

"THE MEMPHITE THEOLOGY"

British Museum No. 498 (Shabaka Stone)

The text is carved on a rectangular slab of black granite, which measures 92 × 137 cm. It consists of two horizontal lines, written at the top across the entire width of the stone, and sixty-two columns which begin on the left side. In addition to numerous lacunae, the middle portion of the text, columns twenty-four to forty-seven, has been almost completely obliterated owing to the slab's reuse as a nether millstone.

As shown by its introduction, the text was copied onto the stone by order of King Shabaka of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty (ca. 710 B.C.), because the original, written on papyrus or leather, was found to be worm-eaten. The text is a work of the Old Kingdom, but its precise date is not known. The language is archaic and resembles that of the Pyramid Texts.

The present translation is based on the studies of Sethe and Junker, which have achieved an overall understanding of this difficult work. In matters of detail many obscurities remain. According to Sethe, the text was a dramatic play accompanied by explanatory prose narrations, and comparable to medieval mystery plays. Junker, however, saw in it an expository treatise, written partly in explicatory and partly in narrative prose and interwoven with speeches of the gods in dialogue form. These speeches would have been derived from dramatic performances of the sacred myths with which the text is concerned.

If the text is viewed as essentially a treatise rather than a drama, it is implied that it has an inner unity and cohesion, and Junker has striven to demonstrate that this is the case, and has pointed out that it treats consecutively of three interrelated topics: (1) Ptah is the king of Egypt and the unifier of the land. (2) Memphis is the capital of Egypt and the hinge of Upper and Lower Egypt. (3) Ptah is also the supreme god and the creator of the world.

Publication: J. H. Breasted, *ZAS*, 39 (1901), 39-54 and pls. I-II. K. Sethe, *Das "Denkmal memphitischer Theologie," der Schabakastein des Britischen Museums*, *Unters. z. Gesch. u. Altertumskunde Ägyptens*, Bd. X, 1 (Leipzig, 1928; reprinted, Hildesheim, 1964). H. Junker, *Die Götterlehre von Memphis*, *APAW*, 1939, Phil.-hist. Kl. no. 23 (Berlin, 1940). H. Junker, *Die politische Lehre von Memphis*, *APAW*, 1941, Phil.-hist. Kl. no. 6 (Berlin, 1941).

Discussion and excerpts: A. Erman, *Ein Denkmal memphitischer Theologie*, *SPAW*, 1911 (Berlin, 1911), pp. 916-950. J. H. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience* (New York, 1933), pp. 29-42. J. A. Wilson in *Intellectual Adventure*, pp. 55-60. S. Sauneron and J. Yoyotte in *Sources Orientales*, I (1959), 62-64.

Translation of excerpts: J. A. Wilson in *ANET*, pp. 4-6.

(1-2 horizontally) The living Horus: Who prospers the Two Lands; the Two Ladies: Who prospers the Two Lands; the Golden Horus: Who prospers the Two Lands; the King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Neferkare; the Son of Re: Sha[baka], beloved of Ptah-South-of-his-Wall, who lives like Re forever.<sup>1</sup>

This writing was copied out anew by his majesty in the House of his father Ptah-South-of-his-Wall, for his majesty found it to be a work of the ancestors which was worm-eaten, so that it could not be understood from beginning to end. His majesty copied it anew so that it became better than it had been before, in order that his name might endure and his monument last in the House of his father Ptah-South-of-his-Wall throughout eternity, as a work done by the Son of Re [Shabaka] for his father Ptah-Tatenen, so that he might live forever.

(3) --- [King of Upper and Lower Egypt] is this Ptah, who is called by the great name: [Ta-te]nen [South-of-his-Wall, Lord of eternity] ---. (4) --- [the joiner] of Upper and Lower Egypt is he, this uniter who arose as king of Upper Egypt and arose as king of Lower Egypt. (5) ----- (6) --- "self-begotten," so says Atum: "who created the Nine Gods."<sup>2</sup>

#### Horus and Ptah Are One

(7) [Geb, lord of the gods, commanded] that the Nine Gods gather to him. He judged between Horus and Seth; (8) he ended their quarrel. He made Seth king of Upper Egypt in the land of Upper Egypt, up to the place in which he was born, which is Su. And Geb made Horus king of Lower Egypt in the land of Lower Egypt, up to the place in which his father was drowned (9) which is "Division-of-the-Two-Lands." Thus Horus stood over one region, and Seth stood over one region. They made peace over the Two Lands at Ayan. That was the division of the Two Lands.

(10a) Geb's words to Seth: "Go to the place in which you were born." (10b) Seth: Upper Egypt. (11a) Geb's words to Horus: "Go to the place in which your father was drowned." (11b) Horus: Lower Egypt. (12a) Geb's words to Horus and Seth: "I have separated you." (12b) --- Lower and Upper Egypt.

(10c) Then it seemed wrong to Geb that the portion of Horus was like the portion of Seth. So Geb gave to Horus his inheritance, for he is the son of his firstborn son.<sup>3</sup>

(13a) Geb's words to the Nine Gods: "I have appointed (13b)

Horus, the firstborn." (14a) Geb's words to the Nine Gods: "Him alone, (14b) Horus, the inheritance." (15a) Geb's words to the Nine Gods: "To this heir, (15b) Horus, my inheritance." (16a) Geb's words to the Nine Gods: "To the son of my son, (16b) Horus, the Jackal of Upper Egypt ----. (17a) Geb's words to the Nine Gods: "The firstborn, (17b) Horus, the Opener-of-the-ways."<sup>4</sup> (18a) Geb's words to the Nine Gods: "The son who was born ---- (18b) Horus, on the Birthday of the Opener-of-the-ways."

(13c) Then Horus stood over the land. He is the uniter of this land, proclaimed in the great name: Ta-tenen, South-of-his-Wall, Lord of Eternity. Then sprouted (14c) the two Great Magicians upon his head.<sup>5</sup> He is Horus who arose as king of Upper and Lower Egypt, who united the Two Lands in the Nome of the Wall, the place in which the Two Lands were united.<sup>6</sup>

(15c) Reed and papyrus were placed on the double door of the House of Ptah. That means Horus and Seth, pacified and united. They fraternized so as to cease quarreling (16c) in whatever place they might be, being united in the House of Ptah, the "Balance of the Two Lands" in which Upper and Lower Egypt had been weighed.

This is the land (17c) ----- the burial of Osiris in the House of Sokar. (18c) ----- Isis and Nephthys without delay, (19) for Osiris had drowned in his water. Isis [and Nephthys] looked out, [beheld him and attended to him]. (20a) Horus speaks to Isis and Nephthys: "Hurry, grasp him ----." (21a) Isis and Nephthys speak to Osiris: "We come, we take you ----."

(20b) ----- [They heeded in time] and brought him to (21b) [land. He entered the hidden portals in the glory of the lords of eternity]. ----- [Thus Osiris came into] the earth (22) at the royal fortress, to the north of [the land to which he had come. And his son Horus arose as king of Upper Egypt, arose as king of Lower Egypt, in the embrace of his father Osiris and of the gods in front of him and behind him.]<sup>7</sup>

(23) There was built the royal fortress [at the command of Geb ----]. (24a) Geb speaks to Thoth: ----- (25a-30a) Geb speaks to Thoth: ----- (31a-35a) ----- (25b-26b) [Geb] speaks to Isis: ----- (27b) Isis causes [Horus and Seth] to come. (28b) Isis speaks to Horus and Seth: "[Come] -----." (29b) Isis speaks to Horus and Seth: "Make peace -----." (30b) Isis speaks to Horus and Seth: "Life will be pleasant for you when -----." (31b) Isis

speaks to Horus and Seth: "It is he who dries your tears -----." (32b-35b) ----- (36-47) -----.

### Ptah the Supreme God

- (48) The gods who came into being in Ptah:  
 (49a) Ptah-on-the-great-throne -----.  
 (50a) Ptah-Nun, the father who [made] Atum.  
 (51a) Ptah-Naunet, the mother who bore Atum.  
 (52a) Ptah-the-Great is heart and tongue of the Nine [Gods].  
 (49b) [Ptah] ----- who bore the gods.  
 (50b) [Ptah] ----- who bore the gods.  
 (51b) [Ptah] -----.  
 (52b) [Ptah] ----- Nefertem at the nose of Re every day.

(53) There took shape in the heart, there took shape on the tongue the form of Atum. For the very great one is Ptah, who gave [life] to all the gods and their *kas* through this heart and through this tongue, (54) in which Horus had taken shape as Ptah, in which Thoth had taken shape as Ptah.

[*Alternative rendering:* (53) Heart took shape in the form of Atum, Tongue took shape in the form of Atum. It is Ptah, the very great, who has given [life] to all the gods and their *kas* through this heart and through this tongue, (54) from which Horus had come forth as Ptah, from which Thoth had come forth as Ptah.]<sup>8</sup>

Thus heart and tongue rule over all the limbs in accordance with the teaching that it (the heart, *or:* he, Ptah) is in every body and it (the tongue, *or:* he, Ptah) is in every mouth of all gods, all men, all cattle, all creeping things, whatever lives, thinking whatever it (*or:* he) wishes and commanding whatever it (*or:* he) wishes.<sup>9</sup>

(55) His (Ptah's) Ennead is before him as teeth and lips. They are the semen and the hands of Atum. For the Ennead of Atum came into being through his semen and his fingers. But the Ennead is the teeth and lips in this mouth which pronounced the name of every thing, from which Shu and Tefnut came forth, (56) and which gave birth to the Ennead.<sup>10</sup>

Sight, hearing, breathing—they report to the heart, and it makes every understanding come forth. As to the tongue, it repeats what the heart has devised.<sup>11</sup> Thus all the gods were born and his Ennead was completed. For every word of the god came about through what the heart devised and the tongue commanded.

(57) Thus all the faculties were made and all the qualities deter-

mined, they that make all foods and all provisions, through this word. <Thus justice is done> to him who does what is loved, <and punishment><sup>12</sup> to him who does what is hated. Thus life is given to the peaceful, death is given to the criminal. Thus all labor, all crafts are made, the action of the hands, the motion of the legs, (58) the movements of all the limbs, according to this command which is devised by the heart and comes forth on the tongue and creates the performance of every thing.<sup>13</sup>

Thus it is said of Ptah: "He who made all and created the gods." And he is Ta-tenen, who gave birth to the gods, and from whom every thing came forth, foods, provisions, divine offerings, all good things. Thus it is recognized and understood that he is the mightiest of the gods. Thus Ptah was satisfied after he had made all things and all divine words.

(59) He gave birth to the gods,  
 He made the towns,  
 He established the nomes,  
 He placed the gods in their (60) shrines,  
 He settled their offerings,  
 He established their shrines,  
 He made their bodies according to their wishes.  
 Thus the gods entered into their bodies,  
 Of every wood, every stone, every clay,  
 Every thing that grows upon him  
 (61) In which they came to be.

Thus were gathered to him all the gods and their *kas*,  
 Content, united with the Lord of the Two Lands.<sup>14</sup>

#### Memphis the Royal City

The Great Throne that gives joy to the heart of the gods in the House of Ptah is the granary of Ta-tenen, the mistress of all life, through which the sustenance of the Two Lands is provided, (62) owing to the fact that Osiris was drowned in his water. Isis and Nephthys looked out, beheld him, and attended to him. Horus quickly commanded Isis and Nephthys to grasp Osiris and prevent his drowning (i.e., his submerging). (63) They heeded in time and brought him to land. He entered the hidden portals in the glory of the lords of eternity, in the steps of him who rises in the horizon, on the ways of Re at the Great Throne. (64) He entered the palace and

Thus Osiris came into the earth at the Royal Fortress, to the north of the land to which he had come. His son Horus arose as king of Upper Egypt, arose as king of Lower Egypt, in the embrace of his father Osiris and of the gods in front of him and behind him.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

1. The titulary of the king is repeated with Sokar substituted for Ptah.
2. This much damaged section appears to be a summary of Ptah's claims to supremacy: He is identical with the old Memphite earth-god Ta-tenen. He is king of Egypt because Horus is a manifestation of Ptah. And he is the self-begotten creator of all the other gods.
3. This section narrates, and enacts, the division of the rule of Egypt between Horus and Seth, which had been decided by the earth-god Geb. The division is viewed as a temporary settlement, subsequently replaced by the union of the Two Lands under the sole rule of Horus who now appears as son of Osiris and grandson of Geb. By viewing the origin of kingship as a two-stage process, the narration blends two distinct traditions: that of Horus and Seth as the original rulers of Lower and Upper Egypt, respectively; and that of Osiris, son of Geb and sole ruler of Egypt until slain by Seth, after which event the kingship over all of Egypt was awarded by the gods to his son Horus.
4. The jackal-god Wep-waut ("Opener-of-the-ways") was often identified with Horus.
5. The crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt.
6. This section stresses the identity of Horus and Ptah, an equation essential to the claim of Ptah's kingship. The "Wall" is the "White Wall," i.e., Memphis.
7. The body of the slain Osiris had floated downstream and was brought ashore at Memphis, thereby making Memphis the most sacred spot, and rightly cast as the place in which the Two Lands were joined. The restorations of the lacunae are made from lines 62-64, where this narrative is repeated.
8. The first rendering of this difficult passage is based on Sethe's translation; the alternative rendering reflects that of Junker. The difficulty centers on the two parallel phrases: *hpr m hsty m tlt Tm*, *hpr m ns m tlt Tm*, in which the use of *hpr m* is ambiguous. Sethe's interpretation seems to me less strained. In any case, the passage expounds the central doctrine of this Memphite theology: Ptah, the god of Memphis, outranks Atum of Heliopolis and all the other gods.
9. Junker's rendering of this passage, to which I have given preference, differs from that of other scholars in that he took *wntj* to refer to heart and tongue respectively rather than to Ptah. In his view, this section embodies a "Naturlehre" which was not originally a part of the theology of Ptah.
10. Though not phrased as an outright repudiation of the Heliopolitan doctrine, according to which Atum created the gods through onanism, the Memphite theology attempts to supersede it by teaching that Ptah created the gods through commanding speech.
11. These two sentences have perhaps been misplaced by the copying scribe, for they seem to belong more naturally at the end of line 54.

12. Some such restoration is usually inserted here, for it looks as if the scribe omitted something.

13. The correct reading of *srri sm n ht nb* was given by Grdseloff in *Arch. Or.*, 20 (1952), 484-486.

14. To Sethe and Junker this section appeared incongruous because, with the account of creation just completed, the text reverts to certain details of creation. It seems to me that the incongruity disappears if one realizes that this section is not a continuation of the narrative but a celebration of creation by means of a poetic hymn. The poem of praise, by which the narration of an action is summed up, makes an early appearance in the *Autobiography of Weni*, and becomes a major feature of Egyptian literature.

15. Since "in front" and "behind" also mean "before" and "after," the sentence has been variously rendered. Reasons for preferring the temporal rendering were adduced by R. Anthes in *ZAS*, 86 (1961), 83.