



Man in the Egyptian Religion and Culture of the New Kingdom: From “Theological Working” to “Speculative Theology”

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Abstract. The paper is devoted to the issue of the religious worldview in Egypt of the era of the New Kingdom (XVI-XI centuries BC), when the doctrine of a transcendent God appears for the first time in the Theban religious thought, which is closely connected with the emergence of new ideas about man and his nature in this historical period. Many details of this new theological model already largely correspond to the cultural and spiritual criteria of the epoch of “axial time”, the onset of which is traditionally dated to a much later period, namely the X century BC.

Keywords: Religion · Theology · Pre-philosophy · Axial time · Ancient Egypt · Ancient Greece · Myth · Man

1 Introduction

The question of the genesis of philosophy is inseparable from the concept of “axial time”. This concept, formulated more than half a century ago by Karl Jaspers [1], is widely used by proponents of mythogenic and epistemogenic models of the genesis of philosophy. The first model uses the concept of “axial time” within the framework of the classical formula “From Myth to Logos”, and the second model uses it to explain the origin of ancient science. Historians of philosophy and culture traditionally date the epoch of “axial time” after Jaspers to the period from the X to the III centuries BC. At the same time, they also traditionally refer to the geographical framework in which this spiritual revolution of antiquity found its main embodiment, first of all, three “philosophical” civilizations of the ancient world - India, China and Greece. Meanwhile, many features of the phenomenon of the “Greek miracle”, which researchers often describe the process of the origin of science and philosophy in Ancient Greece in the VII century BC, cannot be correctly assessed without taking into account the diversity of spiritual cultures and traditions that already existed for many centuries before in the Eastern Mediterranean and had a serious impact on the Greeks. Among such civilizations, it is necessary, first

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of all, to include Persia, Phoenicia, Israel and, of course, Egypt. A number of features of the religious traditions of these cultures that existed long before the X century BC, that is, the beginning of the “axial time”, according to their formal and substantive criteria already meet the main features of this spiritual revolution.

2 The Religion of Amun of Thebes and “Theological Working”

With the expulsion of the Hyksos and the accession of the XVIII dynasty, the cult of Amun, formerly the local deity of Thebes, acquires a state scale. Initially revered as the deity of wind (air) and the “city” god of Thebes, Amun in the XVI century BC was declared the supreme deity of the Egyptian pantheon, and to increase the popularity of his cult united with the oldest and most authoritative Heliopolitan solar deity Re (Amun-Re). Giving a local deity a statewide status in the event of the elevation of a city as the capital has always been a characteristic feature of the Egyptian religion. Meanwhile, in the early stages of its development, the cult of Amun also met the criteria of the classical myth, where the gods are presented as the embodiment of the forces of nature. However, now the situation is beginning to change little by little. With the granting of the status of the capital of Egypt to Thebes, as well as the appearance of a layer of “professional” priesthood in Egyptian society, the doctrine of Amun in the sources of the Theban religion is becoming more universal, or, to use the expression of Jan Assmann, “additive” character [2]. In addition to the characteristic features of traditional solar deities, the image of Amun in the Theban religion of the beginning of the New Kingdom also incorporates the features of other gods of the Egyptian pantheon, which henceforth act as an expression of his properties of the supreme deity. This feature is very characteristic of the Theban religion: even in the Middle Kingdom, under the rulers of the XII dynasty, who were also from Thebes, the cult of Amun was merged with the cult of the deity Montu (Amun-Montu), but then he, also being elevated to the rank of “state”, still did not acquire such influence.

The “additive” character of the Theban theology of the New Kingdom contains both characteristic features of the traditional Egyptian religion and several important innovations. Attributing the properties and functions of other deities to the supreme god has always been very characteristic of various traditions of Egyptian mythology and religion: in this way, peaceful, harmonious coexistence of various local cults was ensured, one of which from time to time became dominant throughout the country (that is, received state status). However, the Theban religious thought of the beginning of the New Kingdom goes much further in this process: Amun, its main exponent, not only has the features of other popular deities of the traditional Egyptian pantheon, but is also proclaimed in the text of the Cairo hymn (Pap. Boulaq 17) “the only king among the gods.” As the eldest among the gods in terms of power and time of existence, he stands here as the personification of the one and only origin of the world, giving rise to all other forms of life. But this beginning is positioned by the categories of politics: it is the king, and not just the supreme god or creator of the world. At the same time, the idea of the immanence of the nature of Amun, the inclusion in it of all other deities of the Egyptian pantheon, including solar ones, is being actively worked out. This new feature for the Egyptian religion, recorded both in religious monuments and in texts with respect to “secular” content, Jan Assmann very accurately defined as “theological working”[3].

3 Shock and Rebirth: The Theban Theology in the Age of Amarna

The beginning of the reign of the XVIII dynasty was marked by the growth of Egypt's political and military power, which soon led to the beginning of its expansion into neighboring Asian territories. Valuable material resources coming from the newly conquered territories significantly increased the economic power of Egypt. Naturally, the kings who carried out military campaigns (expeditions) to Syria, Palestine, Canaan, Mitanni and Hittite lands proclaimed the "state" god Amun as their patron and creator of military victories, and his priesthood received powerful material and financial support. By the end of the XV century BC, the priesthood of Amun in Thebes represented not only a religious, but also a significant economic and political force. However, contrary to popular belief, the growth of his political and economic power did not pose a real and direct threat to the power of the pharaoh. It was enough for the king to announce that the next military expedition was being conducted at the request and order of his father Amun, acting as a temple oracle, and he could easily use all the economic resources of the temple farms to prepare it. Therefore, the widespread view that the main reason for Akhenaten's reforms was his fear of the economic and political power of the priests of Thebes does not seem convincing to us.

From our point of view, the real reason for the harsh police action carried out by Akhenaten and his administration in relation to the cult of Amun of Thebes and his supporters was precisely the features of the image of Amun as a secret (hidden) deity, whose will and intentions cannot be known to anyone, including the king, without his desire. It is no coincidence that the repressive actions of the Amarna administration were directed not against Egyptian traditional cults in general (many of them were simply ignored by them, such as the cult of Osiris), but specifically against the cult of Amun and his supporters, who, in fact, were in an illegal position throughout the reign of Akhenaten.

Meanwhile, this harsh political blow became a new impetus for the development of Amun's theology. During the period of repression and prohibitions, the interpretation of Amun as a deity of an individual who is able to come into personal contact with him is even more intensified. It is important to note that this connection no longer takes place in a temple or through a religious ceremony (for example, offering gifts or public prayer), but through a spiritual, deeply inner experience of a person's closeness with the deity. Under the conditions of the official ban, the believer does not address Amun out loud, not publicly, but "in his heart", that is, mentally. Thus, during the period of persecution, the religious experience of basic Egyptian piety for the first time acquires a pronounced existential-personal orientation. This new element of religious experience, previously unknown in Egyptian spiritual culture, appears at this difficult time for the country precisely in the theology of Amun, among its followers. An even greater incentive for its spread among the broadest masses of people was the fact that Akhenaten and his supporters, in addition to the persecution of the cult of Amun, also, in fact, completely ignored the cult of Osiris and the traditional ideas associated with it about the nature of man and his afterlife. That is why the period of Akhenaten's harsh reforms became, paradoxically, the era of the real revival of the Amun religion, its rooting in the widest layers of popular piety.

4 Egyptian Religion After Amarna: “Speculative Theology” as a Human Understanding

Of course, in the Egyptian religion and spiritual culture there was no complete or at least partial analogue of the concept of “theology” - neither in the modern nor in the Aristotelian understanding of it. However, the theoretical understanding of the most important characteristics of the deity and the categories of religious experience associated with them begins here already in the era of the Middle Kingdom, that is, no later than the XX century BC (this phenomenon Jan Assmann calls in his works the term “explicit theology” [4]). This trend can be traced in the era of the New Kingdom, but it manifested itself most vividly in the religion of Amun of Thebes in the first years after the end of the Amarna era. The restoration of traditional cults, which de facto took place a year after Akhenaten’s death, and de jure enshrined in the text of the famous “Restoration Stele” of Tutankhamun, was only formally the same. Akhenaten and his administration, by their actions, actually disavowed in the eyes of ordinary people the image of the pious king as the “keeper of Maat”, obeying the requirements of this sacred order exactly the same as any other person. The old ideas about political solidarity and the universal world-order (Maat), against the background of uncertainty about the future, are rapidly beginning to be replaced by the so-called “ethics of personal piety” (in the words of J. H. Breasted [5]). In this new model of moral relations, each person is responsible for his actions no longer to the king, his boss or his loved ones, but directly to the deity with whom he comes into direct contact. Of course, it is Amun who becomes such a transcendent deity helping a person during this period.

In the period from the XIV to the XIX centuries BC, the religion of Amun, on the one hand, becomes even more powerful both politically and economically than it was before the Amarna period, but at the same time a deep internal change occurs with it. Introducing into the cultural field of Egyptian religion the idea of a transcendent deity, not identical to the traditional natural or, especially, zoomorphic characteristics of earlier Egyptian cults, is most pronounced. In the text of the so - called Leiden hymn to Amun (Pap. Leiden I 350, XIII century BC), the “speculative theology” of Amun becomes the personal religion of an individual, a person outside of social, political and economic ties. In fact, it is nothing more than an institutionalized expression of the broadest forms of popular piety, transformed under the influence of cultural and political factors. Anthropocentrism was not a characteristic feature of the Egyptian religion at any stage of its long historical development. Amun’s “speculative theology” of the end of the New Kingdom is no exception to this rule. However, the situation of political and social instability caused by the events of the Amarna era made previously secondary aspects of religious experience relevant: not a temple ritual, not a reproduction of myth events through a holiday or offering gifts, but an awareness of an inner spiritual connection with the deity, the realization of which is now possible not only inside the temple territory, but also outside it, at any time and anywhere. Experiencing his own dependence on the deity and connection with him, a person, in fact, makes not only him, but also himself the subject of his experience and comprehension. Of course, such a religious experience cannot even be remotely compared, for example, with the Christian idea of the fall and man’s understanding of the depravity of his own nature through a connection with God, but the image of a transcendental deity who helps in trouble and gives confidence in

the future even outside the traditional institutions of religious experience (temple, ritual, offering gifts, etc.) this is a cultural phenomenon of a completely new order, bringing us close to the cultural and religious values of the epoch of “axial time”.

5 “Speculative Theology” and the Values of “Axial Time”

“Speculative theology” as a religious and general cultural phenomenon was not something unique, characteristic exclusively of the Egyptian religion of the XV-XI centuries BC. It is very important to note that we can find similar forms of religious thought around the same historical period in the Mesopotamian spiritual culture, and a little later, in the X-VIII centuries. B.C., in the Israeli and Greek traditions [6]. The latter, in the person of Hesiod and especially Pherecydes, had a huge influence on the genesis of Greek philosophy. At the same time, the genesis of philosophy itself, especially within the framework of the mythogenic approach, is invariably regarded as a kind of “rationalization” of myth and religion, which finds expression in the classical formula “from Myth to Logos” [7]. But a rational understanding of the categories of religious experience does not at all mean their complete rejection by the emerging philosophical thought (especially in archaic Greece). The image of the transcendental deity, which first appeared in the Theban “speculative theology” of the XV-XIII centuries BC, and later in Israel became one of the most important criteria for the transition to the era of “axial time”, in the case of the origin of Greek philosophy acquires a slightly different form, but not content, transforming into various versions of the main theme of the whole ancient philosophy, namely the problem of the correlation of the categories of “one” and “many”. The most striking example of this kind is the doctrine of the intelligible deity in Xenophanes from the Colophon, which then becomes the basis of Parmenides’ teaching about being as one. Thus, a critical understanding of religion within the framework of a philosophical worldview (expressed, for example, in the criticism of the traditional Olympian religion by Xenophanes, the Eleatics, Democritus, and even more so by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) does not mean a complete denial of religious experience. Vivid examples of this are the famous phrase of Thales of Miletus that “everything is full of gods”, and Aristotle’s designation of his “first philosophy” as the doctrine of God, that is, “theology”. In the epoch of “axial time”, the period of the formation of monotheistic religions of revelation and the development of philosophical thought, “speculative theology” as a phenomenon of the religious and cultural life of the civilizations of the Mediterranean and the Middle East does not disappear. It continues to exist as one of the forms of a complex ideological synthesis of religion, philosophy and culture, which becomes the leitmotif of the era of Hellenism, in the era of Empire gives its brightest manifestations of the union with philosophy in Neoplatonism (Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus) and has a significant impact on the formation and formation of the theological and philosophical thought of early Christianity.

6 Conclusion

The epoch of “axial time” is rightly called the time of a kind of spiritual revolution that swept almost all the civilizations of the Old World in the period from the X to the

III centuries BC. This period became a time of special attention to the topic of man, his nature and inner world both in the West and in the East, when the question of man arises almost simultaneously in the philosophical cultures of Greece, India and China, and in each of these three cases it became an adequate reflection in the philosophical worldview of certain universals of the culture of these civilizations. However, it would be fundamentally erroneous to believe that this spiritual revolution has become a kind of miracle that arose almost from scratch, having no historical and ideological grounds. The examples discussed above show that in reality this spiritual breakthrough had a long prehistory. The phenomenon of “speculative theology” demonstrates that many elements of the culture of “axial time” arise much earlier than the traditional dates of its beginning. Their appearance is not always connected only with the beginning of the disintegration of mythological thinking and worldview, which is no longer able to give an adequate reflection of reality, as Karl Jaspers himself believes. In fact, both myth and religion, being fundamentally formally opposed to philosophy types of worldview (due to the absence of a pronounced individual component and a critical attitude towards man and the world), are fully endowed with these qualities only at the earliest, initial stages of their development. Historically later, but, nevertheless, formally ahead of the historical framework of the “axial time”, the forms of developed myth and religious thought are already beginning in some cases to acquire these features of analytical self-reflection, which then became a distinctive feature of the philosophical worldview. They thus represent the most important transitional forms between archaic myth and primitive religion on the one hand and philosophy and monotheistic religions of revelation on the other, without which the great spiritual revolution of the “axial time” would hardly have been possible.

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