Program in Judaic Studies
Brown University
Box 1826
Providence, RI 02912

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The Representation of the Divine in Ancient Egypt[1]

ANN MACY ROTH

The current scholarly understanding of the representation of Egyptian gods derives largely from Eric Hornung's book, *Der Eine und die Vielen*,[2] which focuses on problems of multiplicity and henotheism, but also covers most other areas of the Egyptian conceptions of divinity. Rather than repeat the findings of this excellent study, the present paper presents investigations into two particular areas of this question that diverge from the views generally held in ways that may be of interest to scholars of other ancient and Near Eastern religions. The first of these areas is the evolution of the representations of the divine, and the second, which will be more briefly treated, is the representation of individual divinities by their names.

The Evolution of Depictions of the Divine

Two-dimensional representations of gods in Egyptian art of all periods are invariably clearly and cleanly drawn, without any blurred edges, shading, or mystery. Like all elements of Egyptian art, both their figures and the details within their figures are normally outlined in a darker color, to separate them from the blank background. The areas inside these outlines are then filled with solid planes of unblended color, as in a child's coloring book. Details are then added, again in outline.

1. This paper was written and presented in 1998, and does not take account of literature published since that date. I am indebted to Kevin Reinhart for guidance in dealing with the literature of Religious Studies.

2. 1971, translated by J. Baines as *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

This clarity and lack of blending and shading is grounded in Egyptian conceptions of cosmology and cosmogony. Non-existence, according to the Egyptian view, was not a lack of physical presence, but a lack of differentiation and individuality. The universe before its creation was not an empty void, but an undifferentiated purée, from which everything that existed later was created by a process of separation. Existence was thus characterized primarily by multiplicity, differentiation, boundaries, and hierarchical order. The blurring of boundaries could lead to the destruction of individual identity and a collapse back into the undifferentiated primeval waters of non-existence. Therefore, our portraits of Egyptian gods, like everything else depicted in Egyptian art, are sharp and clear, underlining their individuality and supporting their existence as separate entities. This emphasis on the demarcation of the boundaries of beings and objects, which is generally viewed simply as a characteristic of Egyptian artistic style, stresses one of the essential characteristics of existence, and hence is a particularly important characteristic of the divine. Throughout the Egyptian evidence there is a tension between the clarity required for the maintenance of the gods' existence and a certain mystery implied by their divinity.

In scenes where they are shown with people, the forms of the gods often closely resemble the king or even the ordinary people who are worshipping them. Many divinities might easily be mistaken for humans, were it not for their position, the captions above them, iconographic elements identifying them as gods, or their divine role in the scene. Even their dress is merely human dress, albeit sometimes in an archaic style.

Despite their clarity and simplicity, Egyptian depictions of gods and goddesses strike most Western observers as mysterious because the deities are so often represented as animals, or, even more bizarrely, in mixed animal and human form. Egyptologists usually explain the animal parts of these forms as simple visual cues that helped to identify the gods,[3] comparable to the animals that the Hittite and Semitic gods stand on, or even to the characteristic implements of torture that identify martyred saints in Christian art.

But although these animal parts may have functioned in practice as markers to help viewers identify the divinity depicted, they had a much more significant role. Their composite forms embody the history of the divinity, and bring to his present manifestation the powerful aura of antiquity conveyed by a sequence of earlier manifestations. The animal characteristics of certain gods are instances of the ancient Egyptians' conservatism. They preserve an artistic tradition from an earlier phase of

3. See, e.g., L. Lesko in *Religion in Ancient Egypt*, ed. B. Shafer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 112–13.

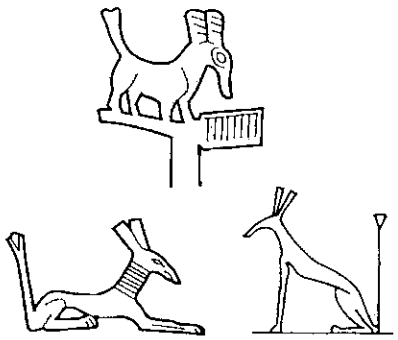

FIGURE 4: Depictions of the "Seth animal" from the Scorpion Macehead of the late Predynastic period (top), the Old Kingdom (lower left), and the Middle Kingdom (lower right). (Drawing by the author after H. te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion* [Leiden, 1977], figs. 4 and 6, with some modification to the tail of the uppermost depiction based on photographs and other published drawings of the macehead.)

became more popular, he was represented as a human being, still with his scepter-like head. He is in himself an example of the nesting of earlier forms within later ones. We even have a *w³s*-scepter with a face, from the Eighteenth-Dynasty temple of Deir el-Bahari (Fig. 5), where much of the decor seems to be modelled on much older prototypes;[27] an earlier example dated to Mentuhotep IV of the Eleventh Dynasty, in the very early Middle Kingdom, has recently been excavated at Elephantine.[28]

This argument suggests that the forms a god takes offer clues to the date of his or her origin. For example, the important divinities Osiris and Isis appear quite suddenly in our sources, towards the end of the Fifth Dynasty (about 2425 B.C.E.), and immediately become extremely popular. It is unclear whether they were older divinities that just happened to become popular at this period, or whether they were simply new gods, coming into existence at the time they first appear. Both of these gods are almost invariably depicted in anthropomorphic form, taking animal form only in much later periods, through association with other divinities. But Isis may actually have begun as an object, a divine personification of the royal throne. Her name actually means "throne," and she is generally shown with a throne upon her head. The pattern proposed here suggests that her history may extend back into prehistory, whereas Osiris probably appeared only in the Old Kingdom.

27. The *w³s* scepter and Seth have previously been connected. A. Wainwright, "Some Aspects of Amun," *JEA* 20 (1934): 148, listed many connections; and A. H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (3d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 509 (sign list S 40), cites Jéquier in identifying the head of the scepter as the head of the Seth-animal. I am simply suggesting that the development was from the scepter to the animal rather than in the other direction, as earlier scholars seem to have assumed.

28. W. Kaiser et al., "Stadt und Tempel von Elephantine, 23./24. Grabungsbericht," *MDAIK* 53 (1997): pl. 20, fragment d. Only the eye is preserved; the bottom part of the scepter is broken.

FIGURE 5: A *w³s*-scepter from the temple of Deir el-Bahari, with an eye that shows its connection with the Seth animal. (Drawing by the author.)

Names of Divinities

Naming beings and objects was another way that the ancient Egyptians distinguished them from the purée of non-existence. Perhaps because of this function of a name, they believed that knowledge of the name gave one control over whatever the name labeled. One can therefore expect that the names assigned to divinities would be significant and revealing. Divinities are often said to have many names, and this multiplicity again distinguishes them from their human worshippers.

As the example of Isis illustrates, the names of the gods sometimes throw light on their natures as well. The gods connected with creation, for example, tend to have negative names, reflecting the undifferentiated pre-creation primeval waters of non-existence. The name of one of the most important creator gods, Atum, is a form of the negative verb *tm*, "to not do." The name of Shu, another creator god, means "empty," and the name Nefertem is actually a double negative: *nfr*, "to finish or stop something," and *tm*, "to not do," as in Atum. The eight divinities of the Ogdoad, in another creation myth, are named for the negative characteristics of the pre-creation purée. The four gods' names denote the lack of motion, light, limits, and form, while the four goddesses have feminine forms of the same names, implying a lack of gender distinctions.

Goddesses, in contrast, tend to be named for places or things. The name of the goddess Hathor means "the temple of the god Horus"; Horus is her consort, so she is in a sense derived from him, a personification of his temple, although she is clearly also an independent and distinctive deity from a very early period. The name Isis, as mentioned above, means "throne," and interestingly, the name of her consort Osiris is at first written as an eye (possibly the verb "to act") resting on a throne. This suggests that Osiris was derived from Isis in the same way that Hathor was derived from Horus. This supports the suggestion made above that Isis was the older divinity.

But a large number of the most important gods have names to which we cannot assign any specific meaning. This is particularly true of gods

popular during the Old Kingdom, such as Ptah, Sokar, Thoth, Anubis, and Seth, as well as the goddess Neith. Some scholars have bemoaned the fact that the meaning of these names has been lost, assuming that if we knew what they meant, we would know more about the nature of these major divinities. But it is more likely that these names are meant to be mysterious: Not only do they not have any obvious meaning, but when they are written phonetically—rather than simply with an emblem or animal, the meaningless names tend to be written exclusively with alphabetic consonantal signs (Fig. 6). The alphabetic spellings completely obscure the pronunciation of these names: Most biliteral and triliteral signs are also words on their own account, and even if the vowels are not noted, the underlying words imply vowels. By writing the words exclusively with single alphabetic signs, scribes avoided implying any vowels, and the true pronunciations of the names remain mysterious, even though an approximation of some sort must have been adopted for purposes of ritual and prayer. These writings constitute an interesting early parallel to the tetragrammaton.

On the other hand, the names of two most important gods of the Old Kingdom, Horus and Re^{c}, do have meaning. Horus (Egyptian *Ḥr*) seems to be the preposition *ḥr*, "on, above," obviously descriptive of a falcon deity. And the sun god is called *R^{c}*, which means "sun," or in later periods, *p^{3} R^{c}*, "the sun." This is unusual; all the other cosmological divinities, representing earth, sky, and so forth, have names that differ from the words for those parts of the universe, and their names are rarely preceded by the definite article.

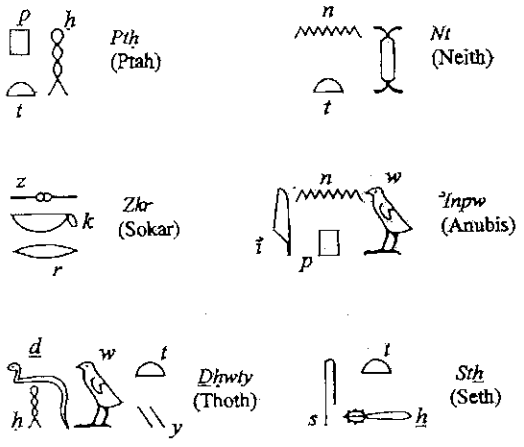

FIGURE 6: The names of six important gods of the Old Kingdom period written almost exclusively with alphabetic signs. (Figure prepared by the author using the Winglyph program.)

The explanation seems to be that both Horus and Re^{c} are paraphrastic names that allow the worshipper to avoid naming the divinity altogether. We even have a myth recounting how Isis learned Re^{c}'s secret, true, name.[29] The myth does not tell us what that name was, but in one manuscript the scribe seems to have tried out several sequences of random alphabetic letters, hoping, we assume, to hit upon the true name by serendipity.[30]

A confirmation of the paraphrastic nature of the names of Horus and Re^{c} is the special way they are treated in personal names of the Old Kingdom period. In royal names, Horus is represented by a falcon and Re^{c} by a sun disk, in other words, by an image of the divinity's manifestation in nature. But non-royal names spell the name Re^{c} alphabetically, as if it were one of those meaningless names, while Horus is written with the face used to write the preposition "upon," flanked by the two alphabetic signs, *ḥ* and *r*. This distinction in the writings again points up the special nature of these two gods, and suggests that while kings' names could represent the actual manifestation of the god, ordinary people treated even the paraphrastic as a name of unknown meaning and pronunciation. This distinction disappeared in later periods, and was not adopted for the "great gods" of later times, so it seems to have been an early phenomenon.

In conclusion, then, it can be said that although the depictions we see of Egyptian gods seem clear and straightforward, both their names and their figures are in fact to some extent shrouded in mystery. There were restrictions about implying pronunciations for the names of the more powerful gods, and the true names of the two most powerful gods of the early period were unknown, save perhaps to their highest priestly attendants. Similarly, the physical forms taken by the gods in art are sometimes literally shrouded by mummy wrappings, despite the clarity of their depictions. In other cases they contain buried layers of references to earlier stages of their own evolution, which obscure whatever their true nature was believed to be. The Egyptians represented their divinities as both well-defined and mysterious beings: The definition and clarity of their names and depictions were necessary to protect their existence and prevent them from reverting to pre-creation chaos. Nonetheless, both names and depictions contained within them obscurities that hid the divinities' true nature and made them almost as mysterious to the people who worshipped them as they are to us today.

29. J. A. Wilson's translation of this text is published in J. B. Pritchard, *ANET*, 12-14.

30. The fact that the scribe assumed that the "true name" would be a meaningless combination of alphabetic signs also corroborates the interpretation of the alphabetic names offered here.