis, who would also wear their hair in a side lock. All priests wore palm sandals. This proved to be an item of prestige in a society where people walked barefoot.

There were four ways for one to become a priest: hereditary right, royal appointment, co-optation, and purchase. It was the tradition for a son to take over his father's post. In ancient Egypt there were priestly dynasties consisting of numerous generations of priests who served the same deity. These families grew close to their god and gained significant local power. Since all priests were theoretically supposed to be royally appointed, a particular royal appointment could always trump a hereditary rite. Usually the king had far greater matters to worry about than who would fill the vacant office within a temple, especially within the smaller temples. The king would intervene in only two scenarios: when he wanted to reward a particular person with a special post or...
There were different classes of priests, but it is difficult for the modern scholar to understand the hierarchy of the priestly class. Certain types of priests were more or less important in different temples. There was probably also a variation over time. Some of the largest temples, such as the temple of Amun at Karnak, had a separate staff of administrators. In the smaller temples the administrative jobs, like counting and recording the agricultural products, were done by the same people who performed the purely ritual activities. It was possible for a temple to possess fields, gardens, and animals, all of which contributed to its wealth. The temple staff was paid through these agricultural yields. The amount of property owned by a particular temple was directly related to its income level and therefore the number of staff it could support. For example, the temple of Amun at Karnak had 81,322 personnel, the temple in Heliopolis had 12,963, and the temple of Ptah at Memphis had 3,079. These were three of the largest and most important temples in Egypt. It is thought that a modest temple would have anywhere from 10 to 25 personnel. Some temples, however, lacked a financial source of their own and had only one or two clergy members.

There were high clergy and low clergy. The high clergy, or priestly elite, consisted of four levels of "prophets" (mistranslated by the Greeks). There was also a fifth level of prophet, but these priests did not seem to have been included in the ranks of the high clergy. The first four levels of prophets were strictly servants of the god and acted in the same manner as a personal servant would act, taking care of the owner of the house—in this case, the god. The office of first prophet was the highest priestly title, especially in the case of the wealthiest temples. The first prophet was also called the high priest and had many political duties as well as religious ones. The second prophet was the second in command and often took the place of the high priest in the temple when other duties interfered. There was only one first prophet and only one second prophet in each temple. In the case of the temple of Amun, the second prophet had many workers underneath him. It was his job to manage his subordinates and oversee such tasks as making sure the administration ran smoothly, receiving tribute, and overseeing the workshops. Royal favor played a major role in advancement within the priesthood. It was possible for one to work his way up, but other factors came into play as well.

The low clergy were essentially assistants. They were called pure ones and helped the other clergy members with the cult rituals. These priests performed such functions as slaughtering animals for sacrifice, interpreting dreams, carrying sacred objects, and supervising secular workers. In addition to the clergy members, numerous lay people helped the temple function properly.

Fitting somewhere between the high and low clergy were the specialists, those who performed specific functions with the cult. Some temples ranked their specialists in the higher class, while others ranked them in the lower class. These specialists include the stolist, who dressed the divine statue; the academics of the House of Life, who prepared the religious works necessary to the functioning of the cult; the lectors, who were not always priests but could function as funerary ritualists, learned scribes, popular magicians, or scientists; the hour priests who serve as astronomers; the horoscope priests who were calendrical specialists; and musicians and singers of both sexes.

Among the priests were permanent priests and priests who alternated in groups. The groups were called phyles. There were four phyles, each of which consisted of the same number of priests who performed the same functions in the temple. Each phyle worked three months a year; each month of work was separated by two months of freedom.

**Religious Rituals**

A variety of events took place in conjunction with the ancient Egyptian temple: foundation rituals, daily rituals, festivals, and oracles. Foundation rituals were performed by the king as early as the third millennium BCE. The scenes from the late temples at Isna and Kom Ombo show the king performing these same foundation rites. The scenes appear to depict the following events. The king leaves his palace and arrives at the temple site. The king and a goddess hammer in two posts to determine the orientation of the temple. Next a hole is dug to water level to make the structure sturdy. Then bricks are molded at the four corners of the temple, and the foundation is filled with sand. There is a presentation of plaques made of a variety of materials such as gold, silver, copper, and stone. Finally the temple is ready to be built, and chalk is sprinkled on a model temple for purification purposes. At the end there is a symbolic delivering of the temple to the god it will house.
Included in the daily rituals were the morning ritual, which comprised the morning song, the opening of the shrine, and the care of the god (divine repast and toilette). The midday ritual was shorter: The priests sprinkled water and burned incense for the other gods worshipped in the temple. The evening service was a repetition of the morning service except that the sanctuary remained closed. This service took place simultaneously in all temples in Egypt.

Numerous festivals and processions were associated with the temple. Ancient calendars indicate that the god would be taken on procession from five to 10 times each month. Sometimes the god would be in the sacred bark (a small boat), but other times it would not. Examples of some of the festivals are the Festival of the Valley, the Festival of the Nile, and the Festival of Drunkenness. Some festivals involved the public, and others were conducted in secrecy.

In the New Kingdom the consultation of oracles became popular. The priests acted as intermediaries in these matters. Oracles by statues, divine barques, prophetic voices, dreams, and animals were some of the many ways that people accessed the divine. Divine oracles were also supposed to decide legal matters. This was done at the temple gate. The ancient texts state that the gate was the place to hear petitions and tell truth from falsehood. Unfortunately, there is not enough documentation to allow the modern scholar to understand the fine workings of this religious justice system.