

*Monotheism and Kingship
in Ancient Memphis:
Perspectives*

In Religious Studies
A Study in Egyptian Mythology

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The subject of this article is a cosmogonic myth written by priests in the ancient city of **Memphis**, dating from the third or fourth millenium B. C. during the Old Kingdom period if not earlier in Egyptian history. It is of special theological interest for two reasons. First, it represents an abstract philosophical framework for understanding the divine which seems unique to early mythological thought; it incorporates a tendency towards monotheism which pre-dates Akhnaten and Moses by more than a millenium. Second, these monotheistic tendencies which locate all the powers of the universe in a single source, the god Ptah, serve well to authorize and to organize a political state under the sole rule of the Egyptian Pharaoh who represents the one divine power in the social sphere.

yun

Ptah, "The Mighty Great One"

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The text of the Memphite theology is a cosmology: it describes the order of creation and makes the land of Egypt, as organized by King Menes, an indissoluble part of that order. The hitherto local god, Ptah, is proclaimed the creator of all. From earliest

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Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods, A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 24.

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begins one of the most profound passages in Egyptian literature. There are a series of eight equations in which the novel thought of the ultimate oneness of the divine is superimposed upon the prevailing polytheistic doctrine. The gods are declared to be **manifestations of Ptah.**

times Ptah had been known as the patron of the craftsmen to whom he furnished plans and designs. The Memphite theology brought him from the status of being the architect of the craftsman's works to that of being the architect of the world. The prevailing cosmologies of the period were not superseded and rejected by the Memphite doctrine, rather they were superseded and assimilated. The earlier cosmology of Heliopolis, for example, is incorporated into the Memphite creation story but it is transformed and subordinated to a higher claim.

The land of Egypt is proclaimed to have its being in the creator-god, Ptah-Ta Tjenen, which means Ptah "the Risen Land" or Ptah "the Land Arising."²

(48) The gods who came into being as Ptah; 4

(or). . . who have their form in Ptah; 5 Ptah who sits upon the Great Throne. . . ; Ptah-Nun, the father who begot Atum; Ptah-Naunet, the mother who bore Atum; Ptah the Great, that is, the heart and tongue of the Ennead; Ptah who gave birth to the gods; **Ptah-Hefertem at the nose of Re every day.**

Thus this land was united, proclaimed with the great name: Tjenen . . . Ta

Ptah is he who sits "upon the Great Throne," identifying him with the real God, who, like the Great Mother, was a deity early worshipped in Egypt, perhaps as a fertility god.

Ptah is also equated with Nun and Naunet, the female counter part of Nun. Conjoined with birth imagery, this makes Ptah antecedent to the Creator-sun-god, Atum, of Heliopolis. Ptah, then, is logically the creator of all the gods, a claim which is made specifically later in the text.

The term "land" has to be understood with some appreciation for the polysemy common to Egyptian writing. It means the country, **Egypt**, and it also means the

fertile soil upon which all life depends and which is identified with Ptah himself. The "risen land" attribute of Ptah also carries a double meaning. It alludes first to the universal Egyptian belief in the emergence of the **primaeval** hill out of the chaotic waters of Nun. Ptah himself is **identified with** this hill, the fruitful earth, **the starting point** of all that is, including life itself. He obviously supplants **Atum in this role with regard** to the theology of Heliopolis. But at **the same time**, the epithet alludes to the land which Menes had **reclaimed from the marsh waters** to build Memphis and the **temple** of Ptah. Thus, this lordly declaration tacitly sets aside the claim of Heliopolis to be built on the primaeval hill, and **proclaims Memphis to be the contemporary navel of the earth** as well as back in the "first time."

Thus it was discovered and understood that his strength is greater than that of all the other gods. And **so** Ptah was satisfied, after he had made everything, as well as all in the divine order.'

But more than **just the potter who molds the clay into useful vessels, more than the creator of independent objects**, Ptah himself is manifest in his creations. "The Great One" is a title taken from **Atum, the creator of the Ennead, the nine**

The 48th column of hieroglyphics on the Shabake Stone

4John A. Wilson's translation, A. N. E. T., p. 5a.

The rendering of S. G. F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), p. 31.

2This is the rendering of Kurt Sethe, *Urgeschichte und Altteste Religion der Ägypter* (Leipzig: Deutsche Morganlandische Gesellschaft, 1930), p. 183, 222.

The logical assertion of Ptah's bisexuality is noted by Sethe, *Urgeschichte*, p. 182.

Quoted in James Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 5b. Hereinafter abbreviated A. N. E. T.

A. N. E. T., p. 5b. Ptah's being "satisfied" is reminiscent of Yahweh's satisfaction with his creative work, Genesis 1:1-2:4a.

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PERSPECTIVES IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES diety Egyptian pantheon. Ptah is the heart and tongue of the Ennead and Atum is but an emanation of Ptah. Following the eight-equation formula, beginning with column 53, the theory is then stated once more in the form of a narrative of creation. The author, with the basic conviction that the basis of existence is spiritual, struggles within the

framework of a language and mentality tending toward the concrete to express truly abstract notions.

Henri Frankfort sees this as the true Egyptian equivalent of the logos doctrine in the Gospel according to John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." "For such creative speech," says Frankfort, "turns each divine word into the *causa materialis*, *causa formalis*, and *causa movens* of an element of creation all in one."¹⁰

There came into being as the heart and there came into being as the tongue something in the form of Atum. The Mighty Great One is Ptah, who transmitted life to all gods, as well as to their Ka's through his tongue. by which Thoth became Ptah..

His Ennead is before him in the form of teeth and lips. That is the equivalent of the semen and the hands of Atum. Whereas the Ennead of Atum came into being by his semen and his fingers, the Ennead of Ptah, however, is the teeth and lips in his mouth, which pronounced the name of everything, from which Shu and Tefnut came forth and which was the fashioner of the Ennead.⁸

The text claims that Ptah created the other gods and the universe by this exercise of the powers of thought and command. Thought and speech were ordinarily considered attributes of the sun-god. But here these powers are identified, as manifestations or emanations of Ptah, with two other gods of the Egyptian pantheon, namely Horus and Thoth. Breasted draws a mechanical equation:¹¹

heart = Horus Ptah =

tongue = Thoth It appears difficult to reconcile the assertion that, on the one hand, Atum and his Ennead "form the teeth and lips" of Ptah and, on the other hand, that Horus and Thoth are the creative organs. In view of the antiquity of the text and the uncertainty of our knowledge of the grammar, Brandon says it would be unwise to press such questions or try to fabricate a logically coherent exposition of the *Memphite claim*.¹² What seems to be certain is that Ptah's act of creation by pronouncing the name of each thing attests to his superiority to Atum and enlists the other gods in Ptah's activity.

The heart and the tongue of Ptah are the organs of creation. These terms are concrete enough but they point to profound implications behind them. From numerous other Egyptian texts we know that "heart" stands for "intellect," "mind," and even "spirit." Everything first exists in the mind as thought, of which the heart is the seat. The "tongue" is realizing thought; it is the expression of the heart; it translates concepts into actuality by means of "Hu," that is, authoritative utterance.

Out of nothing, there came into existence the idea of an Atum, of a creator-god. This idea "came into being as the heart" of the divine world, heart or mind being

Ptah himself. Then that idea "came into being as the tongue" of the divine world, tongue or speech being Ptah himself.

Through his initial acts of creation, calling one god after the other into being, Ptah evolved the visible and invisible universe with all its living creatures, including justice and the arts. At the same time, this account imparts the character of an established order, valid for all time, to the phenomenal world. The conceptual intent and creative word express an implicit order or purposive Indeed, all the divine order really came into being through what the heart thought and the tongue commanded . . . it is the tongue which announces what the heart thinks.

10Frankfort, *Kingship and The Gods*, p. 29.

81bid., p. 5a.

11James Henry Breasted, "The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, vol. XXXIX, . 50.

91bid.

12 Brandon, *Creation Legends*, p. 36.

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PERSPECTIVES IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES context in which one can comprehend all the created elements.

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. . . he had made everything, as well as all the divine order. He had formed the (local) gods, he had made the cities, he had founded names, he had put the gods in their shrines, he had made their bodies like that with which their hearts were satisfied. So the gods entered into their bodies of every kind of stone, of every kind of clay, or any thing which might grow on him, in which they had taken form. So all the gods, as well as their Ka's, gathered themselves to him, content and associated with the Lord of the two Lands. 13

creator appears as a transcendent, not merely as an immanent, power.

Frankfort maintains that it is significant that the Memphite Theology did not find nationwide adherence as did that which centered upon Amen-Re, immanent in the sun. The notion of Ptah as transcendent required a degree of abstraction which the Egyptians were not prepared to acquire.

The Theological Foundation for Kingship

Even the diversified cults of all Egypt receive a sanction and prior unity due to the initiative of the god and the united country. But the creative principle does not stop with the gods. Referring to the text, John Wilson writes,

In the Egyptian mind there was no split **between cosmology and politics, between the natural order and the social order.**

Then it happened that the heart and tongue gained control over every other member of the body, by teaching that he (Ptah) is throughout **everybody** in the form of the heart) and

throughout every mouth (in the form of the tongue), of all the gods, of all men, of all animals, **of all creeping things, and of whatever lives**, by Ptah's thinking and **commanding** everything he wishes . . . Thus justice was given to him who does what is liked, and injustice to him who does what is disliked. Thus life was given to him who has peace and death was given to him who has sin. Thus were made all the work and all the crafts, the action **of arms, the movement of the legs**, and the activity of **every member, in conformance** with this command which the heart thought, and **which gives value to everything**. 14

The appearance of the first Pharaoh about 3100 B. C. marks the beginning of history and a clear break with pre-historic times for the Egyptians. The rise of the First Dynasty was accompanied by the momentous introduction of writing, technological advances with a large scale use of metal tools, new modes of expression of monumental art-in short, by the thoroughgoing change from a peasant agricultural society to the highest civilization which the world had yet come to know. Menes' political unification, probably the result of three generation's work before him, represented the centralization of an amorphous conglomerate of small communities and some larger political units with tenuous loyalties to either Upper or Lower Egypt. The Egyptians were conscious of this sharp transition, but they did not see it as a new and alien system superimposed upon them. Rather, it was the concrete establishment of a predetermined divine order. Tradition named as the Pharaoh's predecessors semi-divine spirits who had succeeded rule by the gods. The gods, in turn, had been preceded by the creator, Re. Monarchical rule, then, finally meant that the creator had assumed kingship.

The universe is not limited to a single miracle of thought conception and articulation, but the same principles of creation which were valid in the primeval "first time," *in illo tempore*, are still valid and operative in the present. Wherever there is thought and command, there Ptah still creates. Thus the ontological and teleological make-up of the universe finds its ground in the single omnipresent creator, Ptah-Ta-Tjehen.

This very early Egyptian doctrine clearly recognizes divinity beyond, not merely within, the natural phenomena. Ptah as

13A. *N. E. T.*, p. 5.

In looking for the possible historical inspiration or structural model upon which the memphite theme of creation is based the transformation into concrete reality by the spoken word of that which Ptah had conceived in his mind-two possible

141*bid.*, and John A. Wilson, "The Nature of the Universe" in Frankfort, et. al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, (Baltimore: Penguin 1971), p. 67 f.

15 Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: and Row, 1948, 1961).

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PERSPECTIVES IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES sources present themselves. The first is magic, an important factor in all departments of Egyptian life. To know the right magical formula appropriate to each contingency and to duly pronounce it would bring one safely through all perils and achieve a blessed destiny. But there is a second possible source or model, and that is the royal decree. The decree of the divine Pharaoh would be charged with authority and power little different from that of magic. However, the direction of influence in this case could be the reverse as well, that is, it could have been the theology of Ptah at the founding of the first Pharaonic Dynasty that established the authority and the power of the royal decree. Regardless of the direction of influence, there is an obvious structural relativity between uttering the proper magical formula, proclaiming a royal decree and the Memphite Theology.

Kingdom, but not really the kingdom of the living. On the one hand, his dominion is the gloomy Nether World or kingdom of the dead beneath the earth, from which he sends forth the crops to feed and sustain his people; and, on the other hand, he is to ride the daily circuit through the sky from horizon to horizon with Re.

The Memphite text picks up the story and deals with the end of the conflict between Horus and Seth which precedes the establishment of order in the universe and the state. Geb, the earth-god, acts as arbiter and separates them by dividing the country between the two, giving Upper Egypt in the South to Seth and Lower Egypt in the North to Horus.

The Ennead gathered themselves to him, and he judged Horus and Seth. He prevented them from quarreling further, and he made Seth the King of Upper Egypt in the land of Upper Egypt, at the place where he was born, Su. Then Geb made Horus the King of Lower Egypt in the Land of Lower Egypt, at the place where his father was drowned, Pershet-Tawi. Thus Horus stood in one place, and Seth stood in another place, and they were reconciled about the Two Lands. 16

But Geb regrets this decision and rescinds it by giving the whole land to Horus. The two crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt were now said to grow from the head of Horus.

Horus appeared as Menes, the first king of Egypt and founder of the first dynasty, uniting the lands in his rule.

The development of the Memphite doctrine with regard to the king presumes the story commonly known, but with varying **differences** in the details, of the murder of Osiris. The narrative itself is old, but **its earliest written versions** appear in the Pyramid Texts. Osiris, later the god of vegetation and resurrection **from the dead**, the son of Geb and Nut, ruled the happy people of Egypt with the benevolence and splendor of his father, Re. **But he had an arch enemy**, his brother Seth, who **feared and hated the good king. His assailants prevailed against Osiris and killed him**, perhaps by drowning him in the Nile. Isis, his unhappy **wife and also his sister, wandered in great** affliction searching through the entire land until she found the body of her murdered husband. For the Egyptians this was the noblest embodiment of wifely fidelity and the ideal pattern for every family. **When Osiris was finally found, the body was embalmed to prevent** its perishing and a **sycamore tree grew up** from his tomb, a visible **symbol** of the imperishable life of Osiris. His son, Horus, with the filial piety admired by the Egyptians, rose up to overthrow **his father's enemy and take vengeance on Seth. The battle between Horus and Seth, which Horus won, was waged so fiercely that the young god lost his eye at the hands of his father's enemy.**

Although the wound was healed when spit upon by Thoth, the god of wisdom, the Horus-eye which he sacrificed for his father became the symbol of every sacrifice or gift, especially if offered for the dead. The gods responded to this act of filial devotion by opening the tomb and raising the dead Osiris. The risen and victorious Osiris received the

But then it became ill in the heart of Geb that the portion of Horus was only equal to the portion of Seth. So Geb gave his entire inheritance to Horus, that is, the son of his son, his first born... Thus Horus stood over the entire land. Thus this land was united, proclaimed with the great name: "Ta-Tjenen, South-of-His-Wall, The Lord of Eternity." The two great Sorceresses (crowns) grew upon his head. So it was that Horus appeared as King of Upper and Lower Egypt, who united the two Lands in Wall Nome, 17 in the place in which the two Lands are united... they associated and their quarreling ceased in the place which they reached, being joined in the house of Ptah. 18

16A. *N. E. T.*, p. 4b-5a.

1 The province (Nome) of Memphis was called "White Wall."

18A. *N. E. T.*, p. 46-5a.

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PERSPECTIVES IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES According to this, Horus takes control of the Kingdom not as a conqueror but as the rightful heir. At the division of the land Seth goes back to the place where he was born but Horus goes to the place where his father drowned. Again, when Geb changes his mind and assigns the whole country to Horus, he justifies the act by proclaiming Horus as the eldest son of his predecessor. At the time when Menes had just conquered Egypt, such a theological statement provided a solid undergirding for his kingship.¹⁹

power, both natural and social. The king, Horus, is responsible for the bountiful harvest as well as the maintenance of a just social order.

and assuming

Menes

After establishing Horus as the rightful heir to the kingship, the Memphite document turns to his predecessor, Osiris, and explains the relation of this god to Ptah and the new capitol, Memphis. But this portion of the stone

is so badly mutilated that we cannot determine the nature of this relationship. Later in the document the close connection between

Osiris, Memphis and the land Egypt is elaborated

The dual monarchy, the kingship over Upper and Lower Egypt, united not only the body politic but also stabilized the universe under the single rule of the incarnate Horus. The Egyptian saw the world in dualistic terms, in a series of pairs of contrasts balanced in unchanging equilibrium.

Totality is comprised of opposites. The universe as a whole was seen as

"heaven" and "earth." Within the concept of "earth" there was "north" and

"south," "Upper" and "Lower" Egypt, the two banks of the Nile, etc. Horus and

Seth are the antagonists per se, the mythological symbols for all conflict.

Strife is an element in the universe which cannot be ignored; Seth is

perennially subdued by Horus but never destroyed. To the King is often

ascribed the epithet, "The Two Lords," identifying him with both Horus

and Seth, and through his embodiment of these opposites he brings about

an equilibrium. To our view such conceptions belong to cosmology, not

to history or politics. But when the divine king is given the title "Lord of the two Lands," what is emphasized is not the divided origin but the

universality of his

The Great Seat, which rejoices the heart of the gods, which is in the House of Ptah, the mistress of all life, is the Granary of the God, through which the sustenance of the two

Lands is prepared, because of the fact that Osiris is drowned in his water, while Isis and Nephtys watched. They saw him and they were distressed at him. Horus commands Isis and Nephtys repeatedly that they lay hold on Osiris and prevent his drowning. They turned their heads in time. So they brought him to land. He entered the mysterious portals in the glory of the lords of eternity, in the steps of him who shines forth on the horizon, on the ways of Re in the Great Seat. He joined with the court and associated with the gods of Ta-Tjenen Ptah, the lord of years. Thus Osiris came to be in the land in the "House of the Sovereign" on the north side of this land, which he had reached. His son Horus appeared as King of Upper Egypt and appeared as King of Lower Egypt, in the embrace of his father Osiris, together with the gods who were in front of him and who were behind him.²⁰

¹⁹ Breasted maintains that Horus, symbolized by the falcon flying high in the bright sky, originally belonged to a group of solar gods, and in the Memphite Theology he and his feud with Seth were drawn into the Osirin situation. The Memphite doctrine, then, is a synthesis of solar and Osirin theologies with the dominance given to the solar line of thought. *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), pp. 41-48. Frankfort would not agree, however, that any real synthesis of the differing traditions took place. First, only selected elements of the solar mythology were admitted to the Memphite explication, and, second, they were used to articulate the theological primacy of the earth's power in Ptah. Rather than a synthesis, Frankfort says, ". . . it shows very clearly that the multiplicity of approaches and of answers did not destroy that elusive entity, Egyptian religion." *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, pp. 20-21.

Memphis is said to have special significance in the "sustenance" of Egypt, because of the presence in its soil of the interred body of Osiris. Osiris had reached the city, probably from Abydos upstream, via the Nile in which he has drowned and in which Isis and her sister Nephtys found his body. In the earliest texts as well as in those of all succeeding periods Osiris is viewed as reappearing in the grain, for the seemingly dead seeds sprout and grow because of the vital forces in the earth. He is also a chthonic force manifest in the annual flood of the Nile which gives new vitality to the parched land. This explains the extraordinary fertility of the region of Memphis where Osiris is buried, the center from which the vitalizing forces radiated. Thus Memphis is said to be "the granary . . . through which the sustenance

20A. *N. E. T.*, pp. 5b-6a.

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of the two lands is prepared."

or India?

Just as in the myth, the fate of Osiris after burial is that of a twofold destiny: he joins the sun-god Re on his daily voyage across the sky, but he also joins the court of "Ta-Tjenen Ptah" within the earth. At first, these would appear to be two mutually **exclusive destinies, but we must remember** that the Egyptian hoped for an eternal life in unison with the great cyclic movements of nature. The daily circuit of the heavenly bodies **passes from horizon to horizon**, through the Netherworld, and back **again**, a concept to which the thoughts that **Osiris became earth and was reborn again in heaven can be subordinated.**

In the figure of Ptah the power of the earth was envisaged as supreme. Following the Ennead, Atum, Shu, and Tefnut, **Geb and Nut are the great gods of the cosmos, their names** describing primordial elements involved in the creation. The four children of Geb and Nut establish a bridge between **nature and man, and the only manner** in which the Egyptians could **conceive such a** bond was through kingship. Thus the genealogy is pertinent-Geb, Osiris, Horus-a theological formula acknowledging the power in the earth and its relation to the Pharaoh.

Such stories in the Memphite treatise as Geb assigning the unified land to Horus and the drowning of Osiris square with the typical structure of myth: a sacred and primeval story of supernatural ancestors or gods, the acts of whom have created the institutions or patterns of behavior constituting the paradigms of all significant human acts henceforth. But there is also in the **Memphite theology an attempt to go beyond the framework of myth and to posit a primal source** from which all that is real **springs, in the words of Eliade,** "to identify the womb of Being."²² Cosmomic myths typically **assume the existence of matter and a plethora of deities, so that creation is really a transformation of what is already there; creation is simply ordering things.** But there are moments in the Memphite theology that ask about the absolute creation; the logical shift **from non being to being.** A single deity is responsible for this originative **move.**

Conclusion

The Memphite document is of significant theological interest **because of the demythicizing pressures of its nascent philosophical structure and its implicit monotheism.** It seems to be a **search for the essential nature of things, the esse of reality, and in so searching it presses beyond myth into philosophical ontology.**

It was the philosophical speculation of Socrates and Plato which endeavored to

identify and understand the absolute beginning, the source, the first principle, the logical *arche*, implied in their cosmogonic myths. The question of the essence of being became translated from cosmogonic narrative into philosophical ontology. Perhaps the Memphite priest was struggling with the same problem. **From what is said, the primal essence can be characterized as an all-pervasive mind or intelligence behind the universe. It may be summed up this way: all things exist ideally in the mind; speech constitutes the channel, as it were, by which these ideas pass from thought into the world of objective reality.** Hence, the thought impulses of all living creatures are due to the same mind that created them, and all the products of their thought are primarily due to the all **pervasive mind** and only secondarily to the **living creatures concerned. To interweave these philosophical conceptions with the existent Egyptian myths and under the restrictions of a language of such concrete imagery was undoubtedly a difficult task. But within the language of myth in the Memphite Theology one must recognize the document's speculative intention, if**

The search for the "essential" nature of things in their ontological structure rather than in a mythical pre-history marks the breakthrough for Pre-Socratic Greece and Upanishadic India 21 Is something similar going on here in ancient Memphis two thousand plus years prior to its appearance in Greece

21Cf. Mircea Eliade. *Myth and Reality*, (New York: Row, 1963), pp. 111-13.

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22/bid.

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PERSPECTIVES IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES not its performance.

In the unification of the divine lands of Egypt under the rule of the one king, Menes, the people experienced a shift from more local control to a single concentration of power. All authorities for political rule could now be traced to one final authority, the Pharaoh. Perhaps something similar took place in religion. In the earliest times labeled divinities were local, known only to the dwellers of a given locality. With the advancement toward political unification and increased social communication a great deal of religious synthesization took place. The complex nature of the Ennead of Heliopolis and the multifarious responsibilities of each god in other Egyptian myths testify to this process of synthesization. But the Memphite theology goes beyond a mere evolutionary synthesis, it is a rationalized system whereby the clear hegemony of the

Pharaoh's patron divinity is asserted. Ptah is claimed to be the ground of all being, politics included.