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## THE THEME OF THE SEPARATION OF HEAVEN AND EARTH IN EGYPTIAN MYTHOLOGY<sup>2E</sup>

The religion of ancient Egypt, like many others, also included the concept of the separation of heaven and earth as a part of the myths concerning the creation that took place in the beginning; this concept is fundamental to the reality Egyptian man lived in, and offers a perspective for the future, which in Egypt means in effect for man's destiny after death.

The separating of the sky and the earth is a recurrent theme in funerary literature and in hymns to the gods, especially in the solar hymns of the NK.<sup>1</sup> It was accounted as a work of creation: through the separation of heaven and earth or the raising of the heavens, the course along the sky came into existence which the sun could follow to fill the earth with light and life. It is implicit in this idea that the separation of heaven and earth was not considered to be absolute. Separated as they are, heaven and earth still constitute a differentiated unity, that we are accustomed to call the cosmos. The Egyptians, however, liked to denote this differentiated unity as the binary opposition of heaven and earth. To do so was in line with the view of Egyptian ontology<sup>2</sup> that the difference between being and non-being is that being is differentiated; the cosmos exists because it is differentiated into heaven and earth.

The mythical concept of this separation had a ritual counterpart. Festival calendars of various temples and also other data show that the festival of the raising of the sky was fairly generally celebrated upon certain dates, at any rate since the NK.<sup>3</sup> It was the god Shu in particular who, as a text in the book Amduat, among

others, says: "Separated heaven from earth in the primordial darkness".<sup>4</sup> The function could, though, be attributed also to various other gods such as Amon, Atum, Ptah, Upuaut or Khnum, and they could be worshipped as the raiser of the sky. The separation of heaven and earth could be summarized as the entire good and regulating work of creation.<sup>5</sup>

That separating heaven and earth was thus regarded as good, appears very clearly from a number of passages from mainly "magical" texts that speak of the sky falling upon the earth as a cosmic catastrophe.<sup>6</sup> The Egyptians were convinced that the cosmos, protected by gods, was threatened by extra-terrestrial demons, so that the equilibrium of heaven and earth was not entirely stable. Indeed, dangers also threatened from within; Seth the god of confusion, who was notorious for his wicked tricks, was sometimes suspected of making the sky fall upon the earth.<sup>7</sup> The literary work "the Contendings of Horus and Seth" even relates that the divine mother Neith, this benevolent goddess once in an angry mood threatened to drop the sky upon the earth.<sup>8</sup>

The Egyptians' fear of such a catastrophe changing the differentiated cosmos into chaos and making all sink down into the primordial waters must not be exaggerated, however. One of the greatest certainties was the location of heaven above the earth. One could speak of something being as firmly established as the sky upon its four pillars.<sup>9</sup>

In some cultures the separation of heaven and earth has a negative meaning, as putting an end to paradisiacal aboriginal conditions when men, a still unacquainted with labour, suffering and death were together with the gods. For some reason or other, a ritual mistake for instance, free intercourse between heaven and earth was disrupted, and the gods retired to heaven.<sup>10</sup>

Traces of such a negative view of the separation may, I think, be discerned in Egypt also.<sup>11</sup> In the Book of the Heavenly Cow,<sup>12</sup> for instance, we read that the sun-god Re ruled as king over gods and men together, but when he became old mankind began to conspire against him. Then he ordained a great slaughter among the people. Yet before Mankind was exterminated he retired and sat down upon the Heavenly Cow. The cow got up in the morning and became sky. In this story the separation is not so much a deplorable event as a good solution of the difficulties that had arisen

between gods and men, so after all it is a good creation too.

Like many peoples and cultures<sup>13</sup> the Egyptians imagined heaven and earth as an anthropomorphous divine pair. In most cultures the god of the sky is male and the deity of the earth female. In Egypt, however, the sexes are reversed: Nut is the goddess of heaven and Geb the god of the earth. One naturally seeks an explanation of this exception to a general rule. It has been suggested<sup>14</sup> that it may have arisen from the customary position assumed in sexual intercourse; the earth-god Geb lying beneath his spouse Nut the sky-goddess. This idea is only supported by a reference to the manner in which Isis received the seed of Osiris. Although I willingly admit that women in general held a less subordinate position in Egypt than in some other countries, I do not think that the very rare depictions of coitus in ancient Egypt confirm the above hypothesis.<sup>15</sup>

It is noticeable that practically all the Egyptian words for the heavens have the feminine gender and those for the earth the masculine.<sup>16</sup> The gender of a word is not arbitrary, but in many cases we cannot tell what motivated the choice. Perhaps in this instance one might seek a reason in the natural conditions of the country of the Nile where the Egyptian language and world view developed.<sup>17</sup> Fertility there was not fostered by rain from the sky, which might elsewhere be regarded as the seed of the sky-god fertilizing the earth-goddess; in Egypt water came from the Nile and the earth. Hence the earth might be regarded as male and the sky interpreted as a goddess who gave birth to the sun and the stars.

The chief point of importance in mythology concerning Geb and Nut, besides their producing a great number of children, is that they were separated by their father — not by their son — Shu. The reason given in a well-known Egyptian text<sup>18</sup> is that Geb quarrelled with Nut because like a sow devouring her own farrows she swallowed up her children the sun and the stars. We again find the implicit idea here that the separation of heaven and earth made it possible for life and light to develop. Yet we also see the contrary expressed in writing and illustration; Shu, sometimes called the son of Re and sometimes bearing the sun-disk upon his head,



separates heaven and earth by bringing light.

One of the most well-known pictures from ancient Egypt shows Geb and Nut, the earth represented as a recumbent man above whom the sky stretches in the shape of a woman. The divine pair is separated by Shu who bears the goddess of heaven on his hands. As so many subjects in Egyptian religion, these representations of the separation of heaven and earth have not yet been systematically collected, and we still lack a comparative and systematic religious-historical study based on such a corpus.<sup>19</sup>

In general design the drawing on papyrus or the painting on a sarcophagus is always the same, but in the details we see many interesting and instructive variations. The earth is represented as a languidly recumbent man, slowly half raising himself, his face turned downward and his outstretched left arm seeking support upon the ground. The right arm rests upon the right knee, which is drawn up. He seems to represent the earth as it arose from the primeval waters (Tatenen).<sup>20</sup> Whenever there is an inscription, the god is always Geb. He is habitually naked apart from ornaments. The phallus is sometimes not visible, sometimes limp, sometimes hidden in a penis sheath and sometimes erect, especially when the earth-god is depicted not in the lying position but as sitting or floating.

The sky is usually shown as a slender young woman, bending over the earth-god in such manner that her toes and fingertips touch the ground. Like Geb, she is naked apart from her ornaments. Sometimes stars are drawn on her body. The bodies of the pair are mostly placed in parallel, so that the head of the goddess is above the head of the god, but it is not exceptional to see a reversal, so that Geb's head is near the feet and below the womb of Nut.<sup>21</sup> Nut is always so placed that her womb is toward the east, where the sun is born from her.

Usually, but not always, a man is drawn in a standing or occasionally sitting position, supporting the sky-goddess with his hands. As a rule an inscription or iconographical characteristics show him to be Shu. In contrast to Geb and Nut he is commonly clothed. That Geb and Nut are naked is highly unusual for Egyptian gods and suggests that before they were parted they formed a pri-

mordial unity of a sexual nature. The sun is usually present in his boat above or below Nut's body, or in some other way. Shu is often assisted by two ram-headed anthropomorphous figures, named Khnum, ba or otherwise. Next to these or in their stead there may be one or two birds with the head of a ram, a falcon or a man, representing ba soul. Inside and outside the space enclosed by Geb and Nut various other divine figures and symbols may be drawn, in particular a man or woman in adoration — whose destiny in life is thus placed in cosmic perspective. This depiction of the separation of heaven and earth is never accompanied by a long explanatory text. Sometimes the beginning of a sun hymn is written beside it.

It is not possible here to enter into a more detailed analysis of the representation of Geb and Nut.<sup>22</sup> I will only make two remarks. By far the greater part of these depictions date from the comparatively short period of the 21st and 22nd dynasty. We have only a few dating from the subsequent periods. These differ clearly in iconographical details from the familiar depictions of the 21st and 22nd dynasty that are so often reproduced.<sup>23</sup> It is striking that in the religious iconography I have, so far, not found a single depiction of Geb and Nut dating from the period before the 21st dynasty, whereas the motif of Geb and Nut being separated by Shu is known well enough from the funerary literature of earlier times. The earliest representation of Geb and Nut — if indeed we may call it one — is found in the Erotic Papyrus of Turin, that dates from the 20th dynasty. Omlin<sup>24</sup> characterizes this drawing as a parody of the Geb and Nut representation. I have not, however, as yet found any evidence that the Geb and Nut depiction belonged to the repertoire of Ramesside iconography, so that it could have given rise to a parody. If there is a any connexion between the depiction of Geb and Nut in the 21st and later dynasties and this drawing in the Erotic Papyrus of Turin, it is not inconceivable that a drawing such as the latter had an influence on subsequent religious iconography.

Apart from the earliest representation in the Turin Erotic Papyrus, which iconographically is rather a variant, all the pictures are painted on sarcophagi or drawn in funerary papyri. Only in the tomb of Shoshenk of the 22nd dynasty is the representation cut in

stone.<sup>25</sup>

Thus we meet this depiction of the separation of heaven and earth almost exclusively in a funerary context, i.e. a situation concerned with human rebirth. Surely this shows it to be an element of the myth of creation that verbally and pictorially expresses what happened in the beginning and what is the foundation of the reality man now lives in, while offering a perspective for the future, for man's destiny after his individual death.

## NOTES

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1. See for instance: J. Assman, *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete*, Zürich 1970, nr 44, 5-8 (= B.D. Naville 15BII); nr 80,4 (= Urk. IV 942,14), nr 87A, 40 (= pap Boulaq 17); nr 127,28 (= pap Berlin 3049); nr 117, 7-9 (= pap. Beatty IX), nr 128, 130-133 (= hymn to Amon, El Hibe); nr 129, 70-72; nr 143, 33-34 and 150-154 (= pap Berlin 3048, hymn to Ptah); nr 144 I, 35-37 (pap Strassburg 2+7, hymn to Sobek-Re); nr 165, 1-8 (= Cairo J. E. 43591); nr 199, 7-12 (= pap Harris I).
2. E. Hornung, *Der Eine und die Vielen*, Darmstadt 1971, 166 ff.
3. Medinet Habu, pls 164-165 = Kitchen, *Ram. Inscr.*, V, 178. Schott, *Festdaten*, 98 nr 109; 9677 nr 101, 105, 110 cf. Schott, *Fragmente memphitischer Theologie in demotischer Schrift*, 1954, 75; Wainwright, *JEA* 35(1949), 175; Abdel Mohsen Bakir, *Cairo Calendar*, 33,73; Chabas, *Calendrier*, 75. Sauneron, *Esna V*, 20, cf. 73-74. See now also D. Kurth, *Den Himmel Stützen*, Bruxelles 1975, 144-145.
4. E. Hornung, *Das Amduat*, Wiesbaden 1963, II, 188.
5. In liturgical texts, however, not the separation but the uniting of heaven and earth is considered as a good thing. See Assman, *Liturgische Lieder*, 259: "Die Erscheinung des Gottes "auf Erden" (in der Öffentlichkeit) macht diese dem Himmel gleich und der Festjubil vereint Himmel und Erde, die seit der Schöpfung getrennt sind. Im Fest wird diese Trennung, die die geordnete Alltagswelt konstituiert aufgehoben".
6. Hornung, *Studium Generale* 18(1965), 80.
7. Pap Bremner-Rhind 5,7 and 7, 3-4.
8. Pap. Beatty I ro. 3,3.
9. H. Grapow, *Die bildlichen Ausdrücke des Ägyptischen*, Berlin 1924, 28. See already Pyr 1559c.



10. See for instance M. Eliade, *Ewige Bilder und Sinnbilder*, Freiburg 1958, 48.
11. L. Kákosy "Ideas about the fallen state of the world in Egyptian religion: Decline of the golden age", *Acta Orient. Hung.* 17 (1964), 205-216; and E. Otto "Das Goldene Zeitalter in einem Ägyptischen Text", in: *Religions en Égypte hellénistique et romaine*, Paris 1969, 93-108.
12. Texts edited by C. Maystre, *BIFAO* 40(1941), 53-115; translation: A. Piankoff, *The Shrines of Tut-Ankh-Amon*, New York 1955, 27-37.
13. H. Baumann, *Das doppelte Geschlecht*, Berlin 1955, 250ff.  
W. Staudacher, *Die Trennung von Himmel und Erde*, Tübingen 1942. I have not seen the article of Marót in *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 1 (1951-1952), 35-63.  
L. Frobenius, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas*, Frankfurt 1933, 153ff.  
H. Th. Fischer, *Het heilig huwelik van hemel en aarde*, Utrecht 1929.
14. S. G. F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East*, London 1963, 27f.
15. See L. Stork in L. A. S. V. "Erotik".
16. cf. WB VI, 43 and 78.
17. So R. Anthes in: *Mythologies of the ancient world*, ed. by S. N. Kramer, New York, 1961, 33.
18. H. Frankfort, *The Cenotaph of Seti I at Abydos*, London 1933, II, 82-86 (translation by A. de Buck). H. Grapow, *ZÄS* 71 (1935), 45-47 M. Strackmans, *Archiv Orientální*, 20 (1952), 410-416.
19. E. Varga, *Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux Arts* 7(1955), 3-9, devoted a special article to the scene on a fragment of a sarcophagus in the museum at Budapest.
20. cf. H. Bonnet *RARG*, 769: "T(atenen) bedeutet das erhobene Land und bezeichnet die beim Weltbeginn aus dem Urmeer aufgestiegene Erde" ... "Dem Erdgott Geb gleich breitet er sich unter dem in Nut verkörperter Himmelszelt aus". Geb's recumbent position recalls the *primaeval* inertness of reality (L.A. II, 429).

21. With reference to Pap Lavaratori 339 = pap BM 9941 (Lanzone, Dizionario, Tav. CLVII) D. Kurth, Den Himmel Stützen, 148, suggested "der Ägypter habe mit dieser Darstellung die Unmöglichkeit einer erneuten Vereinigung beider Gottheiten beschwören wollen".
22. The present author intends to give a monograph on the subject. So far some published and unpublished depictions of Geb and Nut have come to my knowledge not including those of Nut bending down without Geb, as she is seen for instance in the royal tombs. I thank especially Mr. A. Niwinski, Warsaw, who drew my attention to several representations ab, to 25 unpublished scenes on coffins in the Cairo museum.
23. See for instance the depictions on the Sarcophagus of Tachepen Khonsu (Louvre E 3913) and of Hor (Brit. Mus. 15655) and already of Nesikhonsu (Cairo C.G. 41003). The fact that these scenes are not depicted on the sideboard of the coffin as is usual during the 21st and 22nd dynasty, but on the lid is also significant.
24. J. A. Omlin, Der Papyrus 55001, und seine satirisch-erotischen Zeichnungen und Inschriften, Torino 1973, 35, 40, 54.
25. A. Badawi, ASAE 54 (1956), 169-170 and pl. X.