

Tjeu van den Berk

ANCIENT EGYPT

Cradle of early Christianity



Eburon
Utrecht 2021

ISBN 978-94-6301-333-8

Eburon Academic Publishers, Utrecht, The Netherlands
www.eburon.nl

Translated from the Dutch by Petra Galama, PhD

Cover image:

Cover design: Textcetera, The Hague

Graphic design: Studio Iris

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Foreword

*'Notwithstanding its superficial rejection
of everything pagan, early Christianity
was deeply indebted to ancient Egypt.'*¹

(Erik Hornung)

For years Egyptian mythology was like a closed book to me. At high school, the part of history class in which we were taught about the Egyptian empire lasted no more than ten minutes. My teacher simply said, 'you will be taught about Egypt during catechesis'. And so it seemed. Joseph and his dreams, Moses in his reed basket, the ten plaques and exodus. Altogether Egypt seemed to me an obscure, idolatrous nation. The image of mummies was the only one staying in my mind.

The first time when I could have met the goddess Isis, this encounter was unfortunately forbidden to me. Nevertheless, in retrospect it was because of this prohibition that she started to intrigue me. I was twenty-four years and studied theology in Rome. One day, we went on a guided tour through the Vatican Library. There was an unimaginable wealth of books. Our guide, an old seminary priest, was an enthusiastic narrator. At the end of a long vaulted corridor he suddenly stopped and pointed to a door, saying that behind the door there were still several halls filled with books. They were called the *Appartamento Borgia*. But he forbade us, young students, to enter these rooms. The reason was that these rooms originally had been the private chambers of the most frivolous pope in church history, Alexander VI, who reigned from 1492-1503. Who had not heard of his illustrious daughter Lucrezia? This pope had asked the painter Pinturicchio (1454-1513) to decorate his sleeping quarters with frescos of 'Isis and so'. And also with the Apis bull, which as a 'golden calf' almost caused the downfall of the Jews once more. Pure idolatry. In this sinful context I heard her name for the first time. The goddess Isis, she could be no more than a whore because Alexander looked at her lying in his bed.

1 Hornung, 73.

If I had been allowed to see the frescoes and if I had received some decent explanation, I would not only have seen some splendid frescoes but also images that testify of a deep spiritual insight.

I would have seen a similar fresco as the one in figure 1. *Isis between Hermes Trismegistus and Moses*. Isis sits on the throne of wisdom. The extravert Moses sits to her left with his hand on the Bible, and to her right we see the introvert Hermes Trismegistus with wisdom in his heart. What a wondrous vision was revealed in the Vatican chambers in 1492. Hermetic and biblical wisdom are sitting at the feet of Egyptian wisdom. So this vision Alexander had before his eyes when falling asleep. The renaissance in Europe had been going on for more than a century. In the eyes of the great philosophers, the influence of Egyptian culture on this renaissance was strong. The esoteric wisdom of the Thrice-Greatest Hermes was beginning to break through in the exoteric western culture. In 1471, the *Corpus Hermeticum* was translated from Greek into Latin.



Fig. 1

Pinturicchio: Isis between Hermes Trismegistus and Moses

However, the sixteenth century was the age of reformation and contra-reformation and subsequently the Egyptian wisdom was forced to operate underground (again).

Several years later, I rather accidentally came across this broad underground movement. One evening during my doctorate in theology in Lyon, I watched a performance of *Die Zauberflöte* in the Roman open air theatre. I was immediately taken with it. More than twenty years later I devoted a study to this opera, and since then I committed myself to this masterpiece on indiscriminate occasions, especially to the exploration of its cultural and historical background.² Well then, this opera is imbued with Egyptian mythology.

The Queen of the Night and her deceased husband, the giant snake attacking the solar hero at dawn, Tamino who enters the solar temple ‘wholly to dedicate himself to Isis’ mysteries³: a closer look discloses that all this is authentic Egyptian mythological material. Alchemists, Rosicrucians, Freemasons kept this heritage alive. In choosing their initiation symbols they returned to what they considered to be the Egyptian mystery religion and were no longer inspired by the rational and dogmatic concepts of the Roman church.

‘What they considered to be’, because retrospectively we can say that they used second hand Egyptian mythology. Mozart and his brothers, the philosophers in Florence, the ancient alchemists, they all have drawn their views from Hellenistic thinkers living in the centuries around the beginning of our era, and these thinkers, like Plutarch (c. 46-120) for example, could not read hieroglyphs. One assumes that Plutarch was in contact with Egyptian priests in order to create his masterwork *On Isis and Osiris*, but scholars doubt whether these priests themselves mastered their ancient language.

Die Zauberflöte dates from 1791. In 1822 the eminent linguist Jean-François Champollion (1890-1832) unravelled the hieroglyphs. Egyptology as a science began after that year. This resulted in an incredible amount of knowledge and skills. Scientists were in touch with the logos of historical facts as well as with the mythos of metahistorical symbols of this ancient

2 See: Van den Berk (2004).

3 *The Magic Flute* (Act II, scene 28).

people. In retrospect one has to ascertain that irrespective of the limited knowledge that these Greek thinkers possessed, many of their intuitions originated from the heart of ancient Egyptian knowledge.

It was through Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) that I discovered modern Egyptology. Jung was impressed by ancient Egyptian mythology. He studied the 'fine fleur' of contemporary Egyptologists and developed a theory that gave me insight into how these myths found their way into the Mediterranean cultures. Seeing it from Jung's perspective, we can say that primeval human archetypes influenced the zeitgeist in an exemplary way through this longstanding culture.

Jung made me specifically aware that Egyptian mythology was not only influential in the underground Gnostic movements of our culture, but also and above all in the movements operating aboveground. This second movement has become the theme of this book. The major dogmas of the Roman church are imbued with Egyptian wisdom. It may sound somewhat apodictic (and of course it must be proven), but a priest living in 2000 BC in Memphis would have recognised, without even frowning his eyebrows, his own beliefs in the Nicene creed dating from 325 AD. However, the council fathers would have severely frowned their eyebrows if they had been told that their theology of the Trinity did not essentially differ from that of the Theban priests under Ramesses II.

I never heard of these influences during my theological education. They were *appartimenti* about which my teachers had no clue whatsoever, let alone that they knew in front of which door they should stand in order to prevent us to enter inside. I remember my astonishment when one day I read the following in one of Jung's letters (without further explanation): 'It is just the Trinity dogma, as it stands, that is the classical example of an artificial structure and an intellectual product, so much so that no theologian has yet recognized or admitted its origins in Egyptian theology. It is by no means an original Christian experience.'⁴ This Egyptian-Christian dogma is the central theme in chapter six.

We know how during the first centuries the Roman church persistently attempted to discriminate between the Gnostic Egyptian chaff and the Roman wheat. In retrospect it turns out that the wheat was also sown in

4 To the Rev. H. L. Philp (10th of March 1958) in: Jung (1976), 423.

the Nile valley. This book deals with that theme. Taking everything into consideration, Pinturicchio should have painted his fresco with the pope as a third person, between Moses and Hermes Trismegistus, listening to the goddess with the Council documents on his knees.

As the theme of this book became clearer, I decided to visit ancient Egypt. Since 2003, I have travelled five times, for about a fortnight, along the Nile from Alexandria to Abu Simbel and saw almost all of the important places. As a result, I could situate the many subjects that we will deal with in this book in history as well as in their environment. For me the absolute highpoints of inspiration were Abu Simbel, Philae and Abydos. It was Jielis van Baalen, director of *Ghazala-tours*, who motivated me to visit the land of the pharaohs. Several times I guided groups that were organised by his organisation. Many thanks to him.

Aart van Lunteren, Marjeet Verbeek, Edward Niessen and Philippe van Heusden carefully studied my manuscript, giving me valuable advice concerning the subject matter itself as well as the form in which these subjects are presented. Many thanks to all four of them. Aart and Marjeet also joined my visit to Egypt. Aart even twice. Reading my reflections will affect someone more when one has encountered the divine Trinity in Abu Simbel or stood at Osiris' grave in Abydos. I can only invite the reader to do the same.

The Egyptologist Huub Pragt studied my text very accurately.⁵ With his remarks he outlined several pitfalls and sometimes even pulled me out of them. Somebody like him becomes invaluable if, like me, one cannot read hieroglyphs. The enthusiasm of all my co-readers supported me to finish this book. May it have a safe journey along the Nile and the Tiber!

Breda 2011-2020

5 Egyptologist Huub Pragt (1961) completed his studies at Leiden University. He used to work at the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden and has written several novels and educational books. As a sole proprietor, he gives courses, lectures and leads trips to Egypt.

Introduction

In the field of religious symbolism there is a complete unity between the Christian and the ancient Egyptian religions. When we look at the fundamental values of the Christian tradition from the perspective of religious history one even has to speak of a complete dependence of Christianity upon this religion of the ancient East.⁶

(Eugen Drewermann)

A Christian trail in the Nile valley

This book explicates the view that the main insights developed in early Christianity in relation to its own identity were grafted to a large extent on philosophical ideas of ancient Egypt. We will see that philosophical ideas of God and of humanity presented in Egyptian myths are repeated in a remarkable way in major Christian dogmas and rituals.

At first sight this view might surprise us, because one usually assumes that Christian theology draws mainly from Jewish and Hellenistic sources. Although one has to search in an indirect way for the Hellenistic signature of certain notions, the Jewish signature is clearly acknowledged in direct terms in the New Testament and in the church fathers. Generally the church fathers were abhorred by the philosophy of life of the ancient Egyptians. Their polytheism, zoolatry and magic were completely objectionable. Furthermore, in the conceptualisation of the Bible the people had *left* this godless country Egypt. Hence it was unthinkable to return there. That the parents of little Jesus had fled to Egypt for his safety and that on their return Matthew made God exclaim by mouth of his prophet: ‘Out of Egypt, I called my son’, did not encourage them to think more positively.⁷ If one considered this ‘well’, most of them reasoned, it could only imply another ‘exodus’.

The church fathers were simply unaware of the Egyptian background of their theological themes. In addition, the meaning of hieroglyphs had not been understood for a long time in those ages.

⁶ Drewermann (1992), 61.

⁷ Matthew 2, 15. Biblical quotations are from the *Standard English Version*.

But then again they also had no clue about what kind of typical *Jewish* sources actually had influenced their Christian belief or that these sources in reality had a strong connection with Egypt. Of course the church fathers did understand, for example, that their One-God-in-Three-Persons differed substantially from the Yahweh of traditional monotheistic Judaism, but it did not occur to them that at the beginning of our era there existed a Jewish movement in Alexandria that believed in a divine trinity, a divine couple with a child. At that time, many Alexandrian Jews themselves probably did not even know of this authentic Jewish tradition.

Were they still aware that a divine couple with their child had been worshiped in the (first) temple of Salomon: Yahweh, Asherah and their daughter Anat? When the Yahwistic reform (one God, one temple, one king) commenced in Jerusalem in 622 BC, thousands of Jews left the city, most of them fled to Egypt and they took their triadic image of God with them. The choice for Egypt was not accidental. Because where else could one be more overwhelmed by divine trinities than in this country? Each major temple had its own divine couple and child(ren). I will explicate these facts in several of the following chapters.

The Jews who fled from Israel and Judea gave shape to a form of Judaism, for example in Alexandria, that became the main source of the type of Christianity that we are familiar with nowadays. This Jewish movement was no longer extant at the end of the second century. Persecutions completely eliminated it. Only the pharisaic-rabbinical Yahwistic Judaism sustained.

A similar historical process must be taken into account vis-à-vis the Hellenistic sources of Christianity. These sources were not found in classic Athens, but rather in the Hellenistic culture of Alexandria. When Egypt opened its boundaries to the Greeks in the seventh century BC, they encountered a thousands of years old religion and it overwhelmed them. It was impossible to resist its influence. For example, in a relatively short time an osmosis took place between the 'mysteries' of the deceased and risen god Osiris and the 'mysteries' of their own Dionysus. Herodotus (c. 485-425 BC) witnessed this already in the middle of the fifth century BC. In Alexandria, founded in 331 BC, both cultures blended with the cultures of the Jews and the Persians, among others. And just after the beginning of our era a Jewish mystery religion developed itself from this melting pot

and in the footsteps of Osiris, Dionysus, Mythras and Attis it worshiped its own dying and rising god: Christ-Jesus. Their adherents believe that the Christ (= the anointed, the Messiah) manifested himself in the historic Jesus of Nazareth. This group of people (originally Jews, but soon after also non-Jews) developed their own identity. Their identity was grafted upon a thousand years old Egyptian root system on the one hand and on the other hand was formatted by the cosmopolitan structure of Hellenistic Judaism.

This small group of Christian Alexandrines was most likely unaware of the archaic Egyptian origin of their beliefs. If our view on the origination of early Christianity is correct, it implies that the Egyptian influence occurred on an *unconscious* level.

This could certainly have been the case. Because the unconscious does not manifest itself in our daily consciousness according to consciously created standards, but in an autonomous and spontaneous way and by grace of intuitions, images, dreams, visions, symbols and rituals. Carl Gustav Jung explicated the view that the depths of the mind reach far beyond the limits of the personal or cultural context, because since birth our brain possesses an unconscious psyche that is inherited throughout a millions of years long evolution. The unconscious has its own strong drives, which Jung called archetypes. The Alexandrian Christians received the images and the symbols that inspired them from this collective unconscious dimension *as it was culturally shaped in a millennia old culture*.

Even if one is not or does not want to be a Jung adept, one can still comprehend the existence of a *cultural* unconscious. Using this hypothesis, it is possible to support for most part the vision that is delineated in this book. Let me explain this. In our culture we can act in ways that we experience as completely normal and contemporary, whereas historical research makes it obvious that the roots of these acts lie far back in history. Let me illustrate this. Today, if somebody goes to court whilst he is convinced that even a minister cannot amend the court's judgement, he probably is no longer aware that this common practice goes back to the ideology of the French Enlightenment several centuries ago, and specifically to a study by Charles de Montesquieu (1689-1755) *De l'Esprit des Lois* (1748), in which this scholar developed his ideas of the three powers, the *trias politica*. Probably these facts are completely submerged in

the cultural unconscious of the person. Nevertheless, we must accept that the ancient French Enlightenment is the cradle of the young Dutch Democracy. This does not change even if one developed an aversion towards contemporary France. Now, let us imagine that we are writing in the year 4000 AD and that we no longer understand the French ‘hieroglyphs’, but that there still exists an independent judiciary power alongside a legislative power and a governmental power; now we are getting close to the point of departure at the beginning of Christianity. The Egyptian Enlightenment had taken place 3000 years earlier, but there was no longer any knowledge of its language, let alone that one knew of the existence of a papyrus written by ‘Montesquieu’. However, the zeitgeist in Alexandria still breathed the ancient ideas, although unconsciously.

A culture, overwhelming and enduring

The unparalleled influence of Egypt in the Middle East was of course also due to the immense and almost continuous span of its existence, 3500 years. An extremely long period, especially in comparison with the relatively short existence of other cultures. Certainly, the Sumerian culture in southern Iraq and the Elamite culture in Iran reached the same level of civilisation in the final quarter of the fourth millennium (despite their different characters), but around 2000 BC these cultures were as good as gone. At that point in time, Egypt stood ‘only’ at the threshold of its golden ages of the Middle and New Kingdom.

The Egyptologist Michael Rice (1928-2013) accurately indicates the moment when in Egypt humanity made an unprecedented step forward in its evolution. That was around 3200 BC. In a time when so to speak the rest of the world still lived as hunters and gatherers in the Stone Age, here in a small strip of land the human was able to achieve an almost perfect equilibrium with his environment and to create a society he has so far been able even to conceive. Egypt is the first society in history that developed a coherent hierarchical political structure on a large scale and created a nation, which is different from the city-states of the Sumerians. According to Rice, this ‘unexampled advancement of the human spirit’ occurred between 3200 and 2200 BC. That is during the Early Dynastic Period and the Old Kingdom. There has been no other period in human history that resembles this development. This culture attracted an extraordinary

fascination that still continues in the present day. According to Rice there can be no doubt that this is caused by the untameable power through which certain archetypes were released for the first time in history and presented themselves out of nothing so it seems. Unprecedented genius artists first gave these primal images their material form. And even though there is sufficient proof that also the Egyptians received their inspiration from elsewhere, the most essential characteristics of their culture came out of their own *soil* and *soul*.⁸

We cannot say that the Egyptians invented the archetypes. Archetypes originate at an animal level and have been working within the human psyche for millions of years, creating equivalent forms and structures in different places. For example, pyramids arose in Southern and Central America even long after the Egyptian empire had fallen into decay. These pyramids were certainly not copied from Egypt. Already in the seventh millennium BC an impressive bull cult on a high level of civilisation existed in Anatolia, in current Çatalhöyük. There is no indication whatsoever that Egypt had any cultural memory of this cult. That the same archetypes occur everywhere and at all times proved to Jung the collective existence of the unconscious within the human brain. What better explanation could one give to these sudden and more or less similar eruptions?

In any case, in ancient Egypt these archetypes received their shape in a sublime, overwhelming and enduring way. Its influence on the contemporary cultures in the Middle East was irresistible.

The developing Christianity knew many different movements. For all kinds of reasons, one movement seized power in the middle of the second century: the Roman. As I described previously in the foreword: what one considered to be heretic Alexandrian chaff was separated from the orthodox Roman wheat. This separation was (unfortunately) successful. All nonconformist movements received one label and were vilified as ‘gnostics’, as ‘knowers’. This name became an invective. In the eyes of Rome they were ‘know-all’s’ while they should have been ‘believers’.

8 See: Rice (2009), 1-2.