

**THE MYTH OF RA  
(THE SUPREME SUN-  
GOD OF EGYPT)**

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The Myth of Ra (the Supreme Sun-god of Egypt) by W. R. Cooper

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(THE SUPREME SUN-GOD OF EGYPT)

WITH

COPIOUS CITATIONS FROM THE SOLAR AND PANTHEISTIC  
LITANIES.

BY

W. R. COOPER, F.R.A.S. M.R.A.S.

HON. SEC. BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY.

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TO WHICH IS ADDED

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## THE MYTH OF RA.

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ONE of the most certain results from the present advances of the science of comparative mythology is the discovery of peculiar points of contact, of parallels and analogies, in the earlier forms of all the religions of the world. Starting, as we are naturally willing as Christians to believe they did, from a basis of primeval revelation, these very soon diverged from the simplicity of a faith which rested on the Divine Word alone and originated a theology dependent upon second causes, and sustained by a philosophical theory, in which hypothesis upon hypothesis took the place of reason and induction. In theology, quite as much so as in every science, the tendency of the human mind is to exalt subordinate corollaries into the place of demonstrated first principles, to substitute second causes for original motors, and to rest satisfied with so doing, or, if at last any obvious inconsistencies arose from this process, then by a remarkable system of inverted argument to merge both primary and secondary causes into one, with still a preference to the latter as the more manifest evidence or indication of the former. It was thus that Sabaism was perverted out of and took the place of Monotheism, that Anthropomorphism led to Polytheism, and that both in turn by gradual descent became lost in Pantheism, which, when mingled with philosophy by which its inferences were found fallacious and its dogmas untenable, caused faith to decay away at last into Atheism and Nihilism. The history of religions proves to us that nearly all existing faiths, and certainly all the extinct ones, have passed through their several phases of thought; some have been for a long time arrested at one period of their development and some at another; a

powerful genius or an original thinker has written treatises or composed formularies which for many generations fixed the religion of his country at a particular point; at various times, roused, doubtless, by some monition of that divine instinct which never wholly leaves the heart of man, some fervid reformer, bold in his zeal and confident of his truth, has by his energy and teaching given prominence to certain special doctrines of his religion, and so to a great extent modified or explained away the errors or the difficulties of his creed; but still the religion, being simply a human, and so far a natural\* one, retrograded in its simplicity, and gradually sank into decay. More and more distinctive teaching, and more rigid dogmas, were introduced to retain within the orthodox Church the hearts of men whose faith was waxing cold, and an excess of ritual and ceremony not unfrequently burst forth at the moment of inanition when wearied by doctrines that could not profit, and ceremonies which had no regenerating power, the people, as a body, sank into animalism as the only practical good; and the wiser few of higher intellect, but unconvinced judgment, turned with sorrowing scorn to the barren consolations of philosophy, and painfully asked themselves, as Pliny did, "Is there a God?"† and the fool made answer in his heart, "There is no God."‡ There is probably nothing more painful to a Christian than to note with what sublime theories the ancient sages were endued, and yet to see to what contemptible depths of atheism and bestial folly their teaching gave rise; between the recorded sayings of Sakya Muni and St. Paul, between the discourses of Milinda§ and many an earnest preacher of the present day, there is ostensibly but little to choose, yet the one has for its ultimatum the infinite Nihilism of Nirvana, and the other finds its climax in the rapture of Corinthians xv. and the chastened confidence of the Epistle to Timothy. The maxims of Confucius and of Solomon are in strong parallelism, but the one concludes with the admonition, "Respect the gods,|| and keep out of their way";

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\* *Natural*; that is, of course, only in the sense of an *unrevealed* doctrine.

† Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, lib. II. cap. v., "of God." Bohn's Ed.

‡ Psa. liii. 1.

§ See Hardy's *Manual of Buddhism* for further particulars.

|| See Martin, *The San Kiau, or the Three Religions of China*, in Dickenson's *Theological Quarterly*, No. 7, p. 371.



while the other inculcates the fear of God, and the obedience of his commandments as the whole (*duty*) of man. It would not be easy to find a more detailed code of moral observances than the Institutes of Manu (unless, indeed, the Talmudic regulations of the Sephardim Jews may be supposed to afford a parallel), but the result of such a religious system is the gross licentiousness of modern Sivaism. The proverbs of Pthah-hotep, the oldest proverbs in the world,\* (having been written before the call of Abraham), express the highest reverence for sacred things, and the language of the *Ritual of the Dead*† has no equal except in the Psalms of David. Yet who will not glory in the life of the upright men, many of such as whom Christianity has produced and is producing, rather than in the remote practical morality which was the outcome of the Egyptian faith? And, finally, for it is simply as a prelude to this issue that these reflections have been introduced, scarcely any human phraseology could be found to convey a nobler idea of deity than the vocative addresses of the Myth of Ra, echoing, as they almost do, the tones of the harp of the Hebrew prophets in a lower octave; and yet, as we proceed to examine the logic of that myth in detail, we shall find its most glowing epithets to convey merely abstract ideas, and the issue of its divine ascriptions to be a metaphysical Pantheism, without life, and without the power to become vivified, or even to save itself from that religious decrepitude which ends in practical atheism.

2. The MYTH OF RA is, perhaps, one of the oldest component parts of the national mythology of the Egyptians, since some of the earliest events in the mythical history of the country are connected with it. It commences and permeates the whole of the theology of the *Ritual of the Dead*, and it was one of the last principles of the ancient faith which became lost in the Grecian and Perso-Grecian philosophies. The deity Ra was himself a hero and a god. As a hero he was a monarch of Egypt, and reigned for a thousand years;‡ while as a god he was the father of the deities Shu and Tefnu,§ and, by personal hypostasis, of

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\* Chabas, *Le plus Ancien Livre du Monde. Etude sur le Papyrus Priess, Revue Archéologique*, 1857.

† Especially that section or book which is called *The Egyptian Faith* extending from caps. xvii. to xx.

‡ Birch, *Guide to the Egyptian Vestibule*, Brit. Mus., p. 7.

§ Pierret, *Dictionnaire Archéologique*, in loco.

Horus Ra, his only begotten son.\* He was self-existing, and self-produced, and, according to his various manifestations, he became (1) Amen Ra, as the spiritual supreme being *par excellence*; (2) Har Machu, as the mid-day sun; (3) Tum, as the sun in the under-world, in which form he is more especially venerated in the formulæ of the *Ritual*; and (4) Aten Ra, as the deity of the solar disk. The deity Pthah, of Memphis, as the demi-urgus, derived his power from him; and Osiris, the god and judge of the dead, was in some mysterious manner identified with this god also. He was, as the sun, the author both of life and death; and by parity of reasoning, the greater always including the latter, of good and evil alike. While yet a male deity, he was, like Brahma, endued with the feminine principle as well, and thus he became an Androgyne. Since the visible luminary, the sun, his symbol, and in some mysterious manner his body also, rose and set, the god, in a manner, thus passed through infancy, maturity, and decay; and as he was the soul of the Kosmos itself, and thereby identical with Knuphis and Khneph, so he was also the author of the being of, and the source of the power of, all the other eight great gods,† and was merged in them, and their personality in turn lost in his.

3. Since Ra played so important a part in the celestial hierarchy it naturally followed that he was one of the chief deities whose statues and representations have come down to our day. The sarcophagi and papyri abound with representations of the god Ra in his heavenly boat canopied by the great serpent Mehen traversing the hours of day and night, and attended by the deities of the underworld.‡ Sometimes, inasmuch as the god Pthah was considered to be his father, Pthah being the deity of Material Fire; he was conjoined with that god also, and sometimes, like his children Shu and Tefnu, he was figured with the head of a lion. The most general representation of the god was, however, that of a man with the head of a hawk, choosing,

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\* See the previous paper by the author on the Myth of Horus, and the references there cited.

† These eight deities being in *Memphis*; 1, Pthah; 2, Shu; 3, Tefnu; 4, Seb; 5, Nut; 6, Osiris; 7, Nis and Horus; 8, Athor; while in *Thebes* the order was: 1, Amen Ra; 2, Mentu; 3, Atum; 4, Shu and Tefnu; 5, Seb; 6, Osiris; 7, Set and Nephthys; 8, Horus and Athor.

‡ See especially the sarcophagus of Seti I. at the Soane Museum, and the two basalt sarcophagi, that of Nebesni and the so-called Tomb of Alexander, in the Egyptian Gallery of the British Museum.

according to Horapollo,\* that bird on account of his "being prolific and long-lived, or perhaps rather because it seems to be an image of the sun, being capable of looking more intently towards his rays than all other winged creatures." In every case the solar disk and uræus formed his head-dress, and the cucufa sceptre was in his left hand, the right holding, in common with all the Egyptian deities, the handled cross or symbol of life.† Another but a less distinctive form of representing Ra was simply by the figure of the solar disc without uræi or wings, thus distinguishing him from Har-hut,‡ but with the scarabeus of the god Kheper, the creator, in the centre, and pendant from the edge, the handled cross and cucufa; this would more properly apply to Ra as the midday sun god. When figured as Tum, the solar disk was placed in the hollow of the western mountains, and in the place of scarabeus a small sitting figure of the deity proper occupied the centre of the disk. This latter symbol was generally wrought in carnelian or yellow jasper, and worn by the Egyptian children as an amulet, in which case it was supposed to preserve the vital warmth of the soul.

4. The oldest mythological work in which the worship of Ra is distinctly formulated is, of course, the *Ritual of the Dead*, the earliest portions of which are found in the coffin of Queen Mentu-hotep of the XIth dynasty, with a self-contained reference in the text itself to an earlier edition of one of the chapters, the LXIV., to the period of King Menkères, the founder of the third Pyramid, and one of the chief monarchs of the Vth dynasty.§ This to a certain extent fixes the great antiquity of the doctrine, which we have generally to examine, and the great *Ritual* itself may be regarded as dedicated to the sun, as Ra or Tum, Amen Ra, and many of the better known divinities of later times receiving far less notice than is devoted to the various attitudes of Ra. The *Ritual* almost commences with an address to Ra as Tum of the under-world:—"O Tum, O Tum, coming forth from the great place within the celestial abyss,

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\* *Horapollo*, by Cory, book I, sec. vi.

† A form of Horus as the good spirit, or *Agathodæmon* of the Greco-Egyptians.

‡ Wilkinson, *Materia Hieroglyphica*, pl. iv.

§ Bunsen, *Egypt's Place*, vol. v., p. 127. Introduction to the Book of the Dead.

|| The chapter of coming forth as the sun, and living after death, cap. iii.