Rivers, Gods, and River Gods:
A Source of Egyptian Optimism

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The ancient world and its pioneer civilizations are often perceived to have fostered lifestyles of hardship and bleak outlooks. Today's modern societies find it easy to view these ancient peoples through a pitiful lens and jump to the simple notion that times were hard. A glance at the civilization of ancient Egypt, however, begins to break down this conceptualization. The Egyptians accomplished many great and easily observable feats, such as the building of the pyramids and other impressive works of construction. Surges of advancement and prosperity occurred throughout the ancient era, as Egypt transitioned between the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms. The Egyptian kingdoms were less regimented when examined relative to other ancient civilizations, such as Sumer, with regard to gender division and social class. In addition, the Egyptians experienced a rather dependable society through economic stability and a predictable climate.[1] All of these components point to a civilization notably happier than its counterparts, and this phenomenon unique to the Egyptians is no coincidence. The geographic features of ancient Egypt heavily affected this early civilization, casting a powerful influence on spiritual beliefs, and this prominence and reliability of nature and spirituality in everyday life greatly contributed to Egyptian ethos of optimism and hope.

If one were to look for a surface-level understanding of the ancient Egyptian mentality, the examination of nature's impact could stand alone in explanation. The Nile River was a critical feature of Egypt's geography, and by extension a critical feature of the Egyptian livelihood. The Nile served as a basis for society and as a source of life; it determined settlement patterns, agricultural practices, and administrative orders.[2] Awareness of the significance of the Nile existed in Egypt, and the people possessed a high regard for its influence, as illustrated by a hymn from ca. 2100 B.C.E.:

> Hail to thee, O Nile! Who manifests thyself over this land, and comes to give life to Egypt! . . . You create the grain, you bring forth the barley, assuring perpetuity to the temples. If you cease your toil and your work, then all that exists is in anguish. . . . If you have refused (to grant) nourishment, the dwelling is silent, devoid of all that is good, the country falls exhausted.[3]

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[1] Louis L. Orlin, *Life and Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 39.

[2] Orlin, *Life and Thought in the Ancient Near East*, 40-41.

[3] *Hymn to the Nile* (c. 2100 B.C.E.), in *The Library of Original Sources*, vol. 1: *The Ancient World*, ed. Oliver J. Thatcher (Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co., 1907), 79-83. Available at https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/hymn-nile.asp (accessed November 16, 2021).

The proclamations in this hymn indicate that the Nile was viewed as the guiding force of many of the occurrences in the civilization, from the mundane things such as the harvest of crops, to the overriding motif of "good" in the society. The cyclical nature of the flooding of the river also received great esteem from the Egyptians: "all is changed by inundation; it is a healing-balm for all mankind."[4] The importance of the Nile's inundation lies in its ability to create the calendar which the civilization followed – in other words, it fostered a predictable way of life. Because the Egyptians could depend on the Nile's cycle of flooding and receding, and because they benefitted greatly from this cycle, their lives could be planned accordingly. This stability in social patterns as a result of constancy in natural patterns produced an optimistic outlook on life because the future appeared both promised and blessed by the contributions of the Nile.

Religion also played a prominent role in the daily proceedings of Egypt, arguably comparable to that of nature, resulting from the close ties between the two influences. Egyptian religion was born from the observables of the people. As argued by David P. Silverman of the University of Pennsylvania, it is only because of the "control over their environment" the Egyptians experienced that "they would have had the time and energy" to begin constructing their faith.[5] This sense of control and understanding over nature is mirrored in the creation of deities and their spiritual duties. A significant number of major figures in the Egyptian pantheon were sourced from natural discernments. For example, personification of the Nile occurs within its praises: "If He shines, the earth is joyous . . . . He is the creator of all good things . . . . If offerings are made it is thanks to Him."[6] Indicated by the use of masculine pronouns, the river is associated with a godly or even humanly form. Moreover, the god that later became associated with the Nile in a holistic sense donned the name Hapy.[7] Other examples of this include the worship of the earliest form of Horus as a sun god and the representation of Anubis as "the darkest part of twilight or the earliest dawn."[8] Even Osiris and Seth have natural origins; the story of the godly brothers' interactions served as a foundation to Egyptian faith, and their relationship can be boiled down to a metaphor of the mortal Egyptian world. "[T]he struggle between Osiris and Seth represents a conflict in nature – between the fertile Nile Valley and the infertile desert or between the consistent, beneficial inundation of the Nile (Osiris) and the unpredictable, generally undesirable storm (Seth)."[9] The Egyptians recognized their most important physical governors and translated them into their most important spiritual governors.

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[4] *Hymn to the Nile.*

[5] David P. Silverman, "Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt," in *Religion in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 7-87 at 12.

[6] *Hymn to the Nile.*

[7] Silverman, "Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt," 34.

[8] E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead (The Papyrus of Ani)* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), cxv-cxvii.

[9] Lesko, "Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology," 88-122 at 93.

Another indicator of the relation and importance of nature and religion is the emergence of the worship of the sun god Aten during the reign of Akhenaten (originally named Amenhotep IV) in the New Kingdom. In his hymn to his beloved god, Akhenaten writes, "Rising in your form as the living Aten, / Appearing, shining, withdrawing or approaching, . . . / Cities, towns, fields, road, and river—/ Every eye beholds you over against them."[10] Akhenaten, and by extension the Egyptian people, attributed divine blessings to the blessings of nature – there was no differentiation between the two. Akhenaten also references the reverence held for another cyclical occurrence: "When you have risen, they live, / When you set they die."[11] The rising and setting of the sun, much like the inundation of the Nile, determined the daily lives of the Egyptian people and contributed to their spiritual beliefs.

Under the establishment of relations between nature and spirituality, the presence of optimism and hope in ancient Egyptians becomes more visible and easily understood. The guiding principle of the Egyptian way of life belonged to the conception of Ma'at: righteousness, truth, and justice.[12] While these values in their most basic form belonged to proceedings of the spiritual underworld and are represented by a female deity (called Ma'at), the ethos of Ma'at were held in the heart of society and greatly influenced mortal life. An account from the Middle Kingdom of a commoner's plight for justice after he was robbed by a wealthy landowner illuminates this concept. The peasant makes his case based on the principles of Ma'at:

> Do the truth for the sake of the Lord of Truth. . . . [Y]ou ought to keep yourself far removed from injustice. . . . [Y]ou should be virtuous . . . . [T]ruth is true to eternity. She goes with those who perform her to the region of the dead. He will be laid in the coffin and committed to the earth;—his name will not perish from the earth, but men will remember him on account of his property: so runs the right interpretation of the divine word.[13]

The importance of implementing the values of Ma'at into everyday life stemmed from two components. Firstly, the exposure to Ma'at created a society that had obligations to act morally and in good faith. Secondly, by committing these actions worthy of truth, reason, and justice, the Egyptian had hope to experience acclamation and life after death, modeled by the goddess Ma'at guiding the soul to the underworld. In essence, Ma'at connected the physical world of Egypt to the spiritual realm. The ability of the people to relate themselves directly to and model themselves

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[10] Akhenaten, *Hymn to Aten*, in *Western Civilization*, vol. A: *to 1500*, 8th ed., by Jackson J. Spielvogel (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2012), 25.

[11] Akhenaten, *Hymn to Aten*, 25.

[12] Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, cxix.

[13] *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* (c. 1800 B.C.E), in *Archaeology and The Bible*, 3rd ed., by George A. Barton (Philadelphia: American Sunday School, 1920), 418-421. Available at https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/1800egypt-peasant.asp (accessed November 16, 2021).

after their religious principles and figures fostered a positive outlook on their lives – and what they hoped would come after.

The basis for the hope of eternal life resided in the embodiment of Ma'at within an individual, emphasizing the value of happiness. The Egyptians believed that if they practiced morality and good character in life, they could pass judgement in death and live eternally in the realm of Osiris. The containment of secrets and answers to conducting one's life in this way is referred to today as *The Book of the Dead*. It outlines that, in order to prove compliance, a proclamation of negative confessions occurs before judgement. A few of these negative confessions include the rejection of wickedness, the abstention from deceit, and the assurance that the individual has caused no pain.[14] The Egyptians, aware of the admissions they must give in death to please Osiris and pass judgement, used these confessions to guide their daily practices in life. An Egyptian illustration of the judgement process includes the jackal-headed Anubis leading the deceased to a scale, where the mortal's heart will be weighed against the feather of Ma'at. If the two balance out, Osiris will claim the Egyptian; if they do not, the heart will be eaten and the soul will cease to exist.[15] The heart was perceived to be the source of one's character and morality, similar to the modern notion of the metaphorical heart.[16] Significantly, the threat of eternal punishment or a conception of hell appears absent. The Egyptians did not have reason to fear death and sin in the same way that other cultures experienced. However, the sense of morality in life was still enforced because the heart had to stand against Ma'at's principles. Not only did the Egyptians have a spiritual promise of eternal happiness to cling to in everyday life, but by extension they exhibited positive qualities throughout society, creating a civilization that brimmed with optimism and contentedness.

Two universal reasons for celebration existed in ancient Egypt, both pertaining to sources of joy: the prosperity of the current life and the continuation of prosperity in the afterlife. As evident in the aforementioned praises of nature, as well as in the words of a popular poem often chanted at banquets in recognition of an individual's passing, a sense of prosperity flourished. One portion of the poem states, "Revel in pleasure while your life endures / And deck your head with myrrh. Be richly clad / In white and perfumed linen."[17] The Egyptians placed emphasis on expressions of comfort, indicative of a secure society. This perception of success in life boiled over into the belief of prosperity in death. The use and stress of symbols in Egyptian civilization also suggest this concept of continuity. The *ankh*, meaning "key of life," often adorned mummies.

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[14] *The Negative Confession*, in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead (The Papyrus of Ani)*, by E.A. Wallis Budge (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), 347-351.

[15] "Osiris as Judge of the Dead," in *Western Civilization*, vol. A: *to 1500*, 8th ed. by Jackson J. Spielvogel (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2012), 21.

[16] Paul Carus, "The Conception of the Soul and the Belief in Resurrection Among the Egyptians," *The Monist*, vol. 15, no. 3 (July 1905): 409-28 at 420.

[17] *Lay of the Harper*, *Egyptian Myth and Legend*, https://www.sacred-texts.com/egy/eml/eml29.htm (accessed November 16, 2021).

The *tet* or *ded*, translating to "backbone of Osiris," was representative of the sense of stability.[18] Both symbols demonstrate that worldly prosperity and security extended to the afterlife, manifesting a never-ending cycle of Egyptian happiness.

While exemplified by the previous evidence that at least a portion of the ancient Egyptian civilization experienced optimistic lives, it is arguable that this sensation was not present for each and every pocket of society. Egypt contained an expansive social hierarchy, and a fair amount of the reverence for religion belonged to the important and powerful figures, made clear by Akhenaten's writing of *Hymn to Aten*. Additionally, the story of the commoner who employs the values of Ma'at is deemed "eloquent,"[19] which can point to the idea that he was a unique case within his social class in regards to his understandings and dedication to surviving judgement day. However, the system upon which happiness and optimism flourished did not discriminate against members of society. All Egyptians benefitted from the Nile River – it was the basis of civilization. The Book of the Dead, the key to eternal life, was available to all and did not specify a necessary social rank of the individual seeking its refuge. The foundation for Egyptian happiness was laid for the ancient society in its entirety.

The geographical features of ancient Egypt greatly influenced both the adopted daily practices of its people and the religion created by the civilization. A stable, cyclical pattern of natural occurrences promoted a reflection of stability and dependability in thought and beliefs. The interrelations of natural and spiritual phenomena and by extension their combined influence culminated into a civilization that valued optimism and happiness. Furthermore, ancient Egypt exists in modern thought as recognition of a powerful, leading early civilization. This begs the question: are impressive successes, such as the building of the great pyramids, additional contributors to the preceding ethos, or rather are these prosperous components of ancient Egypt a result of the capabilities of a happy and optimistic society?

[18] Carus, "The Conception of the Soul," 423.

[19] *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant.*

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