

Any, the author linked maat with the god's capricious will. The *Teachings of Amenemope* calls maat the god's burden. Amenemope suggests that the gods give maat without any clear explanation of why some receive it and others do not. Yet even these two authors stress that humans must try to follow maat.

MAAT AND AFTERLIFE. If an individual lived according to maat, access to the afterlife was assured. In *Coffin Texts* Spell 816, a ritual for ensuring entry to the next life utilizes the power of maat. Maat also is integral to *Book of the Dead* Chapter 125. In this chapter the deceased describes in detail the actions he took and avoided in order to comply with maat. The illustrations for this chapter include weighing the deceased's heart against the symbol of maat. If the two are in balance, the deceased is able to enter the afterlife. Maat also played a role in uniting the deceased with the sun god Re, another goal for all Egyptians. Many hymns recorded in New Kingdom tombs stress the association of maat and Re. The Egyptians ultimately associated maat with the cemetery itself. It came to be called the "Place of Maat."

SOURCES

Erik Hornung, *Idea Into Image* (New York: Timkin, 1992): 131–146.

Emily Teeter, *The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt* (Chicago, Ill.: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1997).

SEE ALSO *Literature: The Literature of Moral Values; Religion: The King*

COSMOGONY: THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD

SEP TEPI. Much of philosophy as well as religion focuses on theories of creation. Egyptians described the world's origin with the phrase, *sep tepi* ("the first time"). This phrase suggests that creation was not a single isolated event. Instead they saw it as an event that was endlessly repeated, though it had had one original enactment. The Egyptologist Erik Hornung suggested that this vision of creation allowed the Egyptians to conceive the world as repeatedly new and that this was a source of their personal creativity.

ACCOUNTS. In the early periods of their history, the Egyptians did not write one connected account that described creation. At the end of their history, in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods (332 B.C.E.–395 C.E.),

some accounts were carved on the walls of temples. In the Pharaonic period (3000–332 B.C.E.), the Egyptians left only isolated statements and allusions to a creation myth. Many of these allusions speak of the separation of the earth and sky as the primal event that occurred in *sep tepi*. But the Egyptians had more than one explanation for how the earth came to be. In one version the god Atum used his own seed to create the world. In a second account, the god Ptah used speech to create everything.

BEFORE CREATION. The Egyptians conceived of a time before creation. According to allusions in the *Pyramid Texts*, the funeral ritual carved inside late Fifth- and in Sixth-dynasty royal pyramids (2371–2194 B.C.E.), before creation all was a watery darkness. The blend of darkness and water was the essence of the unformed, chaotic state before creation. It was also the opposite of creation, distinguishing the previous times through the lack of the things that now exist. The period before creation was defined by its lack of gods, people, heaven, earth, day, and night. There was neither life nor death. When the *Pyramid Texts* state that even strife did not yet exist, it refers to the on-going mythical battle between the legitimate heir to the throne, Horus, and his evil uncle, Seth.

EMERGENCE. Somehow from the watery darkness, a hill of mud emerged. This hill provided a resting place for the creator. The Egyptians based this hill on the reality of the way that the earth emerged from the annual flood. Firm ground separated from the watery mass and created a place where the god could work. Here the god separated into four pairs of divinities including primeval flood, the hidden ones, endlessness, and the undifferentiated ones. The sun then emerged from these beings. The first sunrise signaled the beginning of creation. Many Egyptian symbols refer to this emergence on a hill. The pyramid shape is a model of the hill but also points toward the sun. The lotus blossom that floats on the water comes to symbolize the birth of the sun god. A cow goddess can also emerge from the water with the sun between her horns. The best-known form of this goddess is Hathor. All these symbols were another way for the Egyptians to state that emergence was the beginning of creation.

CREATOR GODS. The creator god took numerous forms. It could assume the form of a bird, a human, or a snake. The god could be a *benu*-bird, a heron sometimes associated with the Greek phoenix. This bird's shriek signaled that the sun would hatch from an egg the bird had laid. The bird was also the first living creator to alight on the mound that emerged after the dark



Standing mummiform statuette of Ptah. BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART, 08.480.25, CHARLES EDWIN WILBOUR FUND. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

water subsided. In human form the creator was Atum, Ptah, Re, Neith, or Khnum. Atum's name means "undifferentiated." There are several versions of how Atum created the world, but all deal with a body fluid he emitted in order to create. He would either spit, cough, or masturbate to produce seed. From Atum's moisture the first sexually differentiated couple, a divine pair called Shu and Tefnut, came into being. They are unique in not being the offspring of a couple. The *Coffin Texts* affirm that Shu was not formed in an egg, like other be-

ings. The first couple created through sexual procreation were Geb and Nut, the son and daughter of Shu and Tefnut. The following generations included the gods Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys. This group of nine deities formed the Ennead of the city of Heliopolis. Ptah, also known as Ptah-Tatenen, was the local god of Memphis. Ptah used language to create. First he thought of what the world should be, then said it out loud in order to create it. The text called the Memphite Theology—dating roughly to 716–702 B.C.E., though scholars once thought it had been copied from an Old Kingdom (2625–2170 B.C.E.) text—describes the process. The sun god Re was also a creator. In the *Pyramid Texts*, the sun god creates through planning and speech as did Ptah. However, he adds the concept of magic power to animate his planning and speech. The texts describe Re's relationship with these three powers by saying that they travel in his boat with him. The goddess Neith created the world through seven statements. These statements were later called the seven-fold laugh of the creator god. Neith's connection to creation seems to come from her relationship to a cow goddess called Mehetweret. This cow emerged from the watery darkness with the sun lodged between her horns. The Egyptians also associated this cow with the goddess Hathor. Finally, Neith could be a scarab beetle, another source of creation. Later the Egyptians identified the scarab with Khepri, a form of the morning sun. Neith thus lost her primary connection with creation through the increased importance of Hathor and Khepri in the later periods. Yet it appears that early in Egyptian thought, she was an important figure in creation of the world. Khnum was a ram-headed god worshipped at temples in Esna and in Elephantine, both in Upper (southern) Egypt. As a creator, Khnum worked with his hands to create mankind, the primal egg from which the sun hatched, and the earth itself. He fashioned all of these things on a potter's wheel. In some versions, Ptah performed these same tasks on a potter's wheel after he had planned and spoken creation.

UNIFIED SYSTEM. For many years Egyptologists have tried to organize all of this information about creation into a coherent whole. They have suggested that certain traditions were local and believed only at certain temples. They have tried to organize these stories chronologically, seeing some as more primitive than others and proposing that the sophisticated versions evolved from the primitive stories. The Egyptologist Erik Hornung suggested, on the contrary, that the Egyptians saw each of these stories as mutually re-enforcing, adding detail and complexity rather than contradicting each other. No story was dogma that excluded the possibilities of an-

other story. Yet he has identified certain common themes found in all the stories.

THEMES. The creator gods all share certain characteristics that are themes of the story. All the creators are self-created and pre-date sexual differentiation. All the creators were what the Egyptians called, *kheper djesej*, “what came to exist by itself.” A hymn to the god Amun suggests a male creator “formed his egg himself.” These creators acted as both father and mother in the process of self-producing. But Hornung stressed that this individual was able to reproduce so that many now exist. The important point is that one became many. The *Coffin Texts* refer to Atum and the time when “he gave birth to Shu and Tefnut in Heliopolis, when he was one and became three.” Diversity, in other words, grows out of a unity. In a New Kingdom hymn, Atum is “the one who begat his begetter, who engendered his mother, who created his own hand.” Here both of the prime characteristics of the creator are in evidence. The creator is an individual who creates the many alone.

IMAGE. The Egyptian image that summarizes the story of creation also makes clear that the Egyptians saw creation as a movement from the one to the many. In the Egyptian language, a distinction was made among singular (one), dual (two), and plural (three or more). Thus three represents the many. In the images of the separation of earth and sky, three gods are pictured. The sky goddess Nut hovers above the earth god Geb. Between them, separating earth and sky is Shu, the god of air. Thus, once the primal unity separates, it becomes three, the symbol for many.

CREATING HUMANS. In many creation stories, the creator made humans from tears. The initial relationship between divine tears and humans is in the sound of the words that describe them. Tears in Egyptian are *remy*. People in Egyptian are *remetj*. Thus the connection is based on a pun. But Erik Hornung believed the connection is even deeper than the word play. He suggested that humanity sprang from a blurring of the god’s vision. The *Coffin Texts* suggest that “humans belong to the blindness behind” the creator god.

EARLIEST WORLD. In the earliest world, according to Egyptian belief, the sun god Re served as king. When Re was king, the sun never set and people had access to the sun at all times. The fact that there was no night meant that there was no death. The Egyptians thought people lost this perfect sun-filled world through the aging process. In the *Book of the Celestial Cow*, the author explains that the youthful freshness of the world eventually faded. The sun god himself grew old. As he aged,



Stela with image of Seth. BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART, 16.580.187, GIFT OF EVANGELINE WILBOUR BLASHFIELD, THEODORA WILBOUR, AND VICTOR WILBOUR HONORING THE WISHES OF THEIR MOTHER, CHARLOTTE BEEBE WILBOUR AS A MEMORIAL TO THEIR FATHER, CHARLES EDWIN WILBOUR. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

the sun god’s power began to fail and he lost control. As control waned, forces of opposition challenged the sun god. Humans devised attacks against Re and thus they were punished. At first Re sent his eye, a ball of fire, to destroy mankind. In the end Re allowed a remnant of people to live. However, Re also retreated from the world riding on the celestial cow and forced people to live in a much less ideal world. For one thing, it was now dark. When humans tried to survive in the dark, they turned against each other. This strife among humans caused the other gods to retreat from the earth. Osiris took charge of the new land of the dead, which was lit during the nighttime hours by the sun. On earth war and violence become part of humanity’s fate. Only in death could people regain the perfect world in the presence of the gods. This early myth of the god Re gave the Egyptians the philosophical idea of renewal. Renewal was only possible through the cycling of the sun. Thus every sunrise represented a new creation and renewal of the earth. Every sunset represented the death of the day. Sunrise was a time for rejoicing. Sunset suggested that though the sun disappeared into the land of the dead, it would



Standing mummiform statuette of Osiris. BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART, 08.480.27, CHARLES EDWIN WILBOUR FUND. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

return and recreate the world anew the next day. This is similar in many ways to later philosophical ideas of redemption and reconciliation.

RETURN TO ONE. The Egyptians feared the possibility that the world would return to one watery darkness. The *Book of the Celestial Cow* details the efforts of man and god to keep the sky from collapsing into the earth. If the sky and earth reunited, the original watery darkness would be restored. Chaos would then rule, and human life would be impossible. Yet the Egyptians believed that eventually the world would end and the watery darkness would return. In the Egyptian end of time, a snake will emerge when the sky collapses into the earth and recreates watery darkness. The snake will return to the chaos where he originated. Though Egyptian expressions of belief in the end of time are rare, they give symmetry to Egyptian beliefs about the beginning. Thus Egyptian ideas of creation falls naturally into a series of cycles. Though creation's "first time" was an important, pristine event, the Egyptians believed that creation would repeat infinitely, making it possible to have an endless cycle of rebirth and death.

SOURCES

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- Erik Hornung, *Idea Into Image* (New York: Timken, 1992): 39–56.
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SEE ALSO *Religion: Egyptian Myths*

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

TYPES OF TEXT. Egyptologists have identified ancient texts that teach the Egyptian idea of philosophy. These texts divide into more than one ancient literary type. Many of them are instructions, identified in Egyptian with the word *seboyet*. But other texts that discuss philosophy include complaints, prophecies, and testaments. Some scholars refer to these texts as a group as "didactic literature," the literature the Egyptians used to teach philosophy. Many of the texts identified as didactic literature combine more than one literary type within them. *The Eloquent Peasant*, for example, begins as the story of a farmer bringing his crops to market. He encounters a corrupt official who attempts to rob the farmer. The majority of the text is a series of orations on the nature of *maat* ("right conduct"). These orations amount to a treatise on the nature of *maat*. The narrative or frame story enhances the treatise by giving a concrete example of what happens when *maat* is ignored.