

## ANCIENT EGYPT – Religion

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**Animal gods of ancient Egypt** Egyptian religion was almost consistently polytheistic—it sponsored many gods—for three millennia, from 3000 B.C.E. to the beginning of the common era. (‘Almost,’ because for a brief period during the rule of Akhnaten, who reigned 1353-1336 B.C.E., the state sponsored a form of monotheism.) As a polytheism, Egyptian religion invested multiple-deities concept in a wide diversity of animals: royal cemeteries, where innumerable god-representing animals are to be found, are in fact dedicated to crocodiles, falcons, ibises, snakes, cats, rams, and many other regional fauna. The tie-in of this animal set, to actual worshipped gods, is loose—we know that the most influential animal-based gods rooted in animals like the jackal, the ibis, the bull, the cat, but the range is wide; for reasons we don’t understand, the animals which became sacred to the Egyptians received their own cults, and assumed natural force powers which were regionally worshipped. We have reason to think this synthesis, of animal cults with deified natural forces, derives from Egyptian religious practices which go back centuries before 3000 B.C.E.

**Creation** For the most part Egyptian religion recognizes divine power in nature, and in the animal symbols which intersect in order to undergird the god world. (The god world is also the person-world, because the line dividing animals from individuals is shaky.) That divine power does not lodge in a single creator, but is a world force in a continual state of generation. Even during the brief period of monotheism, under Akhnaten, there was no room for a single Creative Power to stand forth as World Maker. Only in one instance, during a period of what we call the Memphite Theology, generated around the capital of Memphis, and documented by writing on the Shabaka Stone (730 B.C.E.), was there an evolved and official formulation of a Birth of the Universe in Spirit, in the power of a single spiritual creator, the god Ptah, whom we might compare to the creator god of the Abrahamic religion.

**Sin** Though the man on the street seems, from much papyrus documentation, to have worried constantly about how the afterworld would treat him, and about the terrors of death, there was no countervailing internal struggle over whether one had led a good life, or would stand up well before the interrogation at the portals of the next world. It seems as though there was a decisive encounter with fate after death, and one’s heart was weighed on a scale by the god Osiris. The weight balance was between the individual’s soul and that of a feather of the goddess Ma’at, goddess of truth and righteousness; if the soul weighed more than the feather it was adjudged to be the soul of a sinner, part of an inferior life, and unqualified to enter into the afterlife world.

**Death** The ancient Egyptians were preoccupied with death, but over the long course of their cultural vitality they never wavered in their sense that there is life after death. The pyramid and coffin texts, from various 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.E. temples, as well as *The Book of the Dead*—in use from 1550-50 B.C.E.—were popular level records of itineraries of the soul as it made its way from the House of Death to the blessed homes of the gods. The body, whose *ba* (or soul) would leave it for the long journey to the heavens, was thought to continue to live in the tomb, and from there, most thought, it was able to communicate with loved ones and relatives, even to the extent of settling disputes among them.

**Afterlife** The Egyptians had no doubt about the existence of the afterlife, though they had widely various opinions about what it was. As said, there was agreement that the dead were able to communicate with the living, from their tombs. There was no belief in a land of the dead, where the dead congregated, but there was a conception of select dead as transfigured spirits, *akhu*, circulating ‘above,’ and involved in the dramas of overcoming obstacles, like bodies of water which lay between themselves and the land of the blessed. This degree of vitality and movement was possible to the posthumous individual, because the soul or *ba* of the person was ‘the whole of the person as he appears after death,’ and was if nothing else a renewal of the person who had died. In the later periods of Egyptian religious development, at a time when the Eastern Mediterranean was nearing the Christian era and salvation cults were running wild, the Egyptian god Osiris assumed a huge worshipful following for his leadership in finding the right way to rebirth.

**Prayers and spells.** The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* contains many spells, designed to assure the safety of the ascending soul. Mixed with that body of spells and prayers—to all one's favorite deities—is a vast popular network of prayers and supportive incantations, tried and true recipes for self-defence and self-release.

*My mouth has been given to me that I may speak into it in the presence of the Great God.*

*My mouth is opened, my mouth is split open by Shu with that iron harpoon of his with which he split open the mouths of the gods.*

### **Readings**

Breasted, Charles, *Pioneer to the Past: the Story of James Henry Breasted*, Chicago, 1943.

Frankfort, Henri, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, New York, 1961.

### **Discussion questions**

Vast ancient Egyptian cemeteries were devoted to sacred animals, the symbol-aspects of the Gods of the Egyptians. Are you surprised by this hard evidence of animal worship? Did you suppose that the animal worship of the Egyptians was symbolical? If not why not?

What kind of clerisy or clergy ran the Egyptian religious system? Where were the priests, imams, rabbis? How was worship organized, on a social level?

What provisions did Egyptian theology make for the end of the world? Was there an apocalyptic element in this religion?