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TEXT, ARTIFACT, AND IMAGE  
Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion

Edited by  
Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis

# Text, Artifact, and Image

Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion

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## The Representation of the Divine in Ancient Egypt<sup>1</sup>

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The current scholarly understanding of the representation of Egyptian gods derives largely from Eric Hornung's book, *Der Eine und die Vielen*,<sup>2</sup> which focuses on problems of multiplicity and henotheism, but also covers most other areas of the Egyptian conceptions of divinity. Rather than repeat the findings of this excellent study, the present paper presents investigations into two particular areas of this question that diverge from the views generally held in ways that may be of interest to scholars of other ancient and Near Eastern religions. The first of these areas is the evolution of the representations of the divine, and the second, which will be more briefly treated, is the representation of individual divinities by their names.

### The Evolution of Depictions of the Divine

Two-dimensional representations of gods in Egyptian art of all periods are invariably clearly and cleanly drawn, without any blurred edges, shading, or mystery. Like all elements of Egyptian art, both their figures and the details within their figures are normally outlined in a darker color, to separate them from the blank background. The areas inside these outlines are then filled with solid planes of unblended color, as in a child's coloring book. Details are then added, again in outline.

1. This paper was written and presented in 1998, and does not take account of literature published since that date. I am indebted to Kevin Reinhart for guidance in dealing with the literature of Religious Studies.

2. 1971, translated by J. Baines as *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

This clarity and lack of blending and shading is grounded in Egyptian conceptions of cosmology and cosmogony. Non-existence, according to the Egyptian view, was not a lack of physical presence, but a lack of differentiation and individuality. The universe before its creation was not an empty void, but an undifferentiated purée, from which everything that existed later was created by a process of separation. Existence was thus characterized primarily by multiplicity, differentiation, boundaries, and hierarchical order. The blurring of boundaries could lead to the destruction of individual identity and a collapse back into the undifferentiated primeval waters of non-existence. Therefore, our portraits of Egyptian gods, like everything else depicted in Egyptian art, are sharp and clear, underlining their individuality and supporting their existence as separate entities. This emphasis on the demarcation of the boundaries of beings and objects, which is generally viewed simply as a characteristic of Egyptian artistic style, stresses one of the essential characteristics of existence, and hence is a particularly important characteristic of the divine. Throughout the Egyptian evidence there is a tension between the clarity required for the maintenance of the gods' existence and a certain mystery implied by their divinity.

In scenes where they are shown with people, the forms of the gods often closely resemble the king or even the ordinary people who are worshipping them. Many divinities might easily be mistaken for humans, were it not for their position, the captions above them, iconographic elements identifying them as gods, or their divine role in the scene. Even their dress is merely human dress, albeit sometimes in an archaic style.

Despite their clarity and simplicity, Egyptian depictions of gods and goddesses strike most Western observers as mysterious because the deities are so often represented as animals, or, even more bizarrely, in mixed animal and human form. Egyptologists usually explain the animal parts of these forms as simple visual cues that helped to identify the gods,<sup>3</sup> comparable to the animals that the Hittite and Semitic gods stand on, or even to the characteristic implements of torture that identify martyred saints in Christian art.

But although these animal parts may have functioned in practice as markers to help viewers identify the divinity depicted, they had a much more significant role. Their composite forms embody the history of the divinity, and bring to his present manifestation the powerful aura of antiquity conveyed by a sequence of earlier manifestations. The animal characteristics of certain gods are instances of the ancient Egyptians' conservatism. They preserve an artistic tradition from an earlier phase of

3. See, e.g., L. Lesko in *Religion in Ancient Egypt*, ed. B. Shafer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 112-13.

their religion, even though the gods may have been thought of as fully anthropomorphic at the time these older forms were reproduced.

This view is best supported by the myths that mention the gods. In myths, the gods are almost aggressively human in their behavior and, to the small extent that their appearance is described, they are said to have human features (hands, hair, fingers, etc.). The one exception is in the only complete surviving story about a god before the New Kingdom, where the god is explicitly described as an animal. In the story of the Shipwrecked Sailor,<sup>4</sup> dating to the Middle Kingdom, a sailor is marooned on an island. There he meets a 45-foot-long, gold-plated snake-god, with a three-foot beard, and eyebrows inlaid with lapis lazuli. The snake is clearly a snake in some of its actions as well as its appearance: it carries off the sailor in its mouth, which presumably emphasizes its snake-like lack of hands.

Interestingly, however, neither the gold snake statue from the tomb of Tutankhamun<sup>5</sup> nor any other depictions of divine snakes have anything resembling eyebrows or beards. This was clearly not a standard way of representing a divine snake. The story also depicts the snake as entirely human in feelings and in speech (unless a rather cartoonish tendency to repeat himself was thought to be characteristic of animal speech). This snake-god thus seems to have been viewed as simultaneously a snake and a human being rather than as a mixture of the two.

It is also clear from this story and later stories as well that divinities were viewed as composed of rare and valuable minerals,<sup>6</sup> and presumably were thought to resemble their cult images made of these materials. Since cult statues tend to preserve older forms, this circumstance may help explain why older, animal-based forms are conserved long after gods began to be seen as anthropomorphic in their character and actions.

It has been shown that the animal forms are an earlier development than anthropomorphic divinities. Gustav Jéquier described the Egyptian conception of divinity as having begun with the worship of inanimate objects and evolved through a stage of animal divinities to the anthropomorphic gods of the later myths.<sup>7</sup> His suggestion derived from a belief

4. Papyrus Leningrad 1115. For a convenient English translation, see *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, ed. W. K. Simpson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 50-56.

5. See, e.g., object number 283a, a photo of which is published in N. Reeves, *The Complete Tutankhamun* (London: Thames & Hudson 1990), 131 (lower right corner).

6. For example, the three divine kings, children of the sun god, described in papyrus Westcar 10,10-27 and the sun god described at the beginning of the Book of the Divine Cow—see A. Piankoff, *The Shrines of Tut-Ankh-Amon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955).

7. G. Jéquier, *Considérations sur les religions égyptiennes* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1946), as cited in Hornung, *Conceptions of God*, 39.

common among early anthropologists that all religions pass through such phases before arriving at the “higher” concept of anthropomorphic divinities.<sup>8</sup> This evolutionary view of religious development has long been discredited,<sup>9</sup> in particular the assumption of entire complexes of beliefs that can be called “fetishism” or “totemism” or “animism” and that are shared by all cultures at different times in their evolution.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, however, at least for the Egyptian case, an evolution from the depiction of gods as objects, then as animals, and finally as humans, can be demonstrated. Hornung has argued<sup>11</sup> for the validity of the latter part of this hypothesis; that is, that anthropomorphic divinities appear later than divinities in the form of animals and inanimate objects. To do this, he has analyzed the three hieroglyphic signs that could be used to write the word “god” or as determinative signs to mark as divine the names of specific gods. Conveniently, the chief signs used in this way are an object (a cloth-wrapped staff with the ends of the cloth waving like a flag), an animal (a falcon on a standard), and a human (a seated anthropomorphic god).

These hieroglyphic signs are shown in Figure 1.<sup>12</sup> The two signs on the left (1A and 1B) appear simultaneously in some of the earliest hieroglyphic inscriptions. Although anthropomorphic gods occur already in the prehistoric period and are well established by the early Old Kingdom (around 2700 B.C.E.), the third sign did not become a generic determinative for god until the later part of the Old Kingdom (around 2400 B.C.E.).<sup>13</sup> In making this argument, Hornung points out that while the human form is clearly later, it cannot be proved that the worship of objects preceded animal divinities; and, in fact, he doubts that it did.<sup>14</sup>

8. Interestingly, this view goes back to a comparison of ancient Egyptian religion with West African religion of the eighteenth century by Charles. R. de Brosses, *Du Culte des dieux fétiches ou parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec la religion actuelle de la Nigritie* (1760). De Brosses coined the term “fetishism” for the worship of plants and animals.

9. See, e.g., E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1965), 103-5.

10. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. R. Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), has been a particularly influential critic of these assumptions.

11. *Conceptions of God*, 39-40.

12. Hornung also used these signs to illustrate his discussion. His examples were taken from the Old Kingdom tomb of Akhetetep and Ptahhotep. See N. de G. Davies, *The Mastaba of Ptahhetep and Akhetetep I* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1900), pls. 14 (no. 24), 7 (no. 87), and 6 (no. 11). The two signs on the right have been reversed in this figure.

13. Interestingly, this last step took place soon after the anthropomorphic god Osiris appeared and began his reign as the overwhelmingly popular mortuary god, so his importance may have influenced this development.

14. Hornung, *Conceptions of God*, 40: “. . . other Egyptian material does not suggest that this idea is likely to be right, although it is not possible to disprove it.”

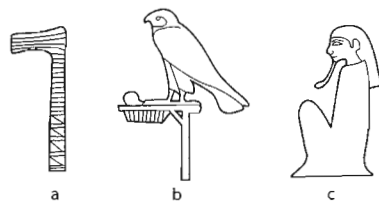


FIGURE 1: Three hieroglyphs used to write the word *ntr*, "god," or to indicate the divine nature of other words and names. A and B occur in the earliest texts, C only in the later Old Kingdom. (Drawing by the author, after E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981], figs. 1 and 2.)

Despite Hornung's doubts, however, a good case can be made for the priority of the flag, based on a general principle within Egyptian religion, that of "nesting."<sup>15</sup> Some fifty years ago, in his valuable essay in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, John A. Wilson suggested the concept of "multiplicity of approaches,"<sup>16</sup> by which the Egyptians gave multiple explanations for the same phenomenon, some of which seem mutually contradictory to modern Western scholars. He saw these multiple explanations as a kind of "pre-logical" thought that characterized and—obviously, in his view, limited—the ancient Egyptians' view of the world. The concept of nesting is a refinement of this idea, but it assumes that these multiple explanations were not viewed as equal in truth value, but instead represent a layered hierarchy, in which the oldest explanation or manifestation is retained, embedded in a sequence of later interpretations. Older explanations were valued for the authority conveyed by their antiquity, while newer explanations were valued for their up-to-the-minute theology. The entire amalgam thus combined the power and advantages of these and all the intervening nested stages. We can see this nesting in many aspects of Egyptian culture, particularly in those connected with religion and magic.

An excellent example of this concept<sup>17</sup> is the burial of King Tutankhamun in three nested coffins, each of increasing antiquity of style as they approach the actual body. The sarcophagus in which these coffins rested was also surrounded by a nested series of three shrines and a canopy. Later, a fourth shrine seems to have been added: The papyrus plan for the tomb of Ramesses IV shows four shrines only two dynasties later. The magical effectiveness of the coffin was enhanced by the inclusion of nested antique and up-to-the-minute forms.

15. A. M. Roth, "Buried Pyramids and Layered Thoughts: The Organisation of Multiple Approaches in Egyptian Religion," in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists*, ed. C. J. Eyre, *Orientalia Louvaniensia Analecta* 82 (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 991-1003.

16. J. A. Wilson, "The Nature of the Universe," in H. Frankfort et al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 32-33.

17. All of the following examples are taken from the fuller argument for this concept proposed in Roth, "Buried Pyramids and Layered Thoughts."

Similar nested forms are frequently found in mortuary architecture, where sequences of older forms were often buried in the masonry of later forms. For example, two early mastaba tombs show a nested mound and a nested stepped platform; and the true pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty often seem to have had Step Pyramids of Third-Dynasty type buried within them. These buried reminders of earlier architectural forms—which represent earlier views of the afterlife—are usually interpreted as earlier phases of construction, often wrongly. The same nesting can be found in myths and rituals, where later redactions do not replace earlier ones, but are simply grafted on to their beginnings.<sup>18</sup>

This nesting phenomenon can also be seen in the evolution of the forms of the divine, and it supports Jéquier's hypothesis that the flag is older than the animal divinities. The flag used to write the word "god" (Fig. 1A) is essentially a staff wrapped with cloth, with the ends of the cloth strips streaming out loose at the top. The central element here seems to be neither the flag-like strips of cloth themselves nor the staff, but the fact of the wrapping, which obscures and makes mysterious the underlying form. Such wrapping, of course, explains the tradition of wrapping the mummified dead in bandages, and it also probably relates to the entire phenomenon of nested layers that I have described.

When examined closely, it is apparent that the falcon hieroglyph (Fig. 1B) incorporates this flag, and hence is a later development. The horizontal bar on which the falcon is perched has some cloth ends hanging off the front. So the bar on which the falcon stood was basically a horizontal flag sign, nested in the later form.<sup>19</sup> From this we may deduce that the flag sign is, *pace* Hornung, earlier than the falcon.

The continuation of the evolution can be seen in the anthropomorphic hieroglyph denoting divinity. Although his body is human, his arms and legs are not distinguished, and he is, in effect, mummiform, entirely shrouded in cloth wrappings with the exception of his head. And, although his head is human in the generic example shown in Figure 1C, when this sign is used in connection with more specific divinities, the head is often that of an animal. Thus the animal form can also be nested in this third version, just as the wrapping associated with the flag occurs in both of the later signs.

The projection of divine authority first upon inanimate objects, then upon animals, and finally upon human forms, can be seen in several

18. These "nested myths" are strikingly similar to the first two chapters of Genesis, where two separate creation accounts are given, probably in reverse historical order of their composition.

19. Other versions of the sign show streamers hanging down from the angle of the standard.

other aspects of Egyptian religious and cultural iconography. Interestingly, these evolutionary changes seem to have taken place at different times in different aspects of the culture. As was already noted above, anthropomorphic divinities occur in iconography long before the appearance of the generic anthropomorphic god as a determinative in writing, and the change from animal divinities to gods of human form in mythological narratives may date as late as the New Kingdom (although there are so few myths from the earlier periods that it is dangerous to generalize). This does not mean, of course, that those who composed myths conceived of divinity differently than those who wrote hieroglyphs or those who decorated temples; instead, it suggests that in different kinds of representations of the gods these changes were adopted at very different rates. In other words, mythological expression was perhaps more conservative than the writing system, which was in turn more conservative than the theologians who dictated the appearance of the individual gods in temple reliefs.

Another apparently conservative aspect of expression of the divine can be seen in the divine emblems that represent different geographic areas of Egypt. Here, too, an evolution from the inanimate object to the animal to the human form can be seen, paralleling the spatial expansion of Egyptian culture. These emblems apparently derive from—and are in some cases identical to—emblems shown on Upper Egyptian pottery from the prehistoric (Nagada II) period, usually in connection with ceremonial boats. Such emblems seem to have represented divinities, as they often rest on standards and are frequently marked as divine by strips of cloth hanging from them. Later, some of these emblems represent the “nomes” or administrative districts of the Egyptian state, and several can be connected with the local gods of the nome in question. Eventually there were forty-two nomes, twenty-two in the Upper Egypt (the south) and twenty in Lower Egypt (the Nile Delta). These emblems (shown in Fig. 2)<sup>20</sup> seem to reflect an evolution of divine forms over the period during which these districts were incorporated into the Egyptian state.

The Egyptian state originated in the south, in the same area where the painted pots with the standards were fashioned in the predynastic period. This area later comprised the first nine nomes of Upper Egypt.<sup>21</sup> By the time that the standards associated with these nomes had been canonized, early in the Old Kingdom,<sup>22</sup> seven of the emblems associated

20. After W. Helck, “Gauzeichen,” *Lexikon der Ägyptologie II*, ed. W. Helck and E. Otto (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977), 423-24.

21. The nomes were numbered beginning from the south.

22. Helck, “Gauzeichen,” 422. Helck argues here that the earliest nomes are those shown on standards, and that they represent distinguishing marks of royal domains founded during the Third Dynasty. However, the consistency of the pattern suggested below would tend to support the idea of an earlier genesis.

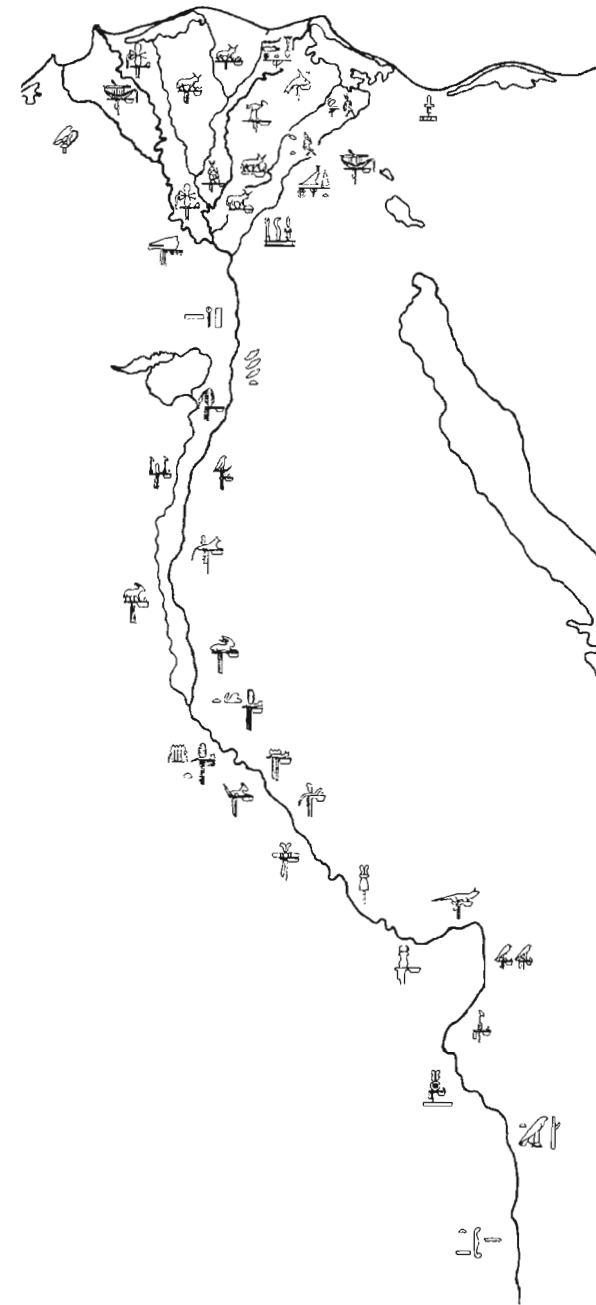


FIGURE 2: The emblems identifying the nomes (administrative districts) of Upper Egypt (the Nile Valley south of the Delta) and Lower Egypt (the Nile Delta). (Figure prepared by the author using nome emblems from W. Helck, “Gauzeichen,” *Lexikon der Ägyptologie II*, ed. W. Helck and E. Otto [Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977], 423-24.)

with these nomes are inanimate objects: a bow (First), the support of Horus (Second), a feathered round emblem (Third), the  $w^3s$ -scepter (Fourth), a cow-headed musical instrument (Seventh), and a fossil (Ninth), as well as a mound-shaped object we cannot identify (Eighth). The two exceptions—the two falcons (Fifth) and the crocodile (Sixth)—may represent additions or subdivisions of larger nomes, reflecting changes which took place before the earliest attestations, since only these two nomes show the later theriomorphic form of emblem. Animal forms are also encountered more frequently as one moves north along the Nile Valley, just as the founders of the Egyptian state did. Most of the northern Upper Egyptian nome emblems take animal form (cobra, Seth-animal, viper, hare, oryx, dog, falcon), with a few inanimate or combined animal and inanimate forms, particularly in the area of the Fayum.

Animal emblems also prevail in the Delta, the last part of Egypt to be divided into nomes. An exception is a group of nomes in the western Delta which are marked by the crossed arrows of the goddess Neith (Fourth and Fifth nomes). Interestingly, this goddess is particularly prevalent in the names of queens from the period of the early First Dynasty, which may point to an alliance with the elite of this area during that period, and the adoption of the earlier inanimate form of standard there.

The Ninth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Lower Egyptian nomes have anthropomorphic emblems. The final two of these nomes were among the last to be added to the group in the New Kingdom and later;<sup>23</sup> the anthropomorphic emblem of the Ninth nome, however, dates back to the Fourth Dynasty.<sup>24</sup> Despite the exception of the Ninth nome, however, the general pattern is clear. Again we can see the inanimate forms change to animal forms and ultimately to human forms as the administrative system of the southern rulers extended northward.

Of particular interest is the emblem of the Fourth Upper Egyptian nome, the  $w^3s$ -scepter, the hieroglyph for "power," which is often held by gods. The  $w^3s$ -scepter is a staff with a curving stick attached to its upper end and a divided, usually forked, base. An early example, on a Fourth-Dynasty nome standard, is shown in Figure 3. Cloth strips are also attached to both the scepter and the standard, marking their divine nature, and the scepter is further decorated with an ostrich feather, as are many Upper Egyptian nome standards. In the prehistoric period, from about 5000-3000 B.C.E., the chief town in this area was at the site now

23. W. Helck, "Gauē," in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie II*, 401, notes that the Eighteenth Lower Egyptian nome split off from the Thirteenth at the time of Ramesses II (Nineteenth Dynasty), and that the Nineteenth Lower Egyptian nome did not come into existence until the Third Intermediate Period.

24. *Ibid.*, 397.

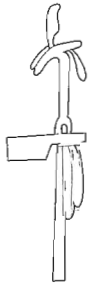


FIGURE 3: The standard of the Theban nome (the Fourth nome of Upper Egypt) from a statue of Fourth-Dynasty date. (Drawing by the author.)

known as Nagada. In historical times, Nagada was in the Fifth nome, just to the north of the Fourth, but this was probably a later development, not only because that nome has an animal standard, but because there are clear connections between Nagada and the  $w^3s$ -scepter. In hieroglyphic writing, for example, the same scepter with a wavy or spiral shaft is used to write the word "fine gold" or "electrum," tying it to the ancient name of Nagada (Greek "Ombos"), which in Egyptian was called Nubt or "Gold Town." Moreover, a huge example of the  $w^3s$ -scepter was actually excavated at Nagada,<sup>25</sup> one of the many large ceremonial objects and representations of divinities found at temples and dating to the early First Dynasty. I would argue that this scepter was in fact the emblem of Nagada, and in the earliest periods probably represented the chief divinity of the city in an inanimate form. (The capital of the Fourth Nome, Thebes, is written with a  $w^3s$ -scepter, taking the name of the nome of which it became the capital, which suggests it may have been an artificial formation.)

In later periods, the chief divinity of Nagada was Seth, god of confusion and violence, whose strength and warlike tendencies were often disruptive but could also be exercised in the service of order. His peculiar form (Fig. 4) has long been controversial: It has been called a wholly imaginary animal, a confused mixture of several animals, and identified with the anteater, the tapir, and an assortment of other animals.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the nature of this animal is probably none of these.

He is, in fact, the  $w^3s$ -scepter converted into an animal by giving him the body of a greyhound. His head is the head of the scepter, and his unnaturally erect tail ends in the split found at the scepter's base. This would mean that Seth was the chief god of Nagada all along, merely changing his form from a scepter to an animal as animals began to be seen the chief repository of divine power. Then, when gods of human form

25. H. te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 90.

26. te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, 13.

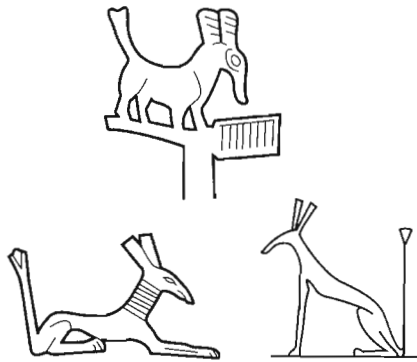


FIGURE 4: Depictions of the "Seth animal" from the Scorpion Macehead of the late Predynastic period (top), the Old Kingdom (lower left), and the Middle Kingdom (lower right). (Drawing by the author after H. te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion* [Leiden, 1977], figs. 4 and 6, with some modification to the tail of the uppermost depiction based on photographs and other published drawings of the macehead.)

became more popular, he was represented as a human being, still with his scepter-like head. He is in himself an example of the nesting of earlier forms within later ones. We even have a *w<sup>3</sup>s*-scepter with a face, from the Eighteenth-Dynasty temple of Deir el-Bahari (Fig. 5), where much of the decor seems to be modelled on much older prototypes;<sup>27</sup> an earlier example dated to Mentuhotep IV of the Eleventh Dynasty, in the very early Middle Kingdom, has recently been excavated at Elephantine.<sup>28</sup>

This argument suggests that the forms a god takes offer clues to the date of his or her origin. For example, the important divinities Osiris and Isis appear quite suddenly in our sources, towards the end of the Fifth Dynasty (about 2425 B.C.E.), and immediately become extremely popular. It is unclear whether they were older divinities that just happened to become popular at this period, or whether they were simply new gods, coming into existence at the time they first appear. Both of these gods are almost invariably depicted in anthropomorphic form, taking animal form only in much later periods, through association with other divinities. But Isis may actually have begun as an object, a divine personification of the royal throne. Her name actually means "throne," and she is generally shown with a throne upon her head. The pattern proposed here suggests that her history may extend back into prehistory, whereas Osiris probably appeared only in the Old Kingdom.

27. The *w<sup>3</sup>s* scepter and Seth have previously been connected. A. Wainwright, "Some Aspects of Amun," *JEA* 20 (1934): 148, listed many connections; and A. H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (3d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 509 (sign list S 40), cites Jéquier in identifying the head of the scepter as the head of the Seth-animal. I am simply suggesting that the development was from the scepter to the animal rather than in the other direction, as earlier scholars seem to have assumed.

28. W. Kaiser et al., "Stadt und Tempel von Elephantine, 23./24. Grabungsbericht," *MDAIK* 53 (1997): pl. 20, fragment d. Only the eye is preserved; the bottom part of the scepter is broken.



FIGURE 5: A *w<sup>3</sup>s*-scepter from the temple of Deir el-Bahari, with an eye that shows its connection with the Seth animal. (Drawing by the author.)

## Names of Divinities

Naming beings and objects was another way that the ancient Egyptians distinguished them from the purée of non-existence. Perhaps because of this function of a name, they believed that knowledge of the name gave one control over whatever the name labeled. One can therefore expect that the names assigned to divinities would be significant and revealing. Divinities are often said to have many names, and this multiplicity again distinguishes them from their human worshippers.

As the example of Isis illustrates, the names of the gods sometimes throw light on their natures as well. The gods connected with creation, for example, tend to have negative names, reflecting the undifferentiated pre-creation primeval waters of non-existence. The name of one of the most important creator gods, Atum, is a form of the negative verb *tm*, "to not do." The name of Shu, another creator god, means "empty," and the name Nefertem is actually a double negative: *nfr*, "to finish or stop something," and *tm*, "to not do," as in Atum. The eight divinities of the Ogdoad, in another creation myth, are named for the negative characteristics of the pre-creation purée. The four gods' names denote the lack of motion, light, limits, and form, while the four goddesses have feminine forms of the same names, implying a lack of gender distinctions.

Goddesses, in contrast, tend to be named for places or things. The name of the goddess Hathor means "the temple of the god Horus"; Horus is her consort, so she is in a sense derived from him, a personification of his temple, although she is clearly also an independent and distinctive deity from a very early period. The name Isis, as mentioned above, means "throne," and interestingly, the name of her consort Osiris is at first written as an eye (possibly the verb "to act") resting on a throne. This suggests that Osiris was derived from Isis in the same way that Hathor was derived from Horus. This supports the suggestion made above that Isis was the older divinity.

But a large number of the most important gods have names to which we cannot assign any specific meaning. This is particularly true of gods

popular during the Old Kingdom, such as Ptah, Sokar, Thoth, Anubis, and Seth, as well as the goddess Neith. Some scholars have bemoaned the fact that the meaning of these names has been lost, assuming that if we knew what they meant, we would know more about the nature of these major divinities. But it is more likely that these names are meant to be mysterious: Not only do they not have any obvious meaning, but when they are written phonetically—rather than simply with an emblem or animal, the meaningless names tend to be written exclusively with alphabetic consonantal signs (Fig. 6). The alphabetic spellings completely obscure the pronunciation of these names: Most biliteral and triliteral signs are also words on their own account, and even if the vowels are not noted, the underlying words imply vowels. By writing the words exclusively with single alphabetic signs, scribes avoided implying any vowels, and the true pronunciations of the names remain mysterious, even though an approximation of some sort must have been adopted for purposes of ritual and prayer. These writings constitute an interesting early parallel to the tetragrammaton.

On the other hand, the names of two most important gods of the Old Kingdom, Horus and Re<sup>c</sup>, do have meaning. Horus (Egyptian *Hr*) seems to be the preposition *hr*, “on, above,” obviously descriptive of a falcon deity. And the sun god is called *R<sup>c</sup>*, which means “sun,” or in later periods, *p<sup>3</sup> R<sup>c</sup>*, “the sun.” This is unusual; all the other cosmological divinities, representing earth, sky, and so forth, have names that differ from the words for those parts of the universe, and their names are rarely preceded by the definite article.

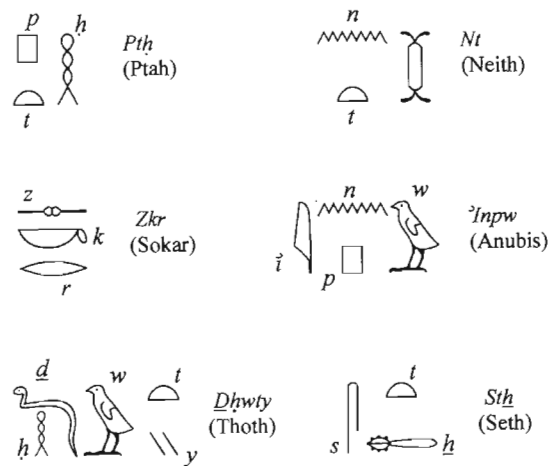


FIGURE 6: The names of six important gods of the Old Kingdom period written almost exclusively with alphabetic signs. (Figure prepared by the author using the Winglyph program.)

The explanation seems to be that both Horus and Re<sup>c</sup> are paraphrastic names that allow the worshipper to avoid naming the divinity altogether. We even have a myth recounting how Isis learned Re<sup>c</sup>'s secret, true, name.<sup>29</sup> The myth does not tell us what that name was, but in one manuscript the scribe seems to have tried out several sequences of random alphabetic letters, hoping, we assume, to hit upon the true name by serendipity.<sup>30</sup>

A confirmation of the paraphrastic nature of the names of Horus and Re<sup>c</sup> is the special way they are treated in personal names of the Old Kingdom period. In royal names, Horus is represented by a falcon and Re<sup>c</sup> by a sun disk, in other words, by an image of the divinity's manifestation in nature. But non-royal names spell the name Re<sup>c</sup> alphabetically, as if it were one of those meaningless names, while Horus is written with the face used to write the preposition “upon,” flanked by the two alphabetic signs, *h* and *r*. This distinction in the writings again points up the special nature of these two gods, and suggests that while kings' names could represent the actual manifestation of the god, ordinary people treated even the paraphrastic as a name of unknown meaning and pronunciation. This distinction disappeared in later periods, and was not adopted for the “great gods” of later times, so it seems to have been an early phenomenon.

In conclusion, then, it can be said that although the depictions we see of Egyptian gods seem clear and straightforward, both their names and their figures are in fact to some extent shrouded in mystery. There were restrictions about implying pronunciations for the names of the more powerful gods, and the true names of the two most powerful gods of the early period were unknown, save perhaps to their highest priestly attendants. Similarly, the physical forms taken by the gods in art are sometimes literally shrouded by mummy wrappings, despite the clarity of their depictions. In other cases they contain buried layers of references to earlier stages of their own evolution, which obscure whatever their true nature was believed to be. The Egyptians represented their divinities as both well-defined and mysterious beings: The definition and clarity of their names and depictions were necessary to protect their existence and prevent them from reverting to pre-creation chaos. Nonetheless, both names and depictions contained within them obscurities that hid the divinities' true nature and made them almost as mysterious to the people who worshipped them as they are to us today.

29. J. A. Wilson's translation of this text is published in J. B. Pritchard, *ANET*, 12-14.

30. The fact that the scribe assumed that the “true name” would be a meaningless combination of alphabetic signs also corroborates the interpretation of the alphabetic names offered here.