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THE BOOK OF THE DEAD.

MUCH interest attaches to the new translation of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the last part of which has just been placed in the hands of subscribers. It is in the main the work of the late Sir P. le Page Renouf and is the most scholarly and best approved translation that has yet appeared. Begun in 1892, it was planned to be completed in eight parts; and the work proceeded. But Renouf died when only six parts had been issued; and the translation and commentary have been completed from his notes, by M. Edouard Naville, Professor at Geneva, to whom also we owe the present Introduction.

The Introduction is valuable as giving the chief facts known about the history of the text; and it is no fault of M. Naville's that it contains a confession of ignorance as to its meaning. The very reason of that ignorance excites further curiosity. In the first place some of the early chapters of this collection date from the earliest times, and language was in a primitive stage. The rubrics attribute them to a king of the first dynasty, and they may really be older than the pyramids. Undoubtedly they go back to the Old Empire; and we are forced to admit that their origin is not much later than the beginning of Egyptian civilization. The texts of the Middle Empire shew already that there were various editions. Words once well understood had become obsolete; ancient usages had fallen into desuetude, many allusions were now uncertain in their reference. Comment and explanation became necessary. Later copyists incorporated the commentary with the text, and sometimes included inconsistent readings. By the time of the twenty-sixth dynasty the Book was hardly intelligible even to its editors. Renouf says,—'I have no doubt whatever that some chapters of the Book of the Dead were as obscure to Egyptians living under the eleventh dynasty [say about 3000 B.C.] as they are to ourselves.' And as to the

present obscurity, in some of the sentences the meaning often seems to us childish, or even 'outrageous nonsense'. We may be sure however that it was not so to the devout Egyptian who paid for a copy of the sacred word and placed it in the tomb with his deceased relative. The difficulty now is not in literally translating the text, but in understanding the meaning which lies concealed beneath familiar words. For this portion of the task the translator of hieroglyphics is not necessarily well equipped. It is confessed that 'the most accurate knowledge of the Egyptian vocabulary and grammar will not suffice to pierce the obscurity arising from what M. de Rougé called symbols or allegories, which are in fact simple mythological allusions'. Naville speaks of 'the Egyptian mythology which plays such an important part in the Book', and confesses that 'we have not yet unravelled all its intricacies'.

It is certain that in Egypt six thousand years ago, there was a mythology which served as a background of religious belief. It was so important and so cherished that temples were built to the gods it recognized, and priests were supported to perform rites and celebrate festivals. It was so generally known and accepted, that the sacred writings of that time assume the theology instead of setting it forth didactically. There is no *Book of the Dead*, properly speaking. What we have is separate chapters or compositions, of various date and authorship, and as independent of one another as the Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures. They are given in the present edition as 186 in number. In the course of centuries they underwent revision and enlargement; and new chapters were added. It was late in the day before they were collected and issued in what might be called an authorized edition. They are found in tombs, because the deceased person was supplied with one or more chapters as a *vade mecum*. His day of life was over, he was buried in the west, and he would have to pass through the dark Underworld. In order that he might find true guides, baffle deceivers, and escape all perils, he was to con his book and recite its verses. Champollion called the collected chapters a ritual; but they are not that: they are not for the priest in the temple, but for the deceased himself to repeat in the Netherworld. Lepsius found the best collection to be that embodied in the

long papyrus in the Turin Museum. He published it and called it the *Todtenbuch*—the Book of the Dead: but that again, is not a translation of the Egyptian title. That title, as rendered by Renouf, is 'Coming forth by day'; but Renouf felt a difficulty in explaining the phrase. Naville would translate the title,—'Coming out of the day', the day being, in his opinion, 'the period of a man's life, having its morning and its evening'. This explanation hardly commends itself to us. Surely a man in his grave does not require chapters to help him to come out of his earthly life. He had left that behind. He was believed to be passing through the darkness of the Netherworld, and it was hoped that after this night of death, there would be a morning of resurrection. Literally, if he went down in the west and followed the course of the sun, he would by and by rise up in the east, into the light of heaven. He would come forth into Day! Is not this the meaning? May we not call these old chapters the Book of Resurrection?

Renouf's idea as to the purpose and sense of the chapters amounts to this,—that they relate to the blessedness of the dead, regarded in three aspects;—(1) Renewed existence 'as upon earth'. The deceased eats and drinks, and satisfies all his physical wants. He particularly enjoys the activities of agricultural life. (2) He can transform himself, and range through the universe. (3) He becomes assimilated to the god Osiris, and triumphs over his enemies. Osiris is the sun in his underworld aspect. In the Egyptian mythology there is a very close relation between Osiris and Ra, and sometimes they are declared to become interfused, one and inseparable. Ra is the sun-god, the seat of whose worship was Heliopolis, a city connected with the oldest religious traditions of the country. The bulk of the *Book of the Dead* came from Heliopolis. It is not disputed that a leading feature in Egyptian religion was the worship of Ra, and that Heliopolis may rightly be called the religious capital of Egypt. Next to the *Book of the Dead*, the longest of the sacred writings of the Egyptians is the *Litany of Ra*; and in this the Supreme Power is adored in all his numerous manifestations. Of another composition, in honour of Ra-Harmachis, Mr. W. R. Cooper says,—'This beautiful hymn . . . resembles those sublime outpourings of adoration, of which in sacred

literature Psalm civ is so characteristic a type.' Now the king of Egypt was declared to be the Son of Ra, his living image; and when he died he went the way of the Sun, as Osiris had done.

Rameses II says of his deceased father,—'Thou dost rest in the depth like Osiris, while I rule like Ra among men.' As early as the fourth dynasty the monarchs were honoured with the appellation of 'Osiris' on their funeral tablets. In later time all good men of all ranks were assimilated to Osiris; they were addressed as 'the Osiris N. N.', and the body was bound up to resemble Osiris. The survivors trusted that the deceased would rise to new life, as it was believed that Osiris had done. The royal sepulchres in the valley of *Biban el Meluk*, at Thebes, have their walls adorned with pictures which generally represent the course of the sun through the Underworld. The deceased is supposed to follow the god in his journey. In other words, the Sun represents the Deity, and the good man goes to be with his god. The way out of the Underworld, and up to Heaven, was by a staircase [or Jacob's ladder] of seven steps: and in chapter xxii Osiris says,—'I am the Lord of Restau, the same who is at the head of the Staircase.' Renouf here bids us compare the picture of Osiris at the head of the Staircase, which is represented on the alabaster sarcophagus of Seti I in the Soane Museum. The good man, having thus ascended from the nether deep to the gate of Heaven, counted upon being assisted over the threshold. The deceased king Pepi I, as early as his pyramid—say 3300 B.C. —exclaims, 'Hail to thee, O ladder of God . . . Stand up, O Ladder of God!' and 'every god stretcheth out his hand unto this Pepi when he cometh forth into heaven by the Ladder of God!'

It ought to be clear that the basis of ancient Egyptian theology was largely astronomical. As we ourselves say that we are led, through nature to nature's God, so they; and the region of nature they regarded most was the sky. It may be admitted, of course, that astronomy was not everything in their system, and still less were they simply and exclusively sun-worshippers; but certainly their ritual gave prominence to the sun as a symbol. The netherworld journey of the deceased, however, can hardly have been simply from the place of sunset to the place of sunrise,

for that should have been plain sailing for the sun's 'boat', and for the souls in the wake of it. Instead of this, it seems, the deceased might miss his way: he met with deceivers and encountered many perils. We are surprised at the multiform dangers, and often baffled in trying to guess their meaning. The deceased passes through the chine of Apepi the Serpent, at the risk of being devoured; he meets with crocodiles, and through them, strangely, may be robbed of his Words of Power. There are Merta goddesses, and the Apshait, and the Eater of the Ass, all requiring to be kept back. At a place called Sutenhenen a great slaughter is perpetrated, and at another place there is a divine block of Execution. The unwary soul may be imprisoned, or be taken in the net of the catchers of fish. The deceased may even die a second time, and see corruption. It is possible that some of these dreadful things are survivals of the more primitive fancies which terrified mankind before they became civilized enough to study the sun and stars and measure the return of the seasons. It is possible that some of the descriptions are symbolical of facts of the astronomic system itself. What is that Stairway at the end of the journey? and how comes it to have seven steps? Egyptian religion was not sun-worship pure and simple. In an astronomic system the moon may be of some importance; certain stars may have a place; equinoxes and solstices may be taken into account.

There were many divinities besides Ra, and some of them so closely associated with him that they too must be supposed to have been celestial. Isis and Nephthys were his sisters; Set was his murderous brother; Horus was his son, who avenged him. Osiris, who reigns in the Underworld, becomes inseparable from Ra; and Thoth is continually to the fore as Ra's favourite. It should be an object of the student to identify these divinities astronomically, with the same certainty that Ra is identified with the sun. Who is Thoth? In chapter clxxxii he is the perfect scribe, the writing-reed of the Inviolate God: he writes justice and execrates wrong, and his words have dominion over the two earths. The Greeks recognized Thoth as their own Hermes, the god of number and calculation, of letters and learning. Of course, therefore, he corresponds to Mercury and to Nebo in other systems. We shall perhaps find that the Pantheon

included nearly the same circle of divinities in all the ancient nations. And why? Surely because they all had the same heavens above them, the same succession of seasons, the same need of measuring months and years; and the same practice of celebrating the festivals of each divinity as the day came round. Hermes or Thoth was associated with the renewal of the years. He was supposed to measure their length and to record their passage; and thus he became the god of number and of letters. He supplied all the data for a correct calendar. When the time and place of the equinox were accurately fixed, the right adjustment made between the summer and winter halves of the year, Thoth was said to appease the two gods, to reconcile the two brothers. It was this exact balancing of the hemispheres that made him the lord of justice. It was the need of bringing the calendar into accord with the astronomic facts which gave men their sense of obligation to divine law, the decrees of heaven. The concrete fact is ever the parent of the abstract idea.

It would be easy to enlarge the proof of an astronomic element in Egyptian religion. It would be fatuous to deny its existence. No doubt some French and English writers of the past were too easily satisfied with a simple solar explanation: they so had the sun in their eyes that they could see nothing else. But on the other hand, the writers who now refer everything to the fancies of savages are no less wide of the truth. The early Egyptians were not savages when they established the worship of Ra the Sun-god; nor were those of later centuries degenerate barbarians when they built more temples and added more chapters to the sacred book. The continuity of the teaching is wonderful, and only to be understood when we recognize that the standard was ever present to men in the sun and stars. If the priests kept themselves abreast of science, then, as the equinox receded on the ecliptic and the stars altered in declination, they would have to modify the teaching and the ritual. This would be one reason for writing new chapters; while another would be the general advance of culture. When modification had been too long neglected, the readjustment would come sometimes with the shock and inconvenience of a revolution.

M. Naville refrains from attempting to explain the chapters

he translates, because 'we have not yet unravelled all the intricacies of the Egyptian mythology'. I do not mean to say that Egyptologists, either foreign or English, attribute any part of the development of Egyptian teaching to the need of keeping in accord with the changing heavens. They are not convinced that the basis of the teaching was astronomic. That an element of astronomy is there, is confessed by Renouf and Maspero and other masters among them; but with the remembrance of Dupuis and Volney and other sun-god theorists to daunt them, they hold back too much. With scientific caution they refuse to go an inch beyond their facts; and since they have no scientific imagination they make no progress. Like M. de Rougé they cry out piteously that the most accurate knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar will not enable them to pierce to the meaning of symbols and allegories; yet they will not lend countenance to any other method. This obscurantism of the Egyptologist is as intolerant as ever was that of the Hebraist. To us it is also intolerable.

Religion is what it is, whatever its historical and outward origin. Just as man is man, even if his ancestor was an ape, so we are Christians now, whatever the hole of the pit from which we were digged. But we are naturally curious about origins; and as it has seemed worth while to probe into natural evolution, so is it to inquire into spiritual. Christianity, it is recognized, came out of Judaism: but whence came Judaism itself? Did Israel sojourn in Egypt and learn nothing about Ra the Sun-god? We have satisfied ourselves that the theology of the Egyptians had an astronomic basis, and the worship of the Sun, as a symbol of Deity, was a prominent feature in it. An astronomical system prevailed also in Babylonia and Assyria, where Anu corresponds to Ra, Nebo to Thoth, and the pantheon in general is similar. Even the Hebrew system—by the evidence of the sacred books—must at first have had an admixture of the same. With Babylon on one side of them and Egypt on the other, the Hebrews could hardly escape it. As there was nothing original in their architecture, so there was little that was peculiar in their religion. The Babylonians had their temples and festivals, their priests and sacrifices, their psalms, and their revelations by dreams. The Hebrews built their Temple to face the East, and

offered sacrifices at sunrise and sunset. They paid regard to new-moon days; they held high festival of Passover and Atonement at the season of the equinoxes. The seven lights of their temple candlestick, Josephus tells us, represented the planets. Either in Egypt or in Chaldea we should be able to uncover the roots and the trunk of the tree whose branches have overshadowed the nations.

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