

Review

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NOTICE OF RECENT PUBLICATION

Egyptian Mythology. By W. MAX MÜLLER, PH.D. In vol. XII of *The Mythology of All Races*. Boston, Marshall Jones Company, 1918. Pp. xiv, 328. Two Plates and 220 figures in text.

The title of this admirable work is somewhat misleading ; for it is by no means devoted solely to the mythology of ancient Egypt, but is a pretty complete survey of the whole field of Egyptian supernaturalism, special chapters being devoted not only to the myths, but to local and solar cults, nature-gods, the Osirian Cycle, the other principal gods, foreign gods, worship of animals and men, life after death, ethics and cult, magic, and the development and propagation of the religion. This is of course all to the good : a detailed account of Egyptian myths alone could hardly be made very interesting to general readers, by reason of the heterogeneous and contradictory character which the material (consisting largely of mere allusions) has for us at present ; on the other hand the more studies that competent scholars give us of Egyptian religious ideas and practices the better. The book is palpably the outcome of a great amount of solid study, and is at the same time not lacking in fresh and interesting ideas, showing it to be much more than a mere compilation. The illustration is copious and original, and in itself goes far to confirm the statement in the preface that Egyptian doctrines often found a greater degree of expression in religious art than in religious literature. It is, however, a serious defect that in spite of the copious annotation of the text (there are 68 pages of notes at the end of the volume) references to the illustrations are not given ; even professional Egyptologists would be hard put to it to identify many of the most striking ones. The total absence of hieroglyphic type is probably a distinct advantage in a work of this kind.

In his Introduction Dr Max Müller sketches the study of the subject in the nineteenth century, and lays great stress on the fact that both the classical and modern worlds have tended to overrate vastly the philosophical and mystic significance of Egyptian religion. He insists that we have to accept the fact, whether we like it or not, that the most highly developed people of the ancient near East held in religion a place no higher than that which is occupied by some barbarous negro tribes. This failure of Egyptian religious thought to refine itself (*i.e.*, to lay increasing stress on subjective values) with increasing cultural development is attributed by the author to the extreme conservatism of the Egyptians. But this explanation, to be a satisfactory one, should further show why the conservatism was one-sided, tenacious of primitive beliefs far more than of primitive ways of living ; why, for instance, they adhered to their forefathers' views on the nature of the sun, but broke clean away from their forefathers' tomb and temple architecture by employing stone instead of brick. Dr Max Müller is, I believe, endeavouring to explain a problem which, as formulated by him, is not really a problem at all. Is there not a fallacy in the assumption that in some way a development in material culture brings about a refinement in religious views ? For in what way can material progress affect beliefs which are independent of material experience ? A culture of a purely practical nature might conceivably develop much further than our present one, and its practitioners might yet hold the beliefs that food-offerings were of benefit to the dead, and that rain would fall if prayed for ; there is nothing in the one to react on the other. The fallacy has probably come into existence from the spectacle of certain other ancient cultures (notably those of the Greeks and Hindus) in which refined beliefs about unseen things and high material civilisation are found together ; but a little reflection will show that the causes of the former are as little material as themselves. They may be stated to be chiefly : abstract speculation ; thought of the scientific type (both imagination and scepticism playing a part in these) ; and the personal teachings of certain religious innovators. And where these factors do come into play they often fail to influence the main stream of the religious life of the race, from a lack of general interest in them. Thus, any surprise which we may feel at the static and primitive character of Egyptian religion throughout its history, should exist, not in view of the high material culture obtained, but because we might well expect a race with the Egyptians' long history, high intelligence and preoccupation with religious affairs to have produced more original thinkers about the subject than they did. We have to do here, it seems, with a fact of racial temperament ; the Egyptians,

possibly because of their African blood, were not only almost incapable of evolving new and higher conceptions about religion, but were also not interested (at all events until the Christian era) in such new conceptions. Ikhnaton, the one real exception of which we know, was probably frustrated quite as much by lack of sympathy as by vested interests.

The enormous importance attached to Egyptian doctrines by the Greeks still seems to await a satisfactory explanation; Dr Müller deals with it in his Introduction on the usual lines of *ignotum pro magnifico*, "you Greeks are but children," etc., but this seems hardly sufficient to account for the traditions about such men as Solon, Democritus and Plato, to say nothing of the unanimous statements of the Neoplatonists.

Of special interest is the discussion, in the chapter on nature-gods, of the world-tree in Egyptian mythology; this conception is probably new to modern scholarship. Among many noteworthy features and ideas may also be singled out the evidence brought together (p. 157) of the early cults of Nubian gods, the references to the astral element in the mythology, the statement that if we knew the full history of even the greatest gods we should find them to have been originally spirits or fetishes protecting only the property of single peasants, and the view in the ninth chapter that the cause of the primitive veneration of certain animals is to be sought neither in their superior strength or swiftness nor in gratitude for their usefulness, but in the fear that they may possess reason and a language of their own which man cannot fathom and which connects them with the supernatural world.

The chapter on the Osirian Cycle contains no reference to the theory that in origin Osiris was no more than the lately deceased king. In the chapter "Life after Death" one might have expected somewhat clearer ideas than are expressed as to the nature of the *ka'* and the *ba'*. Dr Müller renders them both as 'soul,' and seems to consider any distinction between their natures to be due only to "some very late theologians."

The chapter on "Magic" states, in its opening sentences: "It is.....very difficult to state where religion ends and magic begins; and to the Egyptian mind magic was merely applied religion." I would suggest that the popular feeling about the two things should afford the fundamental criterion, and that to depart from this raises more difficulties than it obviates; namely, the view that in religious rites the thing desired is sought for as a boon, while in magical rites the thing desired is obtained by *force majeure*. Submission and domination are thus the characteristic attitudes of religion and magic respectively. Judged by this test, of course, about nine-tenths of what are regarded as Egyptian religious documents must be called magical.

A few philological points call for notice. It is somewhat misleading to translate *nisbeh* forms as e.g. "the One Before the Westerners," "the One of the City Ubaset," as on p. 21; it imports a nuance of uniqueness which the original words do not possess. Why not "he who is before the Westerners," etc.? "Gold" was the epithet given to Hathor, and not, as is stated on p. 30, "the golden." The seven petals (hardly a seven-pointed star) between the inverted horns over the head of the goddess of writing are, says the author (p. 53), a careful indication of a symbolism which we do not yet understand. It is hardly possible not to see in it a play between *šfht* "seven" and *šfht* "she who has put off (the horns)." It is clear from the earliest writings of the name of Harsaphes that this name does not mean "the ram-faced" as stated on p. 134, but "he who is over his pool (*hri-š.f*)." There is good evidence that the god-name which Dr Müller thinks (Ch. VIII, note 12) may be read Dedunti is to be read Kherti (*hrti*). The Graeco-Roman image of Ophois (*Wp-wtwt*) with the lower part of the body in the form of a serpent (Fig. 219) doubtless rests on a Greek popular etymology of the name from *ὄφης*. Similarly the interpretation of Harpokrates as imposing silence was probably helped by an assimilation of the *kr* in this name to Egyptian *gr* "to keep silence."

There is a lengthy and up-to-date Bibliography by the Editor, Dr Louis H. Gray.

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