ALAN LLOYD

CULT, MYTH, AND KINGSHIP IN PHARAONIC EGYPT

University College of Swansea

CULT, MYTH, AND KINGSHIP IN PHARAONIC EGYPT

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'Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh' (*Ecclesiastes* 12: 12). Many of us in this room, of all ages, I suspect, have experienced at some stage the academic *ennui* expressed over two thousand years ago by the writer of *Ecclesiastes*. Generation after generation the same issues recur only to be met by a bewildering battery of different formulations, different solutions, or different points of emphasis.

The student of myth could be forgiven for being a particularly acute case of this *ennui* in that he finds himself confronted with a positively awesome array of theories stretching back to classical antiquity which attempt to unravel such problems as the origins of myth, the syntax of specific examples or sequences, and the relationship of myth to the societies within which they have been generated. In the fifth century BC we encounter Xenophanes of Colophon rejecting traditional tales of the gods by insisting that Greek concepts of the divine order were no more than projections of the world of men into the world of the gods.

> The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair.
>
> But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves.

The Sophist Prodicus was similarly convinced that myth is the product of an interaction between the human psyche and the physical realities of human existence, arguing that the gods and, *ipso facto*, myths arose from deifying everything which was of value to mankind. A little later the great Democritus was alleged to have insisted that the fear excited on confronting the wonders of nature was responsible for generating the notion of godhead whilst the brilliant and sinister Critias, with typical cynicism, claimed that god was a pure fabrication, a cosmic policeman devised by a lawgiver in primeval times simply to keep people under control:

(A pretty trick, accomplished with a word)
And thus he quenched out lawlessness with laws.

Somewhat later the objective existence of the gods was also denied by Euhemerus who claimed that the gods had originally been great kings and conquerors, and these had subsequently been elevated to divine status in return for their services to men.[1]

These opinions have not failed to find their counterparts in more modern times: in the sixteenth century we find Francis Bacon pleading for an allegorical interpretation of myth; French rationalists such as Voltaire showed themselves every bit as cynical as Critias; and in the great torrent of work on religion and religious phenomena in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which has its origins in no small measure in Darwinian evolutionary theory, we have seen a succession of explanations of myth: Max Müller read myths as a projection of natural, particularly solar, phenomena; Herbert Spencer claimed that gods and myths had their origins in ancestor worship; others, such as Robertson Smith and Jane Harrison, insisted on the close connection between ritual and myth and argued that myth had its origins in ritual. The development of sociology and social anthropology inevitably encouraged attempts to relate myth to socio-political structures, e.g. Fustel de Coulanges, Emil Durkheim, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Max Weber. Equally, the invention of psychoanalysis could not fail to have a major impact in this area, and myths have been interpreted as an expression of deep-rooted compulsions, obsessions, or constructs of the human mind - here, inevitably, the names of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud spring immediately to mind, but the social anthropologist would also think of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Claude Lévi-Strauss.[2]

This is neither the time nor the place to subject this galaxy of theories to a detailed critique - it has, in any case, been ably done both by E.E. Evans Pritchard and, more recently, by Geoffrey Kirk.[3] My intention this evening is rather to consider the relevance of these ideas to the study of one of the oldest extant bodies of myth, that of the Ancient Egyptians.

Curiously enough, Egyptologists have played an insignificant role in the myth debate, though classicists, Hebrew scholars, and Arabists have all made substantial contributions, even if some of them would no longer command widespread support. In part, this is due to the fact that Egypt presents such a wealth of religious phenomena that Egyptologists have found quite enough to keep them busy within their own boundaries without addressing their attention to broader and more general issues, but a further factor has undoubtedly been the heavy influence of the historicist view of Egyptian mythology associated particularly with Kurt Sethe and Hermann Kees.[4] This view inevitably encouraged Egyptologists to focus down very firmly on the Egyptian material and, at the same time, inhibited the use of Egyptian material in the myth debate in general since historicist interpretations of myth have not generally proved rewarding in other cultural contexts. Nevertheless, searching studies have been produced by such scholars as S. Schott, H.W. Fairman, H. Frankfort, J. Assmann, and my old friend and colleague J. Gwyn Griffiths.[5] We have also recently seen a considerable step forward with the publication of Heike Sternberg's *Mythische Motive und Mythenbildung in den ägyptischen Tempeln und Papyri der griechisch-römischen Zeit*.[6] With this encouragement, what I should like to do today is to take a close look at three Egyptian mythical texts to determine what is going on within them and, as far as possible, to try and determine what their origins and function might be. The texts which I have chosen are: the *Myth of the Destruction of Mankind*; the *Conflict of Horus and Seth*; and the *Legend of Horus of Behdet and the Winged Disc*.

The *Myth of the Destruction of Mankind* is extant only in the Valley of the Kings where it appears in the tombs of several Pharaohs of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth Dynasties.[7] The language is basically that of Middle Egyptian narrative texts of the Middle Kingdom, though some Late Egyptian contamination is clearly in evidence, and many have felt justified in maintaining a Middle Kingdom date for the composition. More recently, however, Hornung has

proposed a date in the late Eighteenth Dynasty. Be that as it may, when it first appears in the record, anyone who heard it or read it would have found it very archaic, difficult to understand, and deeply imbued with the odour of sanctity.

The story is quickly told: at the beginning of the narrative the sun-god Rēʿ is presented to us as king of gods and men but is stated to have grown old. In this situation mankind plotted a rebellion against him. On perceiving this development Rēʿ called a council of gods to determine the best course of action. As a result of the debate the council advised Rēʿ to send an avenging goddess called his Eye in the form of the goddess Ḥathor to smite mankind for its disobedience, and this was duly set in motion. Then Rēʿ decided, for no apparent reason, to put a stop to the annihilation, and this he did by means of a trick: having obtained some haematite, he mixed it with a great quantity of beer, the haematite giving the mixture the appearance of blood. This was then used to flood the area where the Eye was. The goddess drank the mixture, became inebriated, and abandoned the destruction of mankind. We are then treated to a passage of aetiological explanation where it is stated that this event is the origin of the festival of drunkenness celebrated every year for Ḥathor. There then takes place a second period of disaffection between Rēʿ and mankind which clearly arises for the same reason as the previous one, and the god is advised by members of his entourage to implement whatever he wishes in order to resolve the crisis and also to get himself transported by the sky-goddess Nut away from men into the heavens. The prospect of the departure of Rēʿ leads the righteous amongst mankind to promise to destroy the iniquitous amongst them, and this change of heart brings about a measure of reconciliation, or, at least, accommodation between the sun-god and his subjects which ensures that mankind is not totally destroyed even though Rēʿ resolves to remain permanently distanced from them in the heavenly sphere. This situation means that there is built into the very fabric of the cosmos a measure of alienation between god and man which was not part of the original order of things but which has been created by man's own iniquity. There then follows a narrative of the creation of certain structural features

of the world as the ancient Egyptian perceived it, the details of which need not concern us here, and the text concludes with a clear statement that it is an utterance that can be recited and gives detailed instructions on the rituals to be performed when this is done, adding a string of further incantations for good measure. The power of these utterances is vividly described on several occasions, e.g. it is claimed that a man who recites them 'is like Rēʿ on the day of his birth, and his possessions do not diminish, and his portal is not blocked (?) (a successful method a million times)'.[8]

So much for the narrative, but this bald summary does little to convey the processes of thought which underlie this text. Let us begin by analysing the portrayal of the actors in the drama. The protagonist is the god Rēʿ. From the very beginning it is clear that he is conceived of as an Egyptian Pharaoh: the action is said to take place in the time of 'the Majesty of Rēʿ, the god who came into being of himself, after he was in the kingship of men and gods together'; like any Egyptian king, he has an entourage and, like any Egyptian king, he initiates and is master of the situation from beginning to end - all major decisions are his. Indeed, the episode where he summons courtiers and officials to a council is clearly modelled on the common motif in the official literature of kingship known as the 'Königsnovelle'. Again like a king, his essence is different from that of mortals: it is said of him that 'his bones were of silver, his limbs of gold, and his hair of real lapis-lazuli' (cf. P. Westcar where it is said of each of the newly born royal princes that 'his bones were firm; he had his limbs covered with gold, and he wore a headdress of real lapis-lazuli'). He is also said to occupy a throne and, again like a king, the fear of him is expected to be great. Other features which belong at least in part in the same order of things can also be identified: he reacts strongly and effectively against aberrant human behaviour by the application of force, but he is not implacable; for, by taming the Eye, who is also called Ḥathor/Sekhmet, he arrests the violence at a critical point in the course of events. However, violence is not the only weapon in his armoury; he is also wise to the point of cunning. At the beginning of the narrative, the council

is convened secretly to avoid spooking the rebels; again, later, in dealing with the council itself, he shows great circumspection in that, despite his power, he consults and seeks advice before acting, and his strategy for dealing with the crisis, when it is at last clearly stated, is well thought out - there is no need to destroy mankind; diminishing their numbers would be quite adequate in order to reduce them to tractability. At the end of the narrative we are taken a step further in this direction when Rē‘ is presented as a full-blown trickster: he does not tell Ḥatḥor/Sekhmet to stop her work of destruction but reduces her to impotence, or, if you like, tames her by a subterfuge.

In all these activities a prominent role is given to an entity called the Eye, a recurrent, multilayered, but by no means incoherent concept in Egyptian religion. The Eye basically embodies the concept of watchfulness, and in this active form it protects by the application of violence. As such, when under control and operating as an instrument of order, it is Ḥatḥor. However, in this myth Ḥatḥor gets out of control during the course of the action, and then she becomes Sekhmet, unbridled power, a destructive and negative force which must be subdued to the authority of the god. It is highly significant that, when the beer is drunk and Sekhmet's violence subsides, she is described as *ỉ3mt*, 'the Charming One', a common epithet of the goddess Ḥatḥor. It is quite evident here, I think, that, although the Eye is presented as the agent of the sun-god, it should be seen, at a deeper level, as an attribute of the god himself; it is his power or force as a cosmic entity exteriorized, objectivized, and personalized. In other words, when talking of the activities of the Eye, this text is, at the most fundamental level, talking about the ambivalence of the force/violence at the disposal of the god: it can function as a cosmicizing agent, if controlled, but, given free rein, it is an instrument of death and destruction. The sun-god, therefore, exercises vigilance in the way in which it operates, but there is a bit more to it than that. Since the sun-god is also Pharaoh transposed into the cosmic arena, we are also dealing with statements about royal power and its ambivalence and inherent dangers.

A further intriguing issue to which I should like to draw attention is the fact that Rē‘ is described as having grown old and that the rebellion of mankind is clearly connected with this development. That a god should grow old at all seems a strange idea to us and, indeed; would have seemed bizarre to many ancient peoples. It is, however, something which is said of Rē‘ on more than one occasion. At one level it has the effect of making a point to which I shall revert, i.e. that the gulf between man and god was not as wide in Ancient Egypt as it has been considered in other cultures, but we are still left with the problem of explaining why this point should be made in relation to Rē‘. The answer may be, in part, that, when the Egyptians speak of this god, they are frequently thinking of him in terms of royal succession and, in such a context, their preferred model was that the older god grows old for the younger to succeed, though they were prefectly well aware that alternative and distinctly less desirable processes were possible. In the present context, however, we should surely insist on the correlation in the text between the age of the god and the incidence of sedition. In simple terms, the old ruler is potentially an easy target, as doubtless more than one Pharaoh found to his cost. Once more the reading of Rē‘ as Pharaoh proves highly apposite.

The importance of the model of kingship should not blind us to aspects of the god's make-up which would not normally be associated with kingship. The aspect on which I would particularly insist emerges in an epithet applied to him in the text: *ḫpr(w) ḏs.f*, 'he who came into being of himself'. This god is self-generated; he is a creator god who created not only the cosmos as the Egyptians knew it but also created himself. Deities as creators are in evidence elsewhere in the text, most obviously in the form of Nun. He is the eldest in a sequence of creators, 'the eldest father who made men, and the king, and the lapwing people'. He is not, however, an active, dynamic creator, but rather a primeval essence who contained within himself the potentiality of all things and from whom all things came. Even Rē‘ emerged from him, though this situation clearly was not seen as compromising Rē‘'s position as a self-creator. Like Rē‘, he is depicted as a king and has a royal

entourage, but his relationship to Rē‘ is intriguing: at one point he is described as Rē‘'s god, i.e. the Egyptian model of a hierarchical society is so deeply ingrained that even Rē‘ has to have someone who is respected as a superior; Rē‘ turns to Nun and the ancestral gods precisely because they are the oldest, i.e. the Egyptian association of age, wisdom, and authority is operative even in the divine sphere. On the other hand, Rē‘ has succeeded Nun in the kingship of men and gods; Rē‘ is now king, and, as such, Nun explicitly concedes his superiority.

Finally, we must mention mankind. No-one could claim that we have a finely nuanced picture here. The critical issue for the narrator, and the only one in which he is interested, is that they have entertained seditious thoughts against Rē‘. This attitude is explicitly stated to be evil and is to be visited with condign punishment, but the ambivalence which is so distinctive a feature of this text also manifests itself here. When a second bout of divine retribution is threatened in the form of the withdrawal of Rē‘ from the world of men, it is the righteous amongst men themselves who attack Rē‘'s human enemies. Yet, even here, the scribe perceives an ambiguity; for, though the defence of Rē‘ is, at one level, an act of righteousness, the slaying of the rebels is seen, at the same time, as a morally reprehensible act - Rē‘'s response to their endeavours is quite unequivocal: *ḫw. tn ḥ3. tn*, 'your transgressions are on your own heads.'

So much for the *dramatis personae*. There are, however, other dimensions which require some comment. It will not have escaped many of you that this Egyptian myth of divine wrath has its parallels. The oldest known to me is the Sumerian myth of Ziusudra which appears fully in the Epic of Gilgamesh and shows intriguing points of similarity to the Biblical narrative of Noah.[9] Such myths evidently have their origin in the human sense of guilt. From their earliest years human beings are programmed to regard certain forms of behaviour or thinking as positive or acceptable whilst others are labelled as negative/unacceptable. This apparatus of psycho-social pressure is, of course, powerfully reinforced by institutional

sanctions at points where this is considered critical for society as a whole. There is constant pressure to move in the direction of what is considered acceptable. This, in turn, generates a sense of falling short, at first in specific cases, but eventually a generalized sense of guilt can evolve. In extreme cases, this can lead to an impulse towards self-destruction, but one way in which the problem has been made tractable in human societies is to evolve a corpus of myth and/or ritual which can induce a sense of reconciliation where mankind, with all his faults, becomes acceptable and is restored to the pale. Putting this in other terms, we might say that an intellectual and spiritual apparatus is generated by which members of a particular society can operate in the eminently satisfying conviction that god and man are reconciled, and a sense of alienation and disfunction gives way to a faith in integration and congruence.

The final dimension to which I should like to draw your attention is the plethora of aetiologies in this text. To take one example: 'Then did the Majesty of Rē‘ say to this divinity, "Welcome, Charming One (*ỉ3mt*)". This means the appearance of the Beauteous Ones in Iamu.' Much weight has been placed on this feature of the myth, and the first half of the text is not infrequently labelled simply as an aetiological myth designed to explain the *Thy* festival of Ḥathor. This assessment is certainly a considerable oversimplification. The effect of aetiologizing is rather more complex than this analysis would allow: at one level it serves to tie the myth down very firmly to the world of men; it thereby validates the myth and also actualizes it. At the same time, the myth must quite clearly validate what men themselves do.

When we try to summarize the results of this analysis, it appears that they can be grouped under two headings. In the first place, and most important, the myth strongly reflects the Egyptian socio-political order. It is evidently concerned with making statements about kingship, in particular its dangers and the qualities which the king needs in order to maintain himself. There is a concentration on the issue of the use of power and its control and an insistence on the obligation of man to accept

royal authority. At the social level there is an evident concern with family issues and an awareness of their importance. In all this, of course, what has happened is that the socio-political order of Pharaonic Egypt has been transposed into the world of the gods. At one level, therefore, this situation will inevitably serve to validate human institutions; at another, and perhaps more important, level it provides paradigms to instruct and advise. Whether one or other or any of these obvious features reflects the original intention of the myth-makers is very far from clear - I should incline to the view that this is a question to which there cannot be a positive answer. One thing, however, we can affirm: we are indisputably confronted with a world whose socio-political dimensions would prove eminently gratifying to the likes of Durkheim, Weber, and Malinowski. There is, however, more to the myth than this; for we have also isolated the operation of fundamental human psychological imperatives. We can detect the operation of the basic human need to impose and maintain a sense of order in relation to the phenomenal world and thereby induce a sense of the tractability of that world. We have also detected an attempt to attenuate and alleviate the human sense of alienation and guilt. What is more, this latter issue is far from marginal but central to the very core of the narrative. Here exegetes with the psychological emphasis of Freud and Jung will find much support for their views.

Let us now turn to the second of our texts, the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*. The papyrus on which this myth is preserved dates to the reign of Ramesses V in the Twentieth Dynasty and was produced at Thebes in Upper Egypt. Unlike the previous narrative, it is written in Late Egyptian and would, therefore, have been immediately intelligible to contemporary Egyptians, a fact which can only mean that, unlike the New Kingdom copies of the previous text, it was intended for general consumption by contemporary readers.[10]

The narrative is straightforward. As in the previous myth, we are still located at the time when the gods ruled man directly on earth. Osiris, King of Egypt, has

been killed by his brother Seth who is determined to establish himself on the throne in his stead. However, Horus, the son of Osiris, insists that the throne is his. The story relates the struggle between the two to resolve this issue, a struggle which is presented as a series of contests taking the form of legal debates in courts of law, physical contests of various kinds, and battles of wits. Eventually, Seth is compelled to yield, and Horus ascends the throne of his father.

The tale is entertaining enough as a story, but it is the underlying concepts which give the text its interest for us. Let us begin, as previously, with the characters in the tale. As in the *Destruction of Mankind*, the divine hierarchy is headed by Rē^{c}, though his presentation here is rendered rather more complicated by the intrusion of the problem of syncretism. One minute he appears as Atum and the next as Rē^{c}-Ḥarakhti, and these entities are sometimes regarded as identical, sometimes not. The problem, however, is more apparent than real. Rē^{c}-Ḥarakhti is explicitly stated to be the *b3* of Atum, i.e. a manifestation of his power or life-force. As such, he will sometimes be regarded as working directly through Atum and sometimes regarded as a separate entity, i.e. though an aspect of Atum, he can be objectivized and personalized whenever it is convenient for the Egyptian to do so. As in the previous text, Rē^{c} is clearly treated as a king, and here also he does not act in the least in an authoritarian way. He is very accommodating in his determination to get a generally acceptable verdict on the issue under dispute and even changes his mind on the right of the matter when Seth himself is tricked into accepting and stating the principle on which Horus' claim is based.

The Eye features in this text also, but it functions in a different way in that a different aspect of this symbol is to the fore. Here it features as the symbol of the victory of Horus the protector and, when it is delivered to him, it symbolizes the wholeness which that victory brings.

As for Horus, he is presented as a somewhat two-dimensional figure. The point on which the text particularly insists is that he is the son of Osiris, but traits of

character do emerge: he can get furiously angry and is an accomplished trickster - as in the previous text, achieving victory by cunning is evidently entirely acceptable. Seth, on the other hand, is distinctly short of intelligence or guile. He embodies strength, power, and a violence which can become unbridled. He insists on his own strength, he bears the carefully chosen epithet *'3 ṗḥty*, 'great of strength', his sheer physical strength is emphasized on more than one occasion, and he generally attempts to win his case through this attribute. He is defeated twice by a trickster, and, when he tries to pull a fast one, he is himself discomfited. He is also a lecher, and his lapse into deviant sexual behaviour excites the universal condemnation of the gods. For all that, his strength is of use, and Rē^{c} initially favours Seth because he slays the sun-god's arch-enemy, Apophis, every day on his behalf.

In general, the picture of the gods and their activities very much reflects the situation which we found in the previous case. The narrative is based on the notion of a trial or arbitration between Horus and Seth presided over by Atum, and *mutatis mutandis* everything proceeds as it would have done in the world of men: the tribunal is addressed by various deities pleading the case of one god or another; they send each other letters on the issue, very much in the manner of human beings; and they attempt to arrive at a verdict which will be acceptable to all concerned, even to the point of offering Seth a sweetener. This attitude to the proceedings very much reflects the emphasis of Egyptian legal tribunals. The gods' psychological make-up is very much that of men; they can take offence and go off in a sulk, and they can even become angry and jealous of their rights. They have a human sexuality which, I am sure, was as amusing to the Egyptians as it is to us. Their conditions of life were also modelled on those of human beings, e.g. we are presented at one point with the charming picture of the gods sitting around together having a snack, and we are also informed that Seth had a garden in his house where, amongst other things, he grew lettuces of which he was inordinately fond. The gods can also behave in ways which are irreverent and even improper; their economy operates on a barter system; and, like human beings, they are much given

to the swearing of oaths.

Although the gods are endowed with so many human attributes and operate in so many ways in a human manner, we cannot lose sight for long of the differences. They enjoy powers which pass well beyond normal human activity: they can change their form at will; they can have overwhelming physical strength; and they are sources of sustenance and life far beyond the measure of man.

It has probably already begun to dawn on some of you that, like the previous text, this myth also is concerned with the issue of power. What is the proper criterion for validating kingship? Does *m3't*, 'right', have precedence over *wsr*, 'power, might'? It is highly significant that the principle 'Right rules might' is enunciated by Shu, one of the most ancient and, *ipso facto*, prestigious of gods. The hereditary principle should prevail, and Seth's insistence that the kingdom should be given to him on the basis of his strength is rejected. Seth tries to win his point by converting the contest into a pure contest of strength, but this does not a yield a resolution. It is, however, most intriguing to note that the matter cannot simply be solved by the sun-god's *fiat*. The underlying assumption throughout is that, if there is to to be a definitive solution, it can only be on the basis of an accommodation between the parties. Until Seth accepts the verdict, there cannot be a resolution. This highly desirable conclusion is eventually achieved in two stages: (a) the sun-god uses force and restrains Seth; (b) Seth is then brought round by a tit-for-tat deal whereby he is given a privileged position as the champion of Rē^{c}. The underlying consideration here is evidently that the sun-god, the maintainer of order, needs force and violence to fulfil his rôle, but they must operate under his control.

Our discussion to this point has been dominated by the ethico-political and indeed cosmic dimensions of the story, but there are two other aspects to which attention should be drawn. Firstly, we again find aetiology cropping up in that episodes in the narrative are related to certain aspects of cult or observance. Here, the explanation would run along the same lines as in the discussion of the

Destruction of Mankind. Secondly, the Delta is given a prominent position in that Neith, a major Delta goddess, is in the forefront of the action, and the final solution to the problem takes place in that area. This probably reflects the pre-eminent position of the northern part of the country at this stage in Egyptian history and, if so, exemplifies the way in which myths in Egypt can reflect contemporary political realities.

The third and final text to be considered is the *Legend of Horus of Behdet and the Winged Disc*. In its present form it is Ptolemaic in date, appearing on the inner side of the west wall of the temple of Horus at Edfû.[11]

When the narrative begins, Rē^{c}-Ḥarakhti is presented as being in Nubia with his army. He then sails north with his troops together with Horus of Edfû. When they arrive at the district of Edfû, Horus informs Rē^{c} that he sees 'enemies who plot against their mighty lord', and Rē^{c} gives Horus instructions to deal with them. Horus then assumes the form of the great winged disc and proceeds to carry out these instructions, and the enemy is duly defeated. However, this defeat is not definitive. At 6, 8, they attack the barque of Rē^{c} in the form of crocodiles and hippopotami, animals which are classic embodiments of Seth and his confederates, the forces of disorder, and they are again worsted. There then follows a series of confrontations which end with the enemies of Rē^{c} being driven either into the sea or into the eastern desert. After this triumph Rē^{c} returns southwards to Nubia to find that during his absence a rebellion has broken out there; that was quickly brought to heel by Horus. This entire narrative is peppered with aetiological statements, and the text concludes with a section which is concerned with decoding certain aspects of the myth, amongst other things making it clear that the defeat of 'the enemy' is a daily necessity. It also explicitly identifies the king with Horus of Edfû:

> The king shall act (?) on the day on which trouble and strife occur ... Be ye far from him, O ye foes, ye evil council, ye men, gods, spirits, and dead, Apophis, thou foe of the Son of Rē^{c}, Ptolemy, who lives for ever, beloved of Ptaḥ. He is the god's avenger (?) who came forth from Behdet, and Horus of Behdet is his name.

Finally, it is stated that the very recitation of the myth will itself slay the king's enemies:

> Let this utterance be recited when trouble occurs, and the king shall not be afraid, but his foes will be slain before him, and his heart will rejoice over them immediately, and (each) one will slay his fellow immediately, as befell the enemies of Rē^{c}-Ḥarakhti when Horus of Behdet [flew] against them as the great Winged Disc.

A detailed analysis of this myth throws up a number of intriguing features. The composition itself is cast in typical Ptolemaic classical Egyptian which would have been quite unintelligible to the vast majority of contemporary Egyptians. It is very carefully composed, proceeding at a meticulously measured pace from one victory to another from the south of Egypt to the north, and exploits the device of ring composition in that the narrative begins in Nubia and also ends there. The constant repetition of formulaic elements imparts an incantatory dimension highly apposite to the text's ritual function. There is a strong sense of actuality which derives from the use of precise numbers, the plethora of genuine place-names, and the precise geographical details of the location of the various battles.

The list of characters presents old acquaintances in familiar guises. Re is unequivocally depicted as a king - the text uses the format and phraseology of a royal inscription in that we begin with a date, and the titles and the royal formulae associated with such texts frequently occur. In addition, we encounter commonplaces such as an army 'without number' and the comment that 'their hearts were faint through fear of him'. More generally, it should be noted that the presence of Rē^{c} brings order and his absence disorder; he is also the initiator of action; he is masterful and in control; and it is from Rē^{c}'s barque that Horus operates. He is also very much the focal point of the action in that the enemies are stated to be Rē^{c}'s enemies, and it is his barque that they attack. As for Horus, he is clearly stated to be the image of Rē^{c}. His kinship to Rē^{c} is emphasized on several occasions, and Rē^{c} is described as showing affection for him. He functions as Rē^{c}'s agent and is specifically associated with the destruction of rebels and foes, even being capable of

striking panic into enemies to the point where they end up killing each other. He can enlist the aid of Isis and Thoth in his mission of conquest, and these deities mobilize their resources of *ḥeka* for this purpose. These activities of Horus are also formulated as being an act of purification. Not surprisingly, his triumph brings cosmic rejoicing.

The enemy is described by a variety of terms: they are rebels, enemies of Rē‘, crocodiles and hippopotami, Seth, or Apophis. Seth himself is said to be fearsome of face and as roaring in a fearsome manner. The enemies are continually depicted as being filled with panic, and at one point they are dismembered and eaten. Whatever damage is done to them, however, it is evident that they are always there, waiting for an opportunity to resume their destructive and disruptive activities.

Aetiologies are overwhelmingly exploited, some referring to place-names, others to aspects of cult practice or of a deity. They all have the intention of relating relevant phenomena to the triumph of Horus and have the effect of anchoring the events of the narrative firmly in the here and now.

Finally, we should emphasize that the correlation: King = Horus and Horus = Agent of Rē‘ emerges unequivocally. It is also made quite clear that the text itself is an utterance of power, and its very recitation can bring about the triumph which it describes. This fits in very neatly with the incantatory dimension which the text as a whole clearly displays.

Conclusion

No single theory of myth would get anywhere near accounting for those examples which we have been discussing here. They all have elements of cosmogony and cosmology within them, and, to that extent, they embody an element of aetiological nature myth. It is equally indisputable that they also demonstrate a large measure of projection of the Egyptian socio-political order into the world of the gods, and they can be seen, *ipso facto*, as having an element of the charter myth about them, if only to the extent that they involve a restatement of the values and premises

underpinning that order. It is also explicitly asserted that two of them were intended to serve a ritual purpose by forming part of the oral rite in specific cult acts, at least in the context in which they survive. They therefore provide some support for the ritual theory of myth. Yet again they can also be seen as exteriorizing and palliating fundamental human anxieties and/or preoccupations and, as such, they are very much grist to the mill for those who wish to see myth as a reflection of inbuilt or socially programmed human psychological preoccupations. In all three myths on which we have concentrated many of these dimensions coexist and interact at one and the same time; no single label can be attached to any one of them. In a word, these myths are polyvalent.

So what exactly was their function? In the form in which they are presented to us, they describe aspects of the world which were particularly significant to the myth-maker or myth-makers at the time of composition and about which they wished, for their own reasons, to make a statement, but these statements are made in a distinctive mode which must be clearly understood. No-one can spend any time with such material in any culture without coming to the firm conviction that no claim is being made for any myth that everything in it is literally true - quite the contrary. Myth should be seen rather as a symbolic narrative language. The characters are the vocabulary; the characterization, however simple, is the morphology; the interrelationship of characters is the syntax; and all this apparatus is used to express a semantic core. Furthermore, this language is not to be taken literally, and no-one in a society where myth is a vital mode of expression would do so. The meaning is conveyed by association, by emphasis, by omission, by the very structuring of the narrative itself. Like any language, myth has flexibility and is not constrained in the manner of Christian dogma. The vocabulary, the morphology, and the syntactic structure can all be modified depending on the meaning which has to be conveyed. Therefore, when different versions of myths occur, they must not be perceived as contradicting each other, for the simple reason that they do not inhabit the rational Aristotelian universe where such judgements of consistency have their place. When

we, in the modern, Western, scientifically orientated world make statements about the world around us, if we wish to be taken seriously, we distil the essence of our experience and produce a general statement about it which we should expect people to take literally. The myth-maker, on the other hand, operates in a society where such a level of abstraction is simply not possible and would, indeed, be meaningless because it would relate to nothing. To such people meaning lies in the social, in the interaction of social entities, and the only way to convey a perception of meaning is by presenting the interaction of social entities. In such contexts, therefore, narrative is the given medium for communicating meaning in virtually all contexts, and that meaning is conveyed, for the most part, at a subliminal level through that narrative rather than through the language of precise rational perception and statement.

If we were now to ask, 'What, then, is the Egyptian trying to say about his world in the myths which we have been discussing?', I should have to reply that a coherent picture is readily extracted once we have grasped the nature of the language being used and the techniques for decoding it. These myths are constantly addressing the question of the physical and moral structure of the Egyptian world and, even more important, the factors and forces that brought it into being and govern and determine its continued existence, matters that are not simply or even mainly matters of physics but are interpenetrated by a moral dimension. These myths are permeated by a conviction that the world in which the Egyptian found himself was a cosmos which was the result of a conscious creative ordering purpose, and that, once it had come into existence, it continued to exhibit in all its aspects the operation of conscious cosmicizing forces. In the myths under discussion these forces are pre-eminently, though not invariably, symbolized by Rē‘, who may work his will directly but frequently uses an agent in his stead. The maintenance of this world is made no easier by the nature of the cosmos itself. For it is no single undifferentiated essence or entity. At the macrocosmic level, certainly, it is a unity, but, on closer inspection, it emerges as a unity transfused with

a duality which often presents itself as ambiguities which are capable of threatening the structural integrity of the entire fabric: it is a world where controlled and well-directed power can easily dissolve into unbridled violence - Ḥathor may become Sekhmet; Seth, the champion of Rē‘, may become Seth, the promoter of chaos; Rē‘, the destroyer of man, can become his saviour and then again his potential destroyer; mankind may be the foe of Rē‘ and the target of his righteous wrath but can also be his champion against his enemies. In a word, the myths leave us in no doubt that the universe of order is constantly under mortal threat, that constant vigilance is required, and that this threat must be confronted daily and defeated daily. There is also no doubt, though these particular texts do not make the point, that ultimately this world is doomed to be pulled apart by the tensions generated by its innate contradictions and ambiguities, and that it will ultimately dissolve into the primal essence from which it came.[12] It is Horus who is most frequently presented as the agent of Rē‘ in his work of staving off this catastrophe, and, since Pharaoh is himself an embodiment of Horus, the king's actions become the cosmicizing actions of the agent of Rē‘. The king, however, is more than this. There are several orders of being in this Egyptian universe: gods, the blessed dead, and men, but these orders of being are not sharply demarcated and do not ultimately occupy different worlds. They are seen as forming a continuum of being where the major divide lies between men and the rest, but this is no deep and insuperable gulf. The link here is the king whose very nature as man-god embodies an ambiguity which makes him the perfect liminal figure. His historical actions then become much more than actions rooted in what we would call historical space and time. History itself becomes ritual and is subsumed in cult, as the divine king, in all spheres of activity, is perceived as operating at the interface where gods and men meet to maintain the very fabric of the cosmos. Given this concept of kingship, statements about Horus become also statements about kingship; but statements about kingship also arise elswhere; for Rē‘, the father of Horus and, *ipso facto*, father of the king, is also a king, and statements about his methods and attitudes are also statements about

royal action - its problems and the parameters within which it must operate. Statements about his subjects are also statements about what subjects of Pharaoh ought and ought not to do. It is, therefore, entirely valid to regard some myths as being, in part, the Egyptian equivalent of political tracts. Such narratives would have a sufficient *raison d'être* as formulations of a particular world view and instruction on how man should negotiate terms with it, but there is sometimes even more to them than that; for it is clear that, in Egypt, myths were not necessarily inert, i.e. they need not simply exercise their influence by exciting a response in the reader or listener; they can be potent, active agents in their own right in that they can function as words of power, part of the apparatus of words and rituals of mysterious and intangible force which can alter the physical structure of things and which the Egyptian designated as *ḥeka*. We must, however, beware of insisting, on the basis of these examples occurring in specific ritual contexts, that Egyptian myths were always devised to serve such ritual purposes; for it is quite evident that neither in Egypt nor elsewhere, for that matter, is there an inseparable link between myth and ritual. There is not the slightest indication that the *Contendings of Horus and Seth* is a ritual text in its extant form. On the contrary, it can only be understood as a text designed to instruct and entertain.

It is indisputable that many of the features and functions which we have just isolated are also to be found in other categories of Egyptian narrative text. We must, therefore, put the simple question, 'What is the difference?' What would impel an Egyptologist to use the term 'myth' in one case and not in another? The answer is, I think, quite simple: the distinctive feature is that a myth is a narrative of the actions of divine beings. This brings with it the corollary that myths are concerned, explicitly or implicitly, with basic features of the phenomenal and spiritual world in which the Egyptian lived, and that factor, in turn, can give them a uniquely powerful resonance to which even modern man can respond. Like any narrative, they can entertain, instruct, reinforce social values, confirm the social order, and define the structure of the universe, and, in pursuit of these aims, they may deploy a wide

range of techniques and delve into the deepest and murkiest corners of the human psyche, but none of this is uniquely mythical. In Egypt myths are narratives of divine action - no more, no less - and I strongly suspect that the same holds true for every other culture, but that is a subject which I had better leave for my next inaugural lecture.

Notes

1. See H. Diels (rev. W. Kranz), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, I-III, 5th edn (Berlin, 1934-8) (Xenophanes, I, 21, B10-16; Prodicus, II, 84, B5-6; Democritus, II, 68, A75; Critias, II, 88, B25); G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven (rev. M. Schofield), *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1983) (Xenophanes, 166-74); M.P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, II (Munich, 1950), 269-74 (Euhemerus).

2. For useful surveys see, e.g., T.A. Sebeok (ed.), *Myth: A Symposium* (Bloomington, Ind., and London, 1965); J. de Vries, *Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie* (Orbis Academicus. Problemgeschichten der Wissenschaften in Dokumenten und Darstellungen) (Freiburg and Munich, 1961); K.W. Bolle *et al.*, 'Myth', in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, X (New York and London, 1987), 261-85.

3. E. Evans Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford, 1965); G.S. Kirk, *Myth, its Meaning & Functions in Ancient and other Cultures* (Sather Classical Lectures 40) (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1970); id., *The Nature of Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth, 1974).

4. K. Sethe, *Urgeschichte und älteste Religion der Ägypter* (Leipzig, 1930); H. Kees, *Der Götterglaube im alten Ägypten*, 2nd edn (Berlin, 1956). These theories have recently been discussed and evaluated by K. Koch, *Das Wesen altägyptischer Religion im Spiegel ägyptologischer Forschung* (Berichte aus den Sitzungen der Joachim Jungius-Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften E.V. Hamburg, Jahrg. 7, 1989, Heft 1) (Hamburg, 1989), 42 ff., 52 ff.

5. E.g. S. Schott, *Mythe und Mythenbildung im alten Ägypten* (Leipzig, 1945); H.W. Fairman, 'The Kingship Rituals of Egypt', in S.H. Hooke, *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship* (Oxford, 1958), 74-104; H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1948); J. Assmann, *Ägypten - Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur* (Stuttgart, Berlin, Cologne, and Mainz, 1984); J. Gwyn Griffiths, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth* (Liverpool, 1970). Cf., in general, Koch, op. cit.

6. H. Steinberg, *Mythische Motive und Mythenbildung in den ägyptischen Tempeln und Papyri der griechisch-römischen Zeit* (Göttinger Orientforschungen IV. Reihe: Ägypten, 14) (Wiesbaden, 1985).

7. Text of different versions in Ch. Maystre, 'Le livre de la vache du ciel dans les tombeaux de la Vallée des Rois', *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 40 (1941), 53-115; H. Hornung *et al.*, *Der ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh. Eine Ätiologie des Unvollkommenen* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 46) (Freiburg and Göttingen, 1982), 1-32; text of first section, A. de Buck, *Egyptian Readingbook* (Leiden, 1970), 123-6. The only modern translation of and commentary on the entire work is that of Hornung (op. cit. 37-127); for older (incomplete) versions see *inter alios* J.B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd edn (Princeton, 1969), 10-11; H. Brunner-Traut, *Altägyptische*

Märchen, 2nd edn (Dusseldorf and Cologne, 1965), 69-72; M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*. II: *The New Kingdom* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1976), 197-9.

8. Verses 269-71 (Hornung, op. cit. 25). The comment at the end is a typical endorsement of the efficacy of the text - it had been tried many times, and it had always worked!

9. Translated in N.K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Harmondsworth, 1972). The precise relationship of the Noah story to older Mesopotamian parallels remains a matter of dispute.

10. Text in Alan H. Gardiner, *Late-Egyptian Stories* (Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca I) (Brussels, 1932). Translation in G. Lefebvre, *Romans et contes égyptiens de l'époque pharaonique* (Paris, 1949), 178-203; E.F. Wente, in W.K. Simpson (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven and London, 1973), 108-26; Lichtheim, op. cit. 214-23.

11. Text in E. Chassinat, *Le Temple d'Edfou* (Mém.miss.arch.française 23) (Cairo, 1931), VI, 108-32; translation (with some commentary), H.W. Fairman, 'The Myth of Horus at Edfu - I', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 21 (1935), 26-36; Sternberg, op. cit., 21-35 (though much else is relevant for exegesis of the text).

12. This was not a prospect on which the Egyptians liked to dwell, but it does sporadically surface in the texts: see *Book of the Dead*, Ch. 175, and, in general, R.T. Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London, 1959), 52.