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THE IDEA OF THE UNKNOWN GOD IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Historians tend to specialize in a particular period, an ancient language, or a geographical area. As a result, they often seek answers to their questions within the boundaries of their expertise, despite the rather obvious fact that ideas move across time and space. The concept of the Unknown God can be found in many religions of the past and present. However, experts in Western culture tend to trace its origins to Christian mysticism, Neoplatonism, or Gnosticism. In contrast, Indologists and Egyptologists are well aware that this idea has much deeper roots and is present in Asian and African cultures from more ancient times. Drawing on the valuable work of traditional historians, the historian of ideas takes on the role of a 'dot-connector.' In this vein, this article reconstructs the history of Egyptologists' rediscovery of the Unknown God in ancient Egyptian religion and examines the debate among experts on whether Egyptian religion was monotheistic, henotheistic, or polytheistic. The study also provides some clues about how the concept of the Unknown God reached us through the Greeks and the Hebrews. Thus, this work is not a contribution to Egyptology but rather a contribution to the history of Egyptology within the broader framework of the history of ideas.

KEYWORDS: Monotheism, History of Egyptology, Unknown God, Syncretism

> In all polytheism is latent a monotheism
> which can be activated at any time.
> Eric Voegelin (1956, 8)

1. CLUES FROM AN OLD BOOK

The idea of the Unknown God can be found in some of the oldest documents written by humans, such as *The Book of Going Forth by Day*, a famous ancient

Egyptian funerary text more commonly known today as *The Book of the Dead*, and the *Rig Veda*, the oldest of the sacred books of Hinduism. Later, this idea appears in Ancient Greece and, further downstream, in Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, both heretical and orthodox forms of Christianity, late Judaism, and Islam. As the concept of the Unknown God recurs in ancient religious documents from different civilizations and modern theological writings, so too do attempts to write a history of this concept. Two notable examples come to mind: *The Unknown God, or Inspiration Among Pre-Christian Races*, published in 1890 by philanthropist Charles Loring Brace, and *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede*, published in 1913 by German philologist Eduard Norden. Since the implications of the latter work, from the perspective of the history of ideas, have already been discussed in this journal (Campa 2023), it is worth examining the former.

Brace's book is interesting because it represents an attempt to trace the history of the idea of God from an impartial point of view. While we cannot claim the book's perspective is completely free of prejudices, it is undoubtedly more impartial than other similar works published in the past. Contrary to the prevailing trend of earlier scholarship, Brace does not discuss pre-Christian religions solely to criticize them or demonstrate their inferiority to Christianity. The narrative that has been repeated ad nauseam in the West for two millennia claims that, before the advent of Jesus Christ, gullible and morally corrupt pagans believed in many 'false and lying gods.' After the Revelation, and following a period of futile resistance, the peoples of the world would ultimately accept the oneness of God and embrace Christianity, the only true religion.

Brace, a man of faith, does not present an entirely scientific analysis. His book actively promotes the cult of the Unknown God as a central tenet of Christianity and other world religions. Moreover, despite his professed epistemic neutrality, he continues to treat idolatry and polytheism as corrupted forms of religiosity. However, he rejects the aforementioned simplistic and apologetic reconstruction of religious history. In his view, "the only conception of the moral action of the Divine Being on the human soul which is a priori defensible and philosophical is of a continued and impartial influence, limited to no time, age, or race" (Brace 1890, 1).

In other words, if God exists, and if They[1] are truly the God of the Universe rather than the god of a single people living on a small portion of a tiny

[1] There is an ongoing debate about the appropriate pronouns for God. In English, the pronouns 'they/them' can be, and have long been, used both as plural and singular. Since God's being transcends human notions of gender, 'they/them' seems particularly appropriate for an incorporeal – and thus nonbinary – entity. However, because God is depicted as a male figure in the sacred scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – similar to Zeus/Jupiter, the king of the gods in Greco-Roman paganism – 'he/him' has traditionally been used as the default pronouns

planet during a limited period of time – whether the Jews or the Christianized Gentiles – then They must have revealed Themselves to Their creatures at all times and in all places, inspiring the words and deeds of sages and saints. The idea of an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, and transcendent God must, therefore, also be present in pre-Christian and even prehistoric cultures. Given that representations of the divine differ across cultures, the logical conclusion is that God is, in essence, mysterious and incomprehensible to the human mind. The concept of the Unknown God, which Brace posits as a legacy shared by both the caveman and the contemporary philosopher, is defined as follows:

> The conceptions of the 'fossil savage' and of the modern thinker would not be the same, but they would have great elements in common. Both would bow in unspeakable awe before the vast and incomprehensible Mystery behind the things seen; both would depend utterly on this Infinite and Unknown Power, whether manifested in one being or many beings; both would bend their wills to the eternal Will, or wills; and both would seek to guide their lives by what had been revealed to them of the qualities and purposes of the tremendous Being, or beings, unseen yet ever felt. (Brace 1890, 2)

The central thesis of Brace's book is that, quite often, an original and profound monotheism is concealed within a seemingly polytheistic cult. This is particularly evident in certain phases of the ancient Egyptian, Akkadian, Greek, Roman, and Hindu religions. These religions speak of a single God, often referred to as 'the One,' while simultaneously paying homage to a multitude of gods. Numerous documents and inscriptions – which Brace carefully cites – reveal that the many gods or powers of the universe are frequently understood as different manifestations of the one true God, who is, in essence, ineffable and unknowable. Thus, philosophically-minded ancient polytheists were not deceived; they were fully aware of the distinction between the invisible, hidden, mysterious God, who is the soul of the universe, and Their visible manifestations. It is, instead, the non-philosophically-minded monotheist who often mistakenly elevates one of these visible manifestations to the status of

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for God. It is true that the use of 'they/them' might create ambiguity in discussions about whether a given religion is monotheistic or polytheistic. Still, as we will see, Egyptian religion is unique in conceiving of God as "one and many," making the use of these pronouns particularly fitting. More specifically, when faced with a plurality of deities who are represented as male or female, Egyptian religion emphasizes an underlying unifying principle. This principle is sometimes represented as female (Maat), sometimes as male (Amun), and sometimes as both male and female (Aten, who, during the Amarna Period, is referred to as both father and mother). For this reason, and without intending to make this a question of principle, I have chosen to use the pronouns 'they/them' for God in this work. In my view, these pronouns also align well with Christian theology, which conceives of God as both One and Triune.

the sole God and declares war on those who refuse to accept this symbolic reduction.

If Brace deserves credit for overcoming certain prejudices, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of his work. These limitations primarily stem from the fact that the book was published over one hundred thirty years ago. Since its publication, countless historical, archaeological, and philological discoveries and studies have emerged. Furthermore, facts known in his time – albeit in less detail than today – were often overlooked. The book does not mention Gnosticism or Neoplatonism, even though these two philosophical-religious currents provide a very clear and comprehensive expression of the concept of the Unknown God. Besides, the distinction between the ineffability and invisibility of God is not always clearly articulated. On the one hand, God might be hidden, invisible, unnamable, and yet knowable. On the other hand, God could be right in front of our eyes and still unknown because no one is able to recognize Them. Still, it is true that the two concepts of invisibility and ineffability are more often closely related. For many religious writers, God is hidden and therefore unknown, or – if one prefers – ineffable because They are invisible.

Many of Brace's arguments assume that demonstrating the presence of a transcendent conception of the divine ipso facto establishes the presence of the concept of the Unknown God within a culture. For instance, there is an extensive chapter on Zoroastrianism; however, upon closer inspection, very little in the *Avesta* suggests a conception of the Unknown God akin to that of the Gnostics, Neoplatonists, or Christian mystics. While Zoroastrianism does share many similarities with Christianity from both a ritualistic and theological perspective, it does not exhibit as much alignment in the mystical realm. The *Avesta* occasionally mentions the invisibility of Spenta Mainyu (the Holy Spirit), one of the six Amesha Spenta emanating from Ahura Mazda (often compared to the archangels of the Judeo-Christian tradition), as well as some Yazatas (perhaps the equivalent of Judeo-Christian angels). However, as previously mentioned, invisibility and ineffability are two different concepts. This distinction can also be applied to the characterization of God in the Old Testament. It is important to clarify that I am not altogether ruling out the possibility of the idea of the Unknown God being present in Zoroastrianism and Judaism; I am merely pointing out that this presence is less evident than in other traditions.

Brace also discusses Buddhism as a religion founded on the idea of the Unknown God. However, even in this case, a clear reflection on the concept is absent. He rightly distinguishes the Buddhist concept of divinity from that of Christianity, noting that the latter, unlike the former, postulates the personality of God. Among other things, he cites this distinction as a defect of Buddhism. However, in the mystical conception of the Unknown God, the

notion of a personal God becomes problematic. If God is a person, They are not such in the way human beings typically understand the term 'person.' This very fact allows for a rapprochement between Buddhism and Christianity, which is ultimately Brace's objective. Yet, the endeavor does not fully succeed because the concepts are employed in too vague and elusive a manner.

Another limitation of the book, at least from the perspective of the history of ideas, is that it highlights the similarities between different religions without providing clear evidence of their reciprocal influences or 'contaminations.'[2] While there are references to caravan journeys between various continents that must have transported ideas along with goods and people, what is lacking is the meticulous scholarship that traditional historians and historians of ideas have only afterward begun to undertake.

Still, we must acknowledge the valuable aspects of Brace's remarkable 19th-century research. As I mentioned earlier, one of the strengths of his work is that it begins its narrative in the second millennium BCE and focuses on extra-European civilizations in a less prejudiced manner. This is particularly noteworthy, especially considering that later works trace the origin of the concept of the Unknown God back to Jewish and Christian Gnosticism (Norden 1913), or, alternatively, to Parmenides and Plato (Dodds 1971), rather than to Ancient Egypt or India.

Brace (1890, 19) begins his intellectual journey from Egypt, noting the antiquity of *The Book of the Dead*, which he defines as the "most ancient of human documents." Notoriously, this text is a collection of spells and images associated with Egyptian funerary practices. Some might challenge Brace's choice and motivation, noting that the *Rig Veda* is equally ancient. This is a collection of 1,028 poems grouped into ten 'circles' (*mandalas*) composed in an ancient form of Sanskrit. Indeed, the origins of both documents are traced to around the mid-second millennium BCE. However, there is no consensus on the exact dating of these documents.

The reason it might be appropriate to start the journey with Egypt is that the idea of the Unknown God is contained not only in *The Book of the Dead* but also in older written documents, such as the *Pyramid Texts* and the *Coffin Texts*. The former is a collection of the oldest ancient Egyptian funerary texts, dating to the late Old Kingdom (2700–2200 BCE), while the latter is a compilation of spells written on coffins beginning in the First Intermediate Period (2181–2055 BCE). *The Book of the Dead* begins to appear in the coffins or burial chambers of the deceased from the start of the New Kingdom (circa 1550 BCE).

As we will explore in detail, Egyptian religiosity develops differently in various centers of the Nile region (e.g., Heliopolis, Hermopolis, Thebes). The

[2] I do not use this word in a pejorative sense.

role of creator and ruler of the universe is therefore attributed to different divinities that carry different names and are differently represented. The creator divinities are often associated or identified with the Sun and are recognized as having the characteristic of uniqueness (e.g., Atum, Amun-Ra, Aten). Uniqueness can be understood in two different senses: 1) there is only one God, and the other gods are nothing but visible manifestations of this God (monotheism); 2) there are many gods, but only one of them is the creator God and the king of the pantheon (henotheism). While Aten (the solar disk) is a visible and, hence, revealed god, Atum and Amun-Ra are often represented as mysterious and hidden divinities. Therefore, they are our best candidates for the role of *Deus Ignotus*. For political reasons as well, such as liberation from foreign occupations and unification of the kingdom, the different Egyptian deities assumed greater or lesser importance in different periods of Egypt's long history and underwent a process of syncretistic identification. Quite significantly, Amun came to bear such designations as Amun-Re-Atum (Tobin 2002, 19). Both Atum and Amun are very ancient divinities, whose cult is attested not only in the *Book of the Dead* but also in the *Pyramid Texts* and the *Coffin Texts* (Wilkinson 2003, 90–101).

Still, it must be made clear that this article does not aim to firmly establish a chronological primacy of Egyptian religion over Hinduism. The *Rig Veda* is also one of the oldest texts in human history (Doniger 1981). Its compilation is generally dated between 1500 BCE and 1200 BCE (Witzel 2003), but believers suggest an earlier timeframe. In the context of Hinduism, there is evidence suggesting an oral tradition that predates the creation of written texts (Flood 2018, 4). This indicates that one may also find arguments to reverse the chronological order.

A further disclaimer is needed, namely that our focus will be on the religious ideas of Ancient Egypt, but this article is not intended as a scholarly contribution to Egyptology. Instead, it should be understood as a contribution to *the history of Egyptology*, framed within the broader context of the history of ideas.

2. The early history of modern Egyptology

As this article is not primarily directed at Egyptologists, I will introduce readers to some generalities about the history of this discipline. First, it is important to note that the very concept of 'Egyptology' is a matter of debate, and consequently, the histories of this discipline vary in chronology and their protagonists (Bednarski, Dodson, and Ikram 2020, 1-7). In his history of Egyptology, Jason Thompson (2015) offers a detailed account of ancient contributions to the discipline. He points out that the ancient Egyptians themselves

began to take an interest in their history and to preserve their monuments, suggesting that the title of the first Egyptologist might rightly be awarded to Prince Khaemweset (c. 1281 BCE–1225 BCE), the fourth son of Pharaoh Ramesses II.

Thompson then discusses the studies produced by the Greeks and Romans during Antiquity, as well as those by the Arabs and Europeans during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In contrast, Toby Wilkinson (2020) only briefly mentions ancient Egyptology, focusing instead on the so-called golden age of the discipline. In any case, there is a general consensus that modern Egyptology – that is, the scholarly study of ancient Egyptian history, language, literature, religion, architecture, and art – began in earnest in the early 19th century (Navratilova et al. 2019). Its foundation is often traced back to Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt (1798–1801) or to the subsequent deciphering of the Rosetta Stone.

Napoleon brought with him a team of scholars and scientists, known as the *Commission des Sciences et des Arts*, who studied the ancient monuments, artifacts, and geography of Egypt. The findings of these French scholars were published in the monumental work *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–1829), which brought widespread attention to Egypt's ancient civilization.

During the French expedition in 1799, the Rosetta Stone was discovered by French soldiers in the town of Rosetta (Rashid). The stone, which dates back to 196 BCE, features a decree in three scripts: Greek, Demotic, and hieroglyphic. It is not a trilingual document, as is often repeated, but a bilingual one, as Demotic and hieroglyphic are two ways of writing the Egyptian language. Nevertheless, its discovery was crucial because it provided the key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The deciphering of the stele was not the work of a single individual. Several scholars made small but important contributions to understanding the Egyptian language before the final breakthrough. The key was realizing that hieroglyphs were not only a symbolic script but also a phonetic one, and, at the same time, that Demotic, though primarily alphabetic, also contained ideographic elements.

Significant attempts to interpret hieroglyphs date back to the 17th century, when the German Jesuit priest and polymath Athanasius Kircher produced a study of the ancient Egyptian language that was not fully surpassed until the 19th century. Kircher began and ended his work with the incorrect notion that hieroglyphs were purely symbolic in nature. However, "he recognized that they were representations of real objects," correctly understood that the wavy hieroglyph 𓈖 represented water and, finally, "correlated that hieroglyph with the Coptic word for water, *mu*, which is in fact the phonetic value of 𓈖. In doing so, Kircher became the first person since antiquity to assign a correct

phonetic value to a hieroglyph" (Thompson 2015). Unfortunately, Kircher did not pursue this path further and continued searching for mysterious symbolic meanings in the hieroglyphs.

Another important insight came in the 18th century, specifically in 1797, from Danish archaeologist Jørgen Zoëga. He correctly surmised that foreign names in Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions, often enclosed in ovals, might be written phonetically. However, he did not solve the puzzle.

The discovery of the Rosetta Stone was pivotal. Here too, many minds contributed to the deciphering process. Notable names include Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy, John David Åkerblad, Étienne-Marc Quatremère de Quincy, Thomas Young, and Jean-François Champollion. While Champollion is usually credited with the breakthrough, the deciphering was in fact a collective achievement. As Thompson (2015) emphasizes, Thomas Young, one of the great polymaths of all time, further deduced, as Zoëga had hypothesized, that the ovals in the inscriptions, which came to be known as cartouches, contained royal names and that they could be identified by comparison with their locations in the Greek text of the Rosetta Stone. Then he took up the idea – derived from Silvestre de Sacy – that those Greek royal names might be expressed through the 'sounds' of the hieroglyphic signs and that that principle could be applied to other words as well. Using these approaches, Young identified 218 demotic and two hundred hieroglyphic words and their meanings, getting about half of them correct.

What was Champollion's role? One year before the breakthrough, the young Frenchman still erroneously believed that hieroglyphs were "signs of things and not of sounds" (Champollion 1821). However, one year later, he understood the phonetic nature of the script. Once again, we turn to Thompson for the story:

> Champollion knew that Young had not only identified the name Ptolemy (*Ptolemaios*) but also its individual letters: p, t, ma/m, i, and s. With Cleopatra (*Kleopatra*), he now had more: k, l, a, and the rest, for a total of fourteen letters. By applying those letters to the hieroglyphic characters in trial-and-error substitution, he was able to work out both names systematically.

Thompson notes that, regrettably, Champollion failed to acknowledge Young's contributions. Moreover, while Champollion made great progress, he fell short of a complete breakthrough. By assuming that the phonetic approach applied only to the names and surnames of Greek and Roman kings, he continued to view the hieroglyphs as primarily symbolic. Further work was needed to enable the accurate translation of hieroglyphic and hieratic texts.

Despite these disputes over credit, on September 27, 1822, Champollion announced the successful deciphering of the Rosetta Stone's hieroglyphic

script in a presentation to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris. For this reason, he is now celebrated as 'the father of modern Egyptology.'

The 'philological turn' in Egyptology is of fundamental importance. Until that moment, archaeologists and antiquarians had primarily focused on collecting monuments and artifacts to bring back to Europe, paying little attention to theological questions. Once the language of hieroglyphs became accessible, an extraordinary discovery was made: contrary to the assumptions of Abrahamic monotheists, ancient Egyptian religion may have been a monotheistic cult concealed within symbolic polytheism.

In the following sections, I will propose several of the conclusions reached on this matter by prominent Egyptologists during the golden age of their discipline.

3. The Champollion brothers

Jean-François Champollion, known as the Younger, pioneered the deciphering of hieroglyphs but regrettably died too young to make any substantial discoveries in the realm of Egyptian religion and theology. Hornung (1992, 43) notes that "the founder of Egyptology had no clear idea of Akhenaten or of his revolution, apart from some impressions of the artistic style of the Amarna Period diverging from the traditional style." Nor could he know the exact content of the *Book of the Dead*.

This notwithstanding, using the materials at his disposal, Champollion concluded that the Egyptian religion was not a polytheistic cult sic et simpliciter. He did not write a book specifically on this matter, but he expressed his ideas in letters and private conversations with his brother Jacques-Joseph Champollion-Figeac, known as the Elder, archaeologist, and curator of the Royal Library. The latter, in the book *Egypte Ancienne*, part of the encyclopedic work *L'Univers: Histoire et description de tous les peuples*, writes that the younger brother was persuaded that the *Corpus Hermeticum*, although written in Greek by anonymous authors in Roman times, still contained wisdom inherited from the ancient Pharaohs. In particular, to the eternal truths belongs the idea that God is incorporeal, invisible, immaterial, without forms, and, therefore, cannot be known by the eyes and senses like visible bodies, nor can it be expressed and described with the words of ordinary language. God is the ineffable One.

However, there is more than Greek literature behind Jean-François Champollion's convictions. On January 27, 1829, he visited the temple of Kalabschi in Nubia and discovered a new generation of gods, which, in his view, completed the circle of forms of Amun-Ra. In other words, he concluded that

Amun-Ra is the starting point and the point of reunion of all divine essences. Here are his words, as reported by his brother:

> Amun-Ra, the supreme and primordial Being, being his own father, is described as the husband of his mother (the goddess Mut), his feminine portion enclosed in his own essence both male and female (…): all the other Egyptian gods are only forms of these two constituent principles, considered in different relationships taken in isolation. They are only pure abstractions of the great being. These secondary, tertiary forms, etc., establish an uninterrupted chain which descends from the heavens, and materializes up to the incarnations on earth, and in human form. (Champollion-Figeac 1847, 245)

Indeed, modern Egyptologists also agree that Amun is the Egyptian deity who most embodies the quality of ineffability. As Mehler (2005) specifies, his name "has been spelled many ways: Amun, Amon, Ammon, Amen. The pronunciation, according to Hakim, should be Imen (Imn)…" For consistency, I will hereafter adopt 'Amun' in my text, while leaving the original spelling in quoted fragments. The name 'Amun' itself translates to 'The Hidden One' or 'The Concealed One' (Wilkinson 2003, 92; Tobin 2002, 18). This title captures the god's intrinsic nature as an enigmatic and unseen deity. Unlike many other gods who had distinct physical forms or were linked to specific natural elements, Amun was perceived as a god whose true essence transcended human understanding. He was believed to be omnipresent, playing a crucial role in the creation and sustenance of the universe, yet his true nature remained beyond human perception. He was also believed to have given birth to himself, existed before creation, and brought the universe into existence through his will alone (Bunson 2002, 35). This aspect of Amun as a primeval creator further underscored his mysterious and all-encompassing nature. Wilkinson (2003, 94) underlines that Amun was also seen as a universal god, namely, "as the god 'who exists in all things' and the one in whom all gods were subsumed."

This deity was known at an early date, at least from the Old Kingdom. Several references in the *Pyramid Texts* attest to his antiquity. Amun was originally a local deity of Thebes, modern-day Luxor. The political circumstances, such as the liberation of the country from the domination of the Hyksos, that contributed to turning Amun into the supreme deity have been reconstructed in numerous stories of Ancient Egypt and Egyptian religion (Cerny 1951, 37; Frankfort 2000; Shaw 2000, 266-267; Wilkinson 2003, 97).

In an equally detailed fashion, Egyptologists have reconstructed the events that led to the syncretic fusion of Amun with the solar deity Ra (Erman 1907, 57 ff.; Tobin 2002, 19). When Amun was merged with Ra to become Amun-Ra, the Theban deity retained Their mysterious qualities while also

gaining the solar attributes of Ra. Ra was the visible, life-giving sun god, symbolizing power, creation, and kingship. The combination of these deities created a god who was both immanent and transcendent, revealed and hidden, visible in the form of the sun and yet fundamentally unknowable. The importance of Amun grew enormously after the fusion with Ra, ipso facto ascending – according to some inscriptions – to the role of king of the gods or even the only and sole God. The antiquity of this syncretic deity is also attested. As Tobin (2002, 19) remarks, "the name Amun-Ra appeared on a stela erected by the governor Intef of Thebes before 2000 BCE."

As with other Egyptian gods in statues and paintings, Amun was often portrayed in anthropomorphic form. More precisely, "Amun was normally depicted as a handsome, virile young man or as a ram with curled horns" (Bunson 2002, 35). Still, the idea was not to represent the god literally but to symbolize his hidden and multifaceted nature. Amun was viewed as a force behind other deities, guiding and influencing without being directly visible. This concept can be likened to a hidden prime mover or a divine presence that permeates all aspects of the cosmos while remaining fundamentally elusive.

The monotheistic interpretation elaborated by Jean-François Champollion is shared by his older brother Jacques-Joseph, who expressed the same concept with the following words: "The Egyptian religion is a pure *monotheism*, which manifested itself externally by a *symbolic polytheism*, that is to say, a single god whose all the qualities and attributions were personified in as many active agents or obedient divinities" (Champollion-Figeac 1847, 245). He did not reach this conclusion only based on information obtained from his younger brother, who died prematurely of an apoplectic attack on March 4, 1832, at the age of forty-one. He derived this knowledge from ancient Greek historians and philosophers, who were well aware of this 'fact'[3] before it was overshadowed by the rise of Christianity, as the following quote attests:

> Porphyry dared to assert that the Egyptians formerly knew only one god; Herodotus also said that the Thebans had the idea of a single god who had no beginning and who was immortal; Iamblichus, a very curious observer of the philosophy of ancient centuries, knew, according to the Egyptians themselves, that they worshiped a god master and creator of the universe superior to all elements, by himself immaterial, incorporeal, uncreated, indivisible, invisible, all by himself and in himself, and who comprehended everything in himself… (Champollion-Figeac 1847, 245)

[3] The quotation marks are used appropriately, as this is not an indisputable fact. As we will see, some contemporary Egyptologists reject the narrative crafted by the ancient Greeks and early Egyptologists.

We know that eminent Greek philosophers and historians, such as Thales, Pythagoras, Plato, and Herodotus, studied in Egypt. After the Greeks and the Romans conquered Egypt, the legacy of Amun-Ra persisted, influencing Hellenistic and Roman religious practices. An example of this cultural blending is the syncretic god Zeus-Ammon. Plutarch, who also visited Egypt, played an important role in harmonizing Platonism with Greek and Egyptian traditional religions. Besides the mysterious Hermes Trismegistus, three crucial thinkers for Neoplatonism and Christianity, all of whom incorporated the idea of the Unknown God into their spiritual systems, were Egyptian: namely, Ammonius Saccas (a Christian who converted to Paganism) and his two main pupils, Plotinus (a Pagan) and Origen (a Christian). The above-mentioned Porphyry and Iamblichus are notoriously two of the main exponents of the Neoplatonic School.

The notion of an ancient Egyptian monotheism, transmitted by the sages of the Greco-Roman world, was thus present from the beginning in modern Egyptology but had yet to find a convincing confirmation in the vestiges of the Egyptian world, starting with the messages hidden in hieroglyphics and other written documents.

4. KARL RICHARD LEPSIUS

If the Champollion brothers, following the ancient Greeks, recognized the existence of an Egyptian monotheism centered on the worship of Amun-Ra, other Egyptologists have, instead, focused their attention on another deity. Today, when discussing ancient Egypt and monotheism, one immediately thinks of the Amarna Revolution led by Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, also known as Akhenaten. This revolutionary figure, the husband of Nefertiti, established an exclusive cult dedicated to the sun disc, Aten, during the 14th century BCE.

The rediscovery of this forgotten event is primarily credited to Prussian linguist and archaeologist, Karl Richard Lepsius, although it was, once again, a collective undertaking. In 1714, Jesuit Pater Claude Sicard copied one of the boundary stelae at Amarna. John Gardner Wilkinson identified the rock tombs of Akhenaten's officials in 1824. Four years later, Jean-François Champollion scrutinized the ruins but spent only a single day there – too brief to make any significant discoveries. A quarter of a century later, the Prussian scholar played a pivotal role in revealing the forgotten religion. In 1851, after visiting Amarna and other Egyptian archaeological sites, Lepsius presented his findings to the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin. His research, published the same year under the title *Ueber den ersten ägyptischen Götterkreis und seine geschichtlich-mythologische Entstehung*, explored "a particularly unusual event in the history of Egyptian mythology."

Lepsius discovered that Akhenaten had challenged the traditional worship of Amun by promoting a 'pure solar cult,' centered solely on the representation of the sun disc. The Pharaoh commanded the removal of all other gods' names from public monuments and private tombs, and their images were destroyed wherever possible. In essence, Akhenaten elevated Aten to the status of the only and sole god, effectively establishing a form of monotheism. Aten was represented as a radiant sun disc with extending rays ending in hands, symbolizing the life-giving force of the sun.

The historian of Egyptology, Erik Hornung (1992:44), emphasizes that:

> Lepsius himself was not fully aware of the consequences of his discovery. It is only in retrospect that he became the modern rediscoverer of Akhenaten and his religion. In his paper of 1851, there is a new founder of a religion, completely forgotten for millennia! Manetho, who wrote a history of Egypt in the third century BCE, had no real knowledge of that far-off epoch, allowing the Ramessides to follow immediately after Amenhotep III, as did Champollion after him. Similarly, Herodotus, Diodorus, Strabo, and all the other authors of antiquity knew nothing of Akhenaten and his time.

The reason for this oblivion is that Akhenaten's religious reforms were largely reversed after his death. Another indicator of the lack of awareness of the importance of Lepsius's discovery is the sixty-year gap before the first biography of the heretic Pharaoh appeared: Arthur Weigall's *The Life and Times of Akhnaton*, *Pharaoh of Egypt* (1910). Subsequently, more detailed works followed, such as those by Donald Redford (1987) and James Hoffmeier (2015).

Lepsius remains celebrated for his significant contributions to Egyptology, including his detailed and semi-autobiographical account, *Letters from Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Peninsula of Sinai* (1853). This precise, twelve-volume set of plans and drawings stemmed from a mission led by Lepsius and commissioned by Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, an archaeology enthusiast. The Royal Prussian Expedition to Egypt and Ethiopia (1842–1846) aimed to produce accurate illustrations of monuments, replacing those in the French *Description de l'Égypte*. The mission focused on cataloging Old and Middle Kingdom monuments and investigating Nubian culture, which was poorly understood at the time. Another objective was to secure original artifacts for the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, significantly enriching its collection with items of verified provenance (Loeben 2020).

Lepsius also made history as the first translator of a complete manuscript of the *Book of the Dead*. This funerary text, transliterated as *rw nw prt m hrw* and more accurately translated as *Spells of Coming Forth by Day*, was given

its modern title by Lepsius in 1842 while editing Papyrus Turin 1791.[4] His publication, *Das Todtenbuch der Ägypter nach dem hieroglyphischen Papyrus in Turin mit einem Vorworte zum ersten Male Herausgegeben*, marked the first printed edition of this iconic text.

The papyri found in coffins detail the meeting between the deceased and the Great Ennead, a group of Heliopolitan gods that included the sun god Atum (sometimes syncretized with Ra to form Ra-Atum) and his descendants Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Set, and Nephthys. Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris, is occasionally included in this group. Notably absent is Amun-Ra – the deity the Champollion brothers and ancient Greeks identified as supreme or sole. Instead, Amun was part of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad, gaining prominence only when Amenemhat I seized power in Thebes and founded the Twelfth Dynasty in 1991 BCE (Tobin 2002:19).

The Amarna Revolution took place at the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty (1353–1322 BCE). It is often seen as a significant departure from traditional polytheistic beliefs, yet its implications are far more complex. Akhenaten's successors, including the famous Tutankhamun, are generally thought to have restored polytheistic worship, while Amarna was abandoned. But was this shift from polytheism to monotheism unprecedented? And was the subsequent 'restoration' truly a simple return to polytheism?

The key lies in recognizing that Akhenaten's challenge was directed at the traditional worship of Amun. Aten, the visible, fully revealed deity, contrasted sharply with Amun, the hidden, ineffable god and the enigmatic counterpart in the Amun-Ra syncretism. Elevating Aten as the sole deity inherently negated Amun's role as the unseen, universal essence. This remains the most significant aspect of the Amarna Revolution in the context of our discussion.

5. Emmanuel de Rougé

In France, Champollion's baton was taken up by Emmanuel de Rougé. He allowed the discipline to be reborn following the premature death of the decipherer by doing considerable work in the field of Egyptian philology and providing France with the first generation of professional Egyptologists. Among the researchers belonging to his school, one may mention Gaston Maspero. As the first true French Egyptologist after Champollion, de Rougé placed philological rigor at the heart of Egyptological research by publishing not only translations of numerous hieroglyphic texts, but also of other writings in hieratic cursive and demotic.

[4] The modern numbering of the text's spells (BD 1–165) originates from Lepsius's work on this papyrus.

In 1860, the French scholar published a book entitled *Études sur le rituel funéraire des anciens Égyptiens*. At the beginning of the book, he pays homage to Champollion as the founder of the discipline, stressing in particular that the young researcher had already grasped the importance of funerary rituals in fully understanding the religion of the ancient Egyptians, giving the document the title *Funeral Ritual*. De Rougé, fully convinced of the importance of the book, kept the same title, even though he was aware that Lepsius had already introduced an alternative title, namely *Todtenbuch* or *Book of the Dead*. Needless to say, Lepsius's term was destined to gain much more fortune than the one used by the French school.

Many archaeologists had already noted that, with mummies, one often finds papyrus rolls covered with writings of different kinds. It was also generally understood that these manuscripts ordinarily contain only more or less complete copies of the same book. The problem was translating the document. Champollion had already undertaken a general survey of the funerary book. The sentences quoted in Champollion's grammar show that he had extended his work to all parts of the *Ritual* and had translated numerous fragments. However, de Rougé could not help but note that Champollion's pioneering analysis had to be abandoned in order to arrive at a fully satisfactory understanding of the text. What had not yet been understood when Egyptology was a budding science, and which by the time of de Rougé had already been generally accepted, was that the *Ritual*, in its definitive and complete form, was only a collection composed of more or less ancient texts, perhaps originating from various schools.

What is important for our purposes is that de Rougé formed his view of the Egyptian religion after having studied in detail the funerary ritual and, in particular, the Egyptian conception of divinity. The following fragment is, in this regard, illuminating:

> The unity of a supreme being existing by itself, its eternity, its omnipotence, and eternal generation in God; the creation of the world and all living beings attributed to this supreme God; the immortality of the soul, completed by the dogma of punishments and rewards; such is the sublime and persistent foundation which, in spite of all the deviations and all the mythological embroideries, must assure to the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians a very honorable rank among the religions of antiquity. (de Rougé 1860, 8-9)

As the *Wissenssoziologie* teaches, a view into the social and political context is equally instructive. At least from a terminological point of view, this description of the ancient Egyptian religion seems to owe something to the *Culte de l'Être suprême* established as the civic religion of France by Maximilien Robespierre during the French Revolution. On 7 May 1794, convinced

that only the fear of divine punishment could guarantee social order and man's striving toward virtue, the National Convention solemnly declared that "the French People recognize the existence of the Supreme Being and the Immortality of the Soul" – the two pillars here recalled by the author of the *Études sur le rituel funéraire*.

De Rougé (1860, 9) also wanted to immediately clear the field of possible insinuations regarding an unlikely influence of Judaism, hitherto considered the first true monotheism, on the Egyptian religion. He wrote:

> It is impossible to attribute the adoption of these doctrines to the influence of the sojourn of the Hebrews in Lower Egypt: the antiquity of the principal parts of the *Ritual* is much superior to that period. We even possess today copies much older than the reign of Ramses II, the contemporary of Moses. A *Ritual* in the British Museum was written for an officer of Seti I, father of Ramses II: its style places it, without hesitation, among several manuscripts scattered in various museums, but not as one of the oldest.

Indeed, there are monuments of the Old Kingdom which already attest to the existence of various chapters of *The Book of the Dead*. The Egyptian priests themselves recognized that they did not invent their science in divine matters. Their merit was only to have faithfully preserved the lessons of antiquity. Finally, as Champollion's brother did, de Rougé also underlined the ties between the Egypt of the Pharaohs and the Hellenic world, remarking that Egyptian theology "excited the admiration of the greatest minds of Greece," such as Thales, Pythagoras, and Plato. This is one of the paths followed by the Unknown God to reach us from the distant past.

6. Cornelis Petrus Tiele

One problem, however, seemed insurmountable. If the Egyptian religion was fundamentally monotheistic, as the great masters of the discipline claimed, why did the ancient Egyptians persist in naming, invoking, and representing a plethora of major and minor deities? In 1872, Cornelis Petrus Tiele proposed an interesting solution to this puzzle in his *Comparative History of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian Religions* in two volumes: *I. History of the Egyptian Religion*; *II. History of the Babylonian-Assyrian Religion*. Tiele was a renowned Dutch theologian and scholar of comparative religion. Originally published in Dutch, the book was translated into English by James Ballingal in 1882. In the first volume, the author explored the development and nature of ancient Egyptian religion. His key thesis included the notion that religion in ancient Egypt was perceived and practiced differently by various social strata.

By stressing the dual perception of religion, Tiele distinguished between popular religion and learned religion. For the uneducated masses, Egyptian religion was characterized by polytheism and the worship of a multitude of gods, each associated with specific aspects of life and nature. These deities were often anthropomorphized and involved in mythological narratives. Among the educated and priestly class, there was a more sophisticated understanding of these deities. They perceived the gods as manifestations of a single, underlying divine principle. This perspective is akin to a form of henotheism or even proto-monotheism, where one supreme deity is recognized but worshiped in different forms.

This is what Tiele (1882, 78) wrote about Amun-Ra:

> This god comes to view out of darkness and concealment, and is the same as the hidden god; only, inasmuch as he reveals himself, he bears another name. He is not created, but exists of himself. He himself creates his name, that is, his being, and because, as we read in another passage, all the gods are said to be only manifestations or members of Ra, he is Lord of all the gods.

The Dutch scholar argued that Egyptian mythology and religious symbols had esoteric meanings understood primarily by the priesthood. The myths were not merely stories but encoded teachings about the cosmos, human nature, and the divine. He examined the evolution of religious beliefs over different periods of Egyptian history. For instance, he noticed that during the New Kingdom, the worship of Amun-Ra became prominent, symbolizing a move towards a more centralized and unified religious practice. Tiele often drew parallels between the religious practices in ancient Egypt and other world religions, including Christianity.

The Dutch theologian not only supported a monotheistic interpretation of Egyptian religion, but he also warned that it was not the cult of a natural object, the Sun. Here are his words:

> We must, however, guard very carefully against taking Ra as simply the sun. It appears from the hymns addressed to Ra, included in chapter XV of the *Book of the Dead*, that at the most remote period it was already usual to distinguish between the god and the manifestations of him. In that chapter, he is seemingly identified with the sun; his splendid rising, for example, is referred to; but, in point of fact, a careful distinction was made between the being who was an object of worship and his visible representation. The sun's disk was called 'his,' 'his emblem.' He journeys in his disk, and is designated as *the ancient unknown one* [emphasis added] in his mystery. (Tiele 1882, 82)

To be more precise, Tiele (1882, 217) rejected as a baseless opinion the idea that there was "a double theology among the Egyptians, an esoteric and

an exoteric, – the one being intended for the learned, and known to them alone and to a chosen few, but kept carefully concealed from the multitude; the other being intended for the people, who thus had the husk given to them while the kernel was kept out of their reach." This is just a myth circulating in modern masonic circles, which actually modeled their spiritual life on that pattern.

Present-day Egyptologists agree on this point. It is true that the priests of Amun played a crucial role in maintaining and enhancing the god's mysterious nature. The rituals and ceremonies performed at temples like Karnak were occasionally conducted away from the public eye, within the innermost sanctuaries that only the high priests and the pharaoh could enter. However, "this did not imply that its rituals were totally unknown" (Tobin 2002, 20).

In Ancient Egypt, the theological 'truth' was public, not concealed. It was painted on walls and written in papyri that were potentially accessible to anyone. The problem is that in Egypt, as everywhere else and in all periods, there were educated and uneducated people, cultured and uncultured believers. The latter were simply incapable of understanding the sophisticated theology of the priesthood, even if it was there in front of their eyes. The former could. That is why the uncultured "never got beyond the visible symbol, and were, as a rule, satisfied with the external form," while "the learned penetrated deeper, and followed up the thoughts that were latent in the symbols" (Tiele 1882, 217).

This could also be said of Christianity. What the learned Christian understands allegorically, metaphorically, or symbolically, the unlearned one often understands literally. There is no conspiracy. Many Christians experience religion as merely an external practice, based on rites and ceremonies whose profound meaning they do not grasp, or entrust their hopes to a legion of angels and saints, which sometimes borders on superstition. No one intentionally stops them from ascending to a higher level of religious awareness, which they could do by reading the works of Diogenes the Areopagite or Saint Thomas Aquinas. However, they do not do so out of ignorance, laziness, or inability to understand. So, just as Christianity has different interpretations and levels of understanding among its followers (e.g., laypeople vs. theologians), so did ancient Egyptian religion.

Tiele (1882, 222) notices that, on the one hand, "monotheism is, in fact, expressed in the clearest terms in many an Egyptian treatise," yet, on the other hand, "it would not be easy to discover a richer polytheism than that which flourished on the banks of the Nile." The riddle can be solved only if we admit that "the hidden god by whom, in the beginning, all things came into existence (Tum in the *Book of the Dead*), is a being who is one only, but afterwards he revealed himself, and he reveals himself continually in innumerable forms." In other words, Tiele (1882, 223) brings to the surface that, "to the mind of

the Egyptians, the proposition, God is one, was bound up with this other: his manifestations are numberless."

It is worth noting that the *Book of the Dead* is not actually a book, but a collection of texts with different degrees of antiquity, and no two papyri are exactly identical, although some are more famous than others (for example, the Turin papyrus or the papyrus of Ani). According to Tiele (1882, 24-25), "a strong proof of the antiquity of the great majority of the different parts of which the *Book of the Dead* is composed is that in them there is found no mention of Amun or Amun-Ra, the chief god of Thebes. His name occurs in the last three or four books only," notwithstanding that Amunhoteps and Ramesids worshiped Amun so ardently. This fact can be explained only on the hypothesis that the older parts "were already written before the worship of Amun rose in the fifteenth and fourteenth century B.C. to such a height of splendor."

Nevertheless, the Unknown God is already present in the older parts of the funerary text as Tum. Let us see which primary sources the Dutch scholar cited to support his thesis. At the time, he had access to two different translations of the *Book of the Dead*, that of de Rougé and that of Lepsius. He decided to use the latter. He also made a point of emphasizing that he was considering two of the book's indisputably oldest chapters, namely the 17th and the 64th, and that the 17th chapter is "the most important of all" as it is "complete in itself." In the fragment of that chapter that particularly attracted his attention, Tum himself declares his uniqueness, hiddenness, supremacy, and equivalence to other deities:

> I am Tum (the hidden sun-god), a being who is one alone;
> I am Ba in his first supremacy;
> I am the great god, the self-existing;
> The creator of his name, the Lord of all gods,
> Whom none among the gods upholds.
> I was yesterday, I know the tomorrow.
> There was a battlefield of the gods prepared when I spoke;
> I know the name of that great god who is in that place.
> I am the great Bennu who is worshipped in An (Heliopolis).
> I am Chem (Min) in his appearing;
> I have set both my feathers upon my head;
> I am come home to the city of my abode.
> (cfr. Tiele 1882, 28)

Not only in chapter 17, but also in chapter 34, Tum, also known as Atum and frequently referred to as the god of An, is essentially the same as Osiris and is often conflated with him in the *Book of the Dead*. According to Tiele (1882, 72), besides what we read in the above-quoted text, the similarities be-

tween the worship of Osiris and Ea are quite apparent. Horos, a divine figure common to both systems, is depicted in Osirian mythology in two forms: as Horos the Elder, who is both the father and brother of Osiris, and as Horos the Child. The Dutch theologian also remarks that, similarly, the Heliopolitan sun god is divided into two aspects: Ea, representing the sun during the day, and Harmachis (Harmachu), symbolizing the rising sun visible on the horizon. Both Ea and Horos share the sparrow-hawk as their emblem. Shu, another god associated with An, is identified in Thinis as Nunhur. To sum up, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that all deities, although called differently, are in reality the same deity. This is true at least for the Egyptian elite.

7. HEINRICH KARL BRUGSCH

At the end of the 19th century, the most decisive advocate of the monotheistic interpretation of ancient Egyptian religion was probably German archaeologist Heinrich Karl Brugsch (1827-1894), who had collaborated with Auguste Mariette on the excavations of Memphis, in Egypt, and had then assumed the direction of the Egyptology school in Cairo. Brugsch presented his theses on the monotheistic aspects of Egyptian religion in his works titled *Religion und Mythologie der alten Ägypter*, published in 1885, and *Die Ägyptologie: Abriss der Entzifferungen und Forschungen auf dem Gebiete der Hieroglyphischen Schrift und Sprache, Alterthums und Geschichte der Aegypter*, published in 1891. These books provide an overview of his decipherments and research on Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, language, antiquities, and history, and it includes his interpretations of Egyptian religious beliefs.

In spite of the fact that these works were highly significant in the field of Egyptology, they were never translated into English in their entirety. Brugsch's influence was primarily through his original German texts and the dissemination of his ideas by other Egyptologists who read and referenced his work. Some of his works, such as *A History of Egypt Under the Pharaohs*, are available in English and offer insights into his interpretations of Egyptian texts. However, the English-speaking audiences accessed the most important concepts and findings of Brugsch through secondary sources, such as summaries, articles, and other scholars' works that discussed his theories. Notable references include the works of Wallis Budge, who summarized Brugsch's contributions in *The Gods of the Egyptians*.

Coming to the contents, not unlike its predecessors and with more vigor than them, Brugsch presented the idea that ancient Egyptian religion, despite its polytheistic appearance, contained a monotheistic core. He argued that within the plethora of gods worshipped in ancient Egypt, there existed a supreme deity that stood above all others. This deity was often identified as

Amun or Ra, and sometimes as a combination of the two, Amun-Ra. He posited that this supreme god was the creator and sustainer of the universe, encompassing all divine attributes. He suggested that the many gods and goddesses were merely different aspects or manifestations of this one Supreme Being. The diverse forms and names were a reflection of the various attributes, roles, and functions that this single god represented in different contexts and regions. In synthesis, there was a unity in diversity.

Let us now have a look to the primary sources that have led Brugsch to think that a pure monotheism was at work in ancient Egypt. The Egyptian inscription that more than any other has enlightened the German scholar is reported in *Religion und Mythologie der alten Ägypter* (Brugsch 1891, 96-99).[5] I will break it into six fragments and comment on them to show that it is actually possible to draw parallels between Egyptian religion and the two most popular monotheisms of Ancient Europe, namely Neoplatonism and Christianity. The Egyptian document uses the term 'nuter' or 'noutir', which Brugsch translates as 'God.' First of all, the text specifies that *nuter* is one and eternal.

> God is one and alone, and none other existeth with Him – God is the One, the One who hath made all things – God is a spirit, a hidden spirit, the spirit of spirits, the great spirit of the Egyptians, the divine spirit – God is from the beginning, and He hath been from the beginning, He hath existed from old and was when nothing else had being. He existed when nothing else existed, and what existeth He created after He had come into being, He is the Father of beginnings – God is the eternal One, He is eternal and infinite and endureth for ever and aye…

Secondly, the inscription emphasizes that *nuter* is unknown.

> God is hidden and no man knoweth His form. No man hath been able to seek out His likeness; He is hidden to gods and men, and He is a mystery unto His creatures. No man knoweth how to know Him – His name remaineth hidden; His name is a mystery unto His children. His names are innumerable, they are manifold and none knoweth their number…

In other words, God is the Ineffable One that preceded anything. They are a purely spiritual being. They are called in many different ways but Their real name is unknown no less than Their essence. They created everything or anything emanated from Them. I keep both options (creation and emanation) because, as we will see, some of the entities that come from *nuter* equate with

[5] Brugsch quotes translations of Egyptian documents made by himself and his pupil Johannes Dümichen (cf. Brugsch and Dümichen 1862).

the godhead, while others are separated from Them. The sequence of emanations and creations reminds us of Plotinus's metaphysics, with the Ineffable One as the first principle or hypostasis. Quite significantly, besides being a Neoplatonist, Plotinus was Egyptian and we cannot rule out that he brought with him some reminiscence of the ancient religion of his land. In Christian mystical theology, the One equates with God the Father, first person of the Trinity. Let us proceed.

> God is truth and He liveth by truth and He feedeth thereon. He is the king of truth, and He hath stablished the earth thereupon…

The reference to truth invites us to continue and deepen our parallel with Neoplatonism and Christianity. In Plotinus's metaphysics, the second hypostasis is the Logos, which is sometimes understood as Plato's hyperuranium – that is the collection of all true forms. Indeed, 'the logos' represents an everlasting and unalterable truth existing since the beginning of time, accessible to anyone who pursues it. The Encyclopedia Britannica (2024) rightly remarked that, although mainly associated with Greek philosophy and Christian theology, "the concept is also found in Indian, Egyptian, and Persian philosophical and theological systems." In the above fragment, we see that God does not merely tell the truth; God is 'the truth.' The truth is not Their product or creation; it is inherent to Their being. Besides, contrarily to the very essence of the Ineffable One, the truth is partly accessible to humans. That is why Plotinus defines the logos as the second hypostasis. In Christian theology the Logos, the Word, is notoriously Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity (John 1,1). The Ancient Egyptian text retrieved by Brugsch proceeds as follows:

> God is life and through Him created; He is the maker of his own form, and the fashioner of His own body – God Himself is existence, He endureth without increase or diminution, He multiplieth Himself millions of times, and He is manifold in forms and in members…

In Plotinus's metaphysics, the third hypostasis emanating from God and still being God is the Soul, Plato's Anima Mundi, that is, the principle of life. Any living being participate in this principle. In Christian theology the third person of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit, or Paracletus, the Comforter. Quite significantly, in the Gospel, the Holy Spirit is associated with life, pregnancy and procreation (Mathew 1, 18-21). It is worth noting that, following St. Thomas Aquinas, Bishop Robert Barron (2014) defines God as the sheer act of to be itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*). This means that God is not a being among other beings, but rather the very act of existence or being itself. Ac-

cording to this understanding, God is the necessary foundation of all reality, the source of all that exists, and not limited or defined by any particular characteristics or forms that apply to created beings. God is pure actuality without any potentiality, infinite, and perfect, transcending all finite categories and limitations. The ancient Egyptian inscription clearly states that God does not simply exist as a being among others; God is existence.

The continuation of the text indicates *nuter* as the creator of the material world:

> God hath made the universe, and He hath created all that therein is; He is the Creator of what is in this world, and of what was, of what is, and of what shall be. He is the Creator of the heavens, and of the earth, and of the deep, and of the water, and of the mountains. God hath stretched out the heavens and founded the earth-What His heart conceived straightway came to pass, and when He hath spoken, it cometh to pass and endureth for ever. God is the father of the gods; He fashioned men and formed the gods…

Here again, one cannot help but notice that the sequence of hypostases and the hierarchy in the chain of beings is exactly the same as that found in Neoplatonism and Christianity. Indeed, at the end of the process, according to Plotinus, the One emanates matter, which is not a hypostasis, a divine principle; otherwise this metaphysics would qualify as a form of pantheism. Needless to say, Christianity also considers matter as separated from God, although, as Aquinas clarifies, God is present potentially in all things by virtue of being their ultimate cause and sustainer. His 'presence' is not necessarily a physical or spatial presence but rather a metaphysical one, indicating that everything owes its continued existence to God. The Egyptian text, besides material objects, mentions also gods and men as created by God. Gods could be either manifestations of the one God or other powers of the universe.

Finally, the Egyptian inscription includes a pattern which is found in all the monotheisms that would follow, until our days. God is not only the ineffable one, the logos, the soul of the universe, and the creator of the world. As the last fragment of the text translated by Brugsch specifies, *nuter* is also the ultimate moral judge of humanity.

> God is merciful unto those who reverence Him, and He heareth him that calleth upon Him. God knoweth him that acknowledgeth Him, He rewardeth him that serveth Him, and He protecteth him that followeth Him.

Once again, the similarity to the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants, or the teachings of Jesus Christ and Mohammed, is apparent. God is not disinterested in the fate of human beings, but They are nevertheless selective. They intervene in the world, helping those who believe in Them, who follow Their

teachings and serve Them, not those who ignore or deny Them. The reward for the faithful who follow divine precepts and behave ethically is life after death, understood not only as persistence of the soul, but also as corporal afterlife.

It is worth noting that the eminent French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero was not convinced that Brusch's translation was impeccable, despite the latter continuing to enjoy his esteem. In the book *Études de mythologie et d'archéologie égyptiennes*, Maspero discusses Brugsch's research and theories in detail, so much so that – in addition to being repeatedly cited throughout the volume – two of the ten chapters bear the German scholar's name in the title. Contrary to what Brugsch says, Maspero (1893, 195) believes that "the Egyptians were polytheists above all, and that if they arrived at the conception of a single god, it was not an exclusive and jealous god. Amun-Ra of Thebes, whose dogma contains the greatest approximation to the notion of divine unity that we have known up to now in Egypt, was a single god (noutir ouâou) as the reigning Pharaoh was a unique sovereign in the world." In other words, what is unique is not God, but the King of the Gods. There is only one King of the Gods. The term *nuter* or *noutir* would convey this meaning, rather than the one that calls to mind the Tetragrammaton, YHWH. Therefore, Maspero (1893, 186) concludes that "the system expounded by Mr. Brugsch is an attempt, after many others, to extract from polytheistic texts a monotheistic theology; like the others, it seems to me to rest on a misunderstanding." According to the French scholar, a contemporary Egyptologist who discusses the Egyptian *nuter* and is forced to translate it as 'god' faces significant difficulty in avoiding the imposition of the concept of God that we associate with the term, rather than the original understanding the Egyptians had of that word.

The interesting aspect I would like to underline is that Maspero identifies *noutir* – whether he is the one God as Brugsch wants or the King of the Gods as the French Egyptologist wants – with Amon-Ra, the Hidden One.

8. Charles Loring Brace

It is also worth looking at Charles Loring Brace's specific analysis of Egyptian religion. As I mentioned above, he was not an Egyptologist, but he has the merit of having framed the discoveries of modern Egyptology in a broader discussion on the Unknown God.

First of all, Brace (1890, 9) states that in Egyptian inscriptions and papyri one finds "the thought of a Power, illimitable, incomprehensible, eternal, behind all the phenomena of the universe, above and behind the varied personalities of mythology and polytheism." This is "the One awful beyond expression, enduring while all things change, filling immensity and eternity, self-

created, the one original, before whom was nothing, and in whose presence the earth and heavens are but as a morning cloud, 'living in truth,' 'truth itself,' the essence of 'righteousness,' terrible to evil-doers, yet merciful, beneficent, full of love." So to say, the Ineffable One is already present in human minds thousands of years before he made his appearance in the writings of Christian mystics and theologians.

The American philanthropist admits that many deities populate the Egyptian pantheon, such as Xoper (Being), Ammon (the Concealed), Ra (the Original), Ptah (artist), Xnum (builder or potter), Sebak (contriver), Osiris (periodic force), etc.; however, he is deeply convinced that "behind all these separate gods is the One, unnamable, eternal, infinite. They all seem only forms, or manifestations, of the original being" (Brace 1890, 12). To reach this conclusion, he mostly relies on the studies of Heinrich Brugsch, and in particular on his 1885 book *Religion und Mythologie der alten Aegypter*, which he often quotes.

To support this reconstruction, the philanthropist additionally quotes many primary sources. For instance, a Theban inscription says the following about God in his form of Amun:

> The concealed spirit, a mystery for him whom he hath created, is Ammon, the ancient of days, who is from the beginning, the creator of heaven, earth, the depth, and the mountains. (Brace 1890, 13)

According to Brace, another example of a primary source proving the ineffability of God is the following ancient and lofty inscription of praise to Amun Ra:

> Vast in his largeness without limit. Virtue supreme, in mysterious forms! Soul mysterious! Author of his fearful power, life holy and strong, created by himself; brilliant, illuminating, dazzling! Soul more soul than the gods, thou art concealed in great Ammon! Old man renewed! Worker of ages! Thou who hast designed the world! O Ammon, with the holy transformations! He whom no man knoweth, brilliant are his forms, his glory is a veil of light! Mystery of mysteries! Mystery unknown! Hail to thee in the bosom of Nun (celestial abyss)! (Brace 1890, 14) [6]

Brace (1890, 15) insists on the fact that "the various gods, Ra, Ptah, Xnum, Thoth, Osiris, are in inner being the same, and all manifestations of this original One." Still, among the various manifestations of the Unknown God, Brace places particular emphasis on the figure of Osiris, who plays a

[6] Here, Brace reports a translation by French Egyptologist François Joseph Chabas which quotes as follows: "Chabas, Pap Hav.; Records of the Past; Trad. pap. Mag., Harris."

central role in *The Book of the Dead*. This god is already known outside of Egypt in the ancient Greco-Roman world, thanks to Plutarch's work *Isis and Osiris*. Besides, Osiris could not fail to arouse the curiosity of Christians, considering some extraordinary parallels with the life of Jesus Christ. Brace repeatedly asserts that Osiris, the son of God, is merciful, lives and dies to save man, indicates the way of salvation, is the first resurrected from the dead, and after the resurrection carries out the function of judge, calling to himself the deceased who have lived morally and rejecting those who have behaved badly. In his words, Osiris is "the manifestation of the Infinite Spirit dearest to the hearts of all Egyptians."

The author of *The Unknown God* specifically emphasizes Osiris's role as a universal peacemaker and the price he had to pay for his irenic attitude. In his analysis of Osiris, Brace portrays the Egyptian deity as a transformative figure who elevated his people from a primitive and harsh existence. He describes how Osiris introduced agriculture, established the foundations of civilization, and instilled respect for laws. Additionally, Osiris is depicted as a teacher of spiritual truths, guiding his followers to recognize and honor the Divine Creator. According to Brace, Osiris's influence was gentle and persuasive, relying on the power of music, eloquence, and a benevolent spirit, rather than force or coercion. Moreover, his impact transcended national boundaries. The American philanthropist recounts the legend of Osiris traveling across lands, promoting harmony, diminishing hostility, and spreading the ideals of human unity and devotion to God. As Brace (1890, 22) put it, "war ceased in his presence, there was no need of arms, and his sweetness and the persuasion of his words and music turned all hearts."

Brace also describes Osiris's generous missions abroad as ultimately diminishing his authority in Egypt. Upon his return, the god faced betrayal and was overcome by the embodiment of evil, Typhon, leading to his death at a young age – before reaching thirty. However, the author of *The Unknown God* highlights that Osiris's story did not end there; he was resurrected, earning the title of the 'first-born of mummies,' and ascended to a new role as the judge of both the living and the dead in the divine realm of Amenti, the underworld. Brace (1890, 19) also writes that Osiris "was appointed to reign over the gods in the presence of the supreme lord on the day of the constitution of the world. He is Truth itself; he is Love."

All this information is found in *The Book of the Dead*. Among the many primary sources quoted, the author provides a fragment from papyrus 3292, preserved in the Louvre Museum, which reads as follows:

> Hail to thee, Osiris, elder son of Father Ra, Father of Fathers, he who sittest near Ra, the King of immense times and the Master of Eternity, . . . No man knoweth his name: innumerable are his names in all towns and provinces.[7]

By citing this fragment, the author seems to want to emphasize the remarkable parallel between the ancient Egyptian religion and Christianity, as Osiris – alone among all the divinities and creatures – is called to sit next to his Father, the Master of Eternity, just as Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father. The author concludes that the Egyptian religion is "the grandest conception known to man of the Unknown God" (Brace 1890, 39). If the One – the 'Concealed' – is unknown, then Their son Osiris is known. The Egyptian "trusted in a merciful Being, even though a shadowy person, a manifestation of God's goodness, who had lived and died for the good of men. As this 'Son of God,' as he is called, rose again and became 'the first-born of the dead,' so would the dead arise and meet him as Judge. To be like him, and to be united to that sweet and perfect being, was to be the joy of eternity" (Brace 1890, 39).

Similarly to other coeval scholars, Brace excluded the possibility that the parallels between Egyptian religion and Judeo-Christianity may be due to an influence of the latter over the former. The influence could only have been exerted in the opposite direction. Brace appeals to the authority of de Rougé, who – as we have seen – declares that the British Museum is in possession of a copy of the Ritual dating back to the time of Seti I, father of Ramses II, that is, to a time before the life of Moses. He adds that "the monuments of the First Empire reveal several chapters of these writings (Rev. Arch., p. 357. 1860)."

Moreover, if there was any influence of the Egyptian religion on Christianity, it must have followed other paths, specifically the Greek one, because in the Old Testament of the Jews there is no emphasis comparable to the Egyptian one on spirituality and life after death. Specifically, Brace (1890, 41-43) states that it is one of the most peculiar facts in history "that a people like the Jews should have lived for so many years under the rule of a nation like the Egyptians, and have carried away after their emancipation so few mental and religious influences." As a matter of fact, "the Jewish people in their early history seem singularly little inspired with the belief in a future life or a coming judgment."

Indeed, there is nothing further from Egyptian spirituality than the following fragment of the Old Testament: "Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals.

[7] Brace reports the source as follows: "Pap. 3292, Louvre MSS. Devéria: Cat. d. man. Eg. Mariette: Not d. prin. man, p. 304. Handbuch d. ges. Aeg. Alterth.; Dr. M. Uhlemann, 1858, iv. 138."

Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return" (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20).

The American philanthropist is eager to emphasize that his perspective is not an isolated one. In fact, he states that the monotheistic belief of the ancient Egyptians is supported by most prominent Egyptologists and encourages his readers to consult the works of De Rougé, Brugsch, Chabas, Maspero, Pierret, Renouf, Uhlemann, and others. As the reader can verify in other sections of this paper, it is true that the monotheistic interpretation enjoyed a large consensus during the golden age of Egyptology. However, it is fair to point out that there were also dissenting voices. We have already seen that Gaston Maspero, although enrolled by Brace in the ranks of the 'monotheistic' interpreters, does not seem so convinced that the translations and the consequent interpretations of Brugsch were entirely correct. Another dissenting voice, though less authoritative in the field of Egyptology, is that of F. C. H. Wendel (1889), who rejects the idea of the monotheistic priority of Egyptian religion in the journal *Hebraica*.

9. Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge

Worth mentioning is also Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, another prominent Egyptologist who had extensive views on ancient Egyptian religion, which he articulated through numerous publications. Wallis Budge's comprehensive work on Egyptian religion is most famously compiled in *The Gods of the Egyptians* (1904). Because of his emphasis on polytheism, already visible in the title, it may seem that he distances himself from the narrative discussed earlier. However, his position is subtler. Indeed, he acknowledged that while ancient Egyptian religion was fundamentally polytheistic, there were elements and tendencies within it that could be interpreted as leaning toward an esoteric form of monotheism. More importantly, he also explored the possible influences of Egyptian religious concepts on later religions, including Greek, Roman, and early Christian thought. He was particularly interested in how ideas such as the immortality of the soul and final judgment may have been transmitted to our culture.

One of his most appreciated contributions to Egyptology was the translation of the Papyrus of Ani. In his work *Introduction to The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani*, Wallis Budge (1895, xcii) confronted his ideas with those of other contemporary specialists by writing the following: "From the attributes of God set forth in Egyptian texts of all periods, Dr. Brugsch, de Rougé, and other eminent Egyptologists have come to the opinion that the dwellers in the Nile valley, from the earliest times, knew and worshipped one God, nameless, incomprehensible, and eternal." Wallis Budge (1895, xciv)

also assessed the opinion of Tiele, who concluded "that the religion of Egypt was from the beginning polytheistic, but that it developed in two opposite directions: in one direction gods were multiplied by the addition of local gods, and in the other, the Egyptians drew nearer and nearer to monotheism." However, in his view, it is difficult to say whether polytheism grew from monotheism in Egypt, or monotheism from polytheism, "for the evidence of the pyramid texts shows that already in the 5th dynasty, monotheism and polytheism were flourishing side by side."

This is a quite interesting remark for two different reasons. Firstly, it raises doubts about a postulate that many earlier interpreters – regardless of their specific position on the matter – seem to tacitly subscribe to, namely that Egyptian religion must have been a 'monolith,' with dogmas stable over time and accepted by everybody. This implicit assumption is perhaps the result of the influence exerted for two millennia on Europeans by Judaism and Christianity. Instead, it could be possible that a certain degree of religious freedom allowed monotheistic and polytheistic orientations to coexist in Ancient Egypt, at least during certain periods of the civilization's long history.

Secondly, among the various plausible hypotheses, Wallis Budge includes the possibility that monotheism may have preceded polytheism chronologically. The mainstream narrative in the study of the history of religion is that human religious belief evolved from animism and polytheism to monotheism (Wright 2009). This theory typically shows the following stages: 1) Animism: early humans believed in spirits residing in nature, such as trees, rivers, and animals; 2) Totemism: certain animals or natural objects were revered as sacred symbols and protectors of tribes or clans; 3) Polytheism: societies began to believe in multiple gods, each overseeing different aspects of life and nature (e.g., Greek, Roman, and Egyptian religions); 4) Henotheism: worship of one supreme deity without denying the existence of other gods, often acting as a bridge between polytheism and monotheism; 5) Monotheism: belief in a single, all-powerful deity, usually considered an unprecedented achievement of the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, two eminent scholars – Scottish anthropologist Andrew Lang (1898) and German ethnologist Wilhelm Schmidt (1912–1955) – challenged this narrative. By observing primitive societies and ancient texts, they concluded that the earliest human societies originally believed in a single, high god or supreme being, often associated with the sky and creation. Over time, as societies grew more complex and spread out, this original belief in one god 'degenerated' into polytheism and animism. Schmidt called his alternative theory *Urmonotheismus* (Primitive Monotheism).

It is therefore notable that, as early as 1895, Wallis Budge already considered the possibility that monotheism may have been the original form of

Egyptian religion, even if he later seemed to give more credit to the opposite path. As did the pioneers of Egyptology, he observed that certain gods, particularly Amun and later Amun-Ra, were sometimes elevated to a status that encompassed the powers and attributes of many other gods. This elevation suggested a tendency toward recognizing a supreme deity above all others. He also noted the practice of syncretism, where deities would merge and form composite gods. This could be seen as a step toward or a return to monotheism, as it reduced the multitude of gods to various aspects of a more unified divine entity.

Notably, Wallis Budge underlined the political implications of this process. He noted that, during the early empire, which spans the first eleven dynasties, Amun was regarded merely as a local deity, despite his name dating back to the reign of Unas. It was not until the Hyksos were driven out of Egypt by the Theban rulers of the 17th dynasty that this deity gained prominence. Chosen by the Theban kings as their primary god, and refusing to abandon his worship despite the demands of the Hyksos king Apepi, Amun eventually became acknowledged as the national god of southern Egypt. As the deity of the victorious rulers, Amun ascended to the position of leader of the Egyptian pantheon. Over time, he adopted the attributes and epithets of the ancient gods, consolidating his status.

There is a consensus among present-day Egyptologists that the cult of Amun-Ra also had ethical and political dimensions. Tobin (2002, 20) underlines that the god was "the champion of the poor and a focus of personal piety," and symbolized ultimate power and authority, much like the pharaoh, who was considered a god on earth. The mysterious aspect of Amun-Ra's nature reinforced the idea that the pharaoh's authority was also divine and unquestionable, with roots in a higher, unseen power. The spiritual and political power of this deity "helped transform ancient Egypt into a theocracy, and his priesthood became one of the largest and most influential" (Tobin 2002, 20).

Wallis Budge also highlighted that certain theological texts and hymns expressed a form of monotheism. For example, the *Hymn to Amun* praises him in a manner that implies he is the sole creator and sustainer of the universe. The American Egyptologist quotes the extract from a papyrus written for the princess Nesi-Khonsu,[8] a member of the priesthood of Amun, as an example of the exalted language in which his votaries addressed him.

> This is the sacred god, the lord of all the gods, Amen-Ra, the lord of the throne of the world, the prince of Apt, the sacred soul who came into being in the beginning, the great god who liveth by right and truth, the first ennead

[8] Wallis Budge clarifies that "the hieratic text is published, with a hieroglyphic transcript, by Maspero, *Mémoires publiés par les Membres de la Mission Archéologique Française au Caire*, t. i., p. 594 ff., and pll. 25-27."

> which gave birth unto the other two enneads, the being in whom every god existeth, the One of One, the creator of the things which came into being when the earth took form in the beginning, whose births are hidden, whose forms are manifold, and whose growth cannot be known. (Wallis Budge 1895, xcv)

More importantly, at least for the sake of this research, is that the inscription puts ineffability and hiddenness in relation, confirming that the hidden god is also the unknown god. The hieratic text indeed continues as follows:

> He is the Being who cannot be known, and he is more hidden than all the gods. He maketh the Disk to be his vicar, and he himself cannot be known, and he hideth himself from that which cometh forth from him. He is a bright flame of fire, mighty in splendors, he can be seen only in the form in which he showeth himself, and he can be gazed upon only when he manifesteth himself, and that which is in him cannot be understood. (Wallis Budge 1895, cvi)

Following Tiele, Wallis Budge proposed that the priesthood and the intellectual elite of ancient Egypt might have held more monotheistic views, interpreting the many gods as manifestations of one ultimate divine power, while the general populace continued with traditional polytheistic practices. More precisely, Wallis Budge suggests that, while it may be difficult to resolve the questions that have puzzled even the most renowned Egyptologists, it is clear that the Egyptian who conceived of an unknown, mysterious, eternal, and infinite God was not someone whose spiritual needs could be met by deities who could eat, drink, love, hate, fight, age, and die. This individual, who believed in an afterlife spent in a glorified body in heaven, envisioned a God that transcended these earthly qualities. Given that the person was finite, it is not surprising that they would, in some ways, attempt to represent this infinite God in human terms.

Among the primary sources that led Wallis Budge to reach this conclusion, there is an inscription found in the pyramid of Unas. The text reveals that, after his death, 5th dynasty monarch Unas indulged in oral feeding, engaged in other physiological activities, and satisfied his desires. Here, we also find confirmation that the divinity awaiting the monarch in the kingdom of the afterlife is the hidden-and-unknown God.

> Unas hath weighed his words with the hidden god (?) who hath no name, on the day of hacking in pieces the firstborn. (Wallis Budge 1885, lxxix)

Let us now examine Wallis Budge's translation of the Papyrus of Ani. Here, we find a hymn of praise to Ra when he rises in the eastern part of

heaven (III. 1, 2). The following fragment emphasizes that the divinity is one and ineffable:

> Homage to thee, O Amen-Ra, thou who dost rest upon Maat, thou who passest over the heaven, and every face seeth thee. Thou dost wax great as thy Majesty dost advance, and thy rays are upon all faces. Thou art unknown and canst not be searched out… his fellow except thyself; thou art the Only One… [Men] praise thee in thy name [Ra], and they swear by thee, for thou art lord over them. (Wallis Budge 1885, 356)

The idea that the many deities of the Egyptian pantheon could ultimately be interpreted as visible (or comprehensible) manifestations of the ineffable and unnamable Unknown God – the sole god or the main one – emerges from the following fragment translated by Wallis Budge:

> I come forth and advance, and my name is unknown. (…) I am Horus who passeth through millions of years. (…) Verily my forms are changed. I am the god Unen, from season unto season; what is mine is within me. I am the only One born of an only One, who goeth round about in his course; I am within the eye of the Sun. (…) I am he who is unknown, and the gods with rose-bright countenances are with me. I am the unveiled one. (…) I am he who riseth and shineth; the wall of walls; the only One, [son] of an only One. Ra never lacketh his form, he never passeth away, he never passeth away. Verily, I say: I am the plant which cometh forth from Nu, and my mother is Nut. Hail, O my Creator, I am he who hath no power to walk, the great knot within yesterday. My power is in my hand. I am not known, [but] I am he who knoweth thee. (Wallis Budge 1885, 356)

In summary, Wallis Budge did not claim that ancient Egyptian religion was monotheistic in the strict sense of the word, but he did acknowledge that within its complex polytheism, there were significant monotheistic tendencies and elements that pointed toward the recognition of a singular divine force. As Hornung (1971) summarized, the American Egyptologist holds the opinion that the "pure" monotheistic belief, which has existed in Egypt since the earliest times and which he believes is found above all in the wisdom teachings, has been obscured by "foolish priests."

10. A NOTE ON CONTEMPORARY CONTROVERSIES

The theory that Egyptian religion was a monotheism centered on the cult of the Unknown God and disguised as polytheism held up well until one of the most eminent contemporary Egyptologists, Erik Hornung, raised serious doubts about it. In 1971, the German scholar published the book *Der Eine und*

die Vielen, arguing that ancient Egyptian religion, including the worship of Amun-Ra, was inherently polytheistic. He contended that even when a god was elevated to supreme status, the existence and worship of other gods were never entirely negated.

Hornung noted that the idea that all peoples of the world spontaneously believe in a First Being, Creator, and Preserver of Nature dates back to the 18th century and was very popular in Masonic circles. For instance, he mentions the initiatory novel *Life of Séthos* by Abbé Jean Terrasson from 1731, which had a great influence on Freemasonry. He remarks that Voltaire was also inclined to similar ideas. Subsequently, the idea of a pure monotheism expressing itself externally through a symbolic polytheism made its triumphant entrance in early Egyptology through the articulations of the Champollion brothers and de Rougé. Hornung underlines that in the 1870s, under the influence of the founders, all French Egyptology, with slight variations on the theme, unanimously supported the monotheistic interpretation of Egyptian religion. He mentions, in sequence, Eugène Grébaut, who wrote in 1870 that this monotheism was "incontestable"; Edouard Naville, who, in his book *La litanie du soleil*, published in 1875, considered whether the ancient Egyptians had preserved the idea of a single and personal God under the veil of a "crude and bizarre polytheism"; Paul Pierret, who, in 1879, entitled the first chapter of his *Essai sur la mythologie égyptienne* "Le monothéisme égyptien"; Joseph Chabas, who concluded that the many gods are only aspects of the One; and Auguste Mariette, who assumed a single, immortal, uncreated, invisible, and hidden God "for the initiated" at the head of the Egyptian pantheon. The author then shows how this idea penetrated German and Anglo-American Egyptology.

Hornung argues that the historical reality of the Egyptian gods, evidenced by the fact that the Egyptians lived with their gods for thousands of years and engaged in lively dialogue with them, cannot be denied. He remarks that in all Egyptian literature, there is no fact more certain than that the same people adhered to the doctrines of 'one God' and 'a plurality of gods,' and no one thought of finding a contradiction in these doctrines. Therefore, if the word 'God' had the same meaning for the Egyptians as it does for us, the situation would simply be absurd. Hornung concludes that what the Egyptians actually wanted to express with the word *nutar* is not equivalent to what we understand as 'God.' We have seen that this argument was already put forward by Maspero.

Hornung (1983, 246) draws attention to the fact that Western logic may approach the problem of divinity differently from the ancient Egyptians. Their thought processes may have been different, making our terms inappropriate. In the Egyptian mind, God can simultaneously be 'One and Many', that is, "a unity in worship and revelation, and multiple in nature and manifestation."

According to the German scholar, we can properly talk of monotheism in ancient Egypt only in relation to the Amarna Revolution and the exclusive cult of Aten established by Pharaoh Akhenaten. Ten years after its appearance, Hornung's book was translated into English as *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* and became very influential. For instance, Vincent Arieh Tobin discusses Hornung's ideas in his 1989 book *Theological Principles of Egyptian Religion*. Tobin views ancient Egyptian mythology not as a random assortment of tales and traditions about deities but as a deliberate and intricate framework of symbolic meaning. He illustrates that the mythological structure of ancient Egypt reflects a profound and intellectual theological understanding of the universe. This understanding conveyed an integrated vision of reality, expressing the fundamental order and unity perceived by the Egyptians across all aspects of existence, symbolized by a female deity called Ma'at. The study ultimately portrays Egyptian religion as a cohesive and systematic interpretation of the cosmos rather than a disorganized collection of myths. Still, Tobin is reluctant to talk about an implicit monotheism.

In an essay entitled "Mitho-Theology in Ancient Egypt," Tobin (1988, 182) explicitly states that it is "unlikely that any serious modern scholar would maintain the idea that behind the Egyptian polytheistic symbolism there was hidden a genuine monotheism." He also questions the henotheistic nature of the cult of Amun-Ra after the deity was elevated to the position of king of the gods, noting that the other gods did not lose importance at all. He concludes that "the best we can state of traditional Egyptian thought is that the weight of the position attributed to the Theban Amun-Re may have created a deity who, after a long process and the emergence of an abstract way of thinking, could have eventually evolved into a monotheistic god. Such a phenomenon, however, did not take place…" (Tobin 1988, 182). In other words, Egyptian religion was monotheistic only in potency.

Quite interestingly, many years later, Tobin (2002, 20) would be less drastic in rejecting the 'classic' interpretation of the golden age. He writes that, during the New Kingdom, the position of Amun-Ra "as king of the gods increased to a point that approached monotheism." This is because, in the most advanced theological expressions of the godhead, "the other gods became symbols of his power or manifestations of him – he himself being the one and only supreme divine power."

In relation to our discussion, however, the most interesting observation by Tobin (1988, 172) is that "for the Egyptian mind, the divine world, and to a certain extent even the visible world, was something which was mysterious and totally other than the world of normal human comprehension." Thus, even if by name only Amun is the Hidden One, all the major deities are, to a minor or larger extent, ineffable. That is why, in the *Book of the Dead*, we often find Atum in the position of the Unknown God. Tobin underlines, in particular, the

role of Ma'at, a goddess symbolizing the underlying order of the universe and, therefore, the foundation of natural and political stability. Being the guarantee that nothing wrong can happen, Ma'at also symbolizes the optimistic philosophy of life of the ancient Egyptians. 'Order' is as abstract and invisible as it is fundamental.

The same applies to Atum, a term that means 'the complete one' or 'he who is complete,' signifying that the creator god had to contain everything within themselves, or to Amun, the concealed god by definition. Tobin highlights the abstract nature of these unifying principles to demonstrate that Egyptian religion is midway between mythology and theology. Therefore, those who reduce this religion to "mythological rubbish" (Gardiner 1961, 227) are certainly wrong.

The influence of Hornung's interpretation is also evident in the work of Ann Rosalie David, who appeals to his authority to reject the monotheistic nature of Amun-Ra's cult. She recognizes only Akhenaten's solar cult as properly monotheistic, writing:

> Early studies in religion proposed that monotheism had developed out of polytheism, and it was argued that titles such as 'Lord of All,' which were applied to Amun, were indicative of a trend towards monotheism even before the Amarna Period. However, more recently, it has been argued that this title does not describe the god's transcendent nature but instead indicates that he was lord of the whole temporal and spatial world. Also, the terms applied to Amun as 'King of Gods' are no longer regarded as evidence of a progression from polytheism to monotheism. (David 2002)

By stating that Egyptologists previously accepted the paradigm of implicit monotheism but now align with the polytheistic paradigm, David implies a strong contemporary consensus on the latter. Modern science often operates under the assumption that newer ideas represent an advancement over earlier ones. While this is frequently true, it is not always the case. One of the aims of the history of ideas and sociology of knowledge is to challenge such dogma.

The debate remains open. Another eminent Egyptologist, Jan Assmann, has provided a different perspective. In 1983, Assmann published *Re und Amun: Die Krise des polytheistischen Weltbilds im Ägypten der 18.-20. Dynastie*, a work translated into English a dozen years later (Assmann 1995). This study delves deeply into solar religion and the sun hymns of the New Kingdom, a period from 1500 to 1200 BC, often called the golden age of solar hymns. Assmann views these hymns as more than poetic expressions; they embody theological and political ideologies, reflecting spiritual and cultural movements of the time. The author argues that this era represents an effort to articulate the concept of a singular divine entity, or 'One God,' in tension with

traditional polytheistic beliefs. This struggle to reconcile monotheistic ideas with an existing religious framework posed a unique theological challenge.

He maintains that Akhenaten's Amarna Revolution was the most explicit and radical attempt to establish monotheism in Egypt. This effort, however, was not sustained; following Akhenaten's death, his son Tutankhamun restored the traditional gods' cults. Yet, Assmann contends that what followed was not a mere return to previous polytheism but a nuanced transformation. He suggests that monotheistic ideas introduced during Akhenaten's reign influenced subsequent religious practices, blending polytheistic traditions with monotheistic concepts. This is seen in later hymns and texts, which often elevate one god above others or depict the gods as manifestations of a singular divine principle.

Assmann sought to navigate beyond the traditional monotheism-polytheism dichotomy. He introduced the concept of 'cosmic monotheism' or 'cosmotheism' to describe Egyptian religion. In a 1998 lecture titled "Mono-, Pan-, and Cosmotheism: Thinking the 'One' in Egyptian Theology," Assmann critiques Hornung's conclusion that Egyptian religion is best described as polytheistic.

> It is wrong to speak of Egyptian monotheism. Hornung is perfectly right in stressing this point. With the exception of Akhenaten, the Egyptians worshipped many gods. But it is equally wrong to call the Egyptians 'polytheists.' Polytheism is a polemical term. It exclusively belongs and makes sense in the context of a religion that distinguishes between true and false and equates monotheism with truth and polytheism with error. (Assmann 1998a, 146)

Assmann's arguments become clearer in his book *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, in which he explores the profound impact of Egyptian culture and religion on Western monotheism. There, he focuses on the 'Mosaic Distinction' – the fundamental separation between true and false religion traditionally attributed to Moses in the Old Testament, absent from other ancient civilizations. Assmann links the exclusivity of monotheism, originating with the Amarna Revolution and later Mosaic Law, to the evolution of Western religious and cultural identity. He argues that applying modern theological categories to Egyptian religion is not anachronistic, as those categories are inherited from Egypt through Greek and Jewish intermediaries.

This perspective sparked controversy. Assmann acknowledges that while Judaism represents explicit monotheism, it owes its roots to the latent monotheism of Egyptian religion. Moses, he argues, serves as a cultural bridge between the two. Moreover, Assmann argues that the transition from latent to

explicit monotheism is not necessarily a form of progress, as many assume. While latent monotheism allowed for religious tolerance and peace, explicit monotheism introduced exclusivity, leading to intolerance, persecution, and holy wars. Latent monotheism suggests that the Unknown God can manifest in multiple forms, none of which are inherently true or false. Explicit monotheism, by contrast, asserts one true religion, ritual, and symbol, rejecting all others.

Finally, in his book *From Akhenaten to Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change,* Assmann downplays the stark distinction between the Amarna Revolution and surrounding periods. He argues that Akhenaten's reforms emerged from existing cultural currents and left lasting influences on subsequent Egyptian theology. For example, he writes:

> In Egypt, this latent monotheism gained more and more momentum in the course of the New Kingdom and became overwhelmingly manifest with the religious revolution of Akhenaten, who quite simply did away with the plurality of gods and abolished traditional religion altogether. (…) In the aftermath of this revolutionary step, the gods were readmitted into theology; the henotheistic perspective, however, still prevailed, and the gods, especially in hymns to Amun, tended now to be demoted to 'names,' 'manifestations,' 'symbols,' 'limbs,' and the like, of the One. (Assmann 2014, 13)

Assmann underscores the theological sophistication of ancient Egyptian religion, countering the view that theology is an intellectual phenomenon unique to Abrahamic faiths. American Egyptologist James Peter Allen (1999) notes that ancient Egyptian texts mention over 1,400 deities. However, as Assmann observes, syncretic tendencies often culminated in perceiving the pantheon as aspects of a supreme god. This is epitomized in an inscription, which seems to anticipate the Christian Trinity:

> All gods are three: Amun, Re, and Ptah, whom none equals. He who hides his name as Amun, he appears to the face as Re, his body is Ptah. (Zandee 1947; Assmann 1975; Assmann 2014, 13)

The Old Testament contains many names for God. To cite just a few, we find El Shaddai (Lord God Almighty), El Elyon (The Most High God), Adonai (Lord, Master), Yahweh (Lord, Jehovah), El Olam (The Everlasting God), Elohim (God/gods), and Qanna (Jealous). Believers typically assume that these names refer to a single entity, but this is far from obvious. In the New Testament, alongside Abba (Father), we encounter various titles for Jesus, such as Christ, Lord, Master, Logos (the Word), Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, and Lamb of God. Finally, the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is also referred to as Parakletos (a Greek word for Comforter, Counse-

lor, or Advocate), as well as Baptizer, Strengthener, Sanctifier, and Seven-Fold Spirit – Spirit of Christ, Truth, Grace, Mercy, God, Holiness, and Life. Christian theology has reduced the persons of God to three, while affirming their essential unity.

Similarly, in the Egyptian context, it is not simply a matter of the fact that all the gods are ultimately three, but that "these three are encompassed and transcended by a god who is referred to only as 'He,' whose name is Amun, whose cosmic manifestation is Re, and whose body, or cult image, is Ptah. Even the name of 'Amun,' the 'Hidden One,' is just an epithet screening the true and hidden name of this god" (Assmann 2014, 13).

11. Conclusion

Whether Egyptian religion, at least during a period of its long history, was a monotheism centered on the cult of the Unknown God, a henotheism that elevated the Unknown God to a supreme divinity ruling over other deities, or simply a polytheism that included a cult of the Unknown God, remains a matter of controversy. Egyptologists have explored all of these options. In the golden age of Egyptology, the monotheistic interpretation had many supporters, perhaps the majority, while in contemporary Egyptology, the henotheistic and polytheistic interpretations tend to prevail. For the sake of this study, the most important point is the consensus among Egyptologists on the fact that ancient Egyptians venerated an unknown, hidden, invisible, mysterious, incomprehensible, unutterable, and ineffable God. This deity is Amun, although ineffability has sometimes been attributed to other deities.

This fact, evident to Egyptologists, is less apparent to historians, theologians, and philologists specializing in other historical periods, religions, or ancient languages. That is why many works on apophatic theology fail to recognize the Egyptian roots of the idea of the Unknown God and instead confine research to Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, or early Christianity. The history of ideas aims to construct a holistic view of our intellectual past by integrating the valuable contributions of specialists in different fields. Historians of ideas work as 'dot-connectors.' Exploring in detail how the idea of the Unknown God, starting from Egypt (and India!), reached Europe, influencing pagan and Christian spirituality, would be the subject of another study. In this paper, however, I have offered several insights into two fundamental paths – the Greek and the Jewish.

To conclude, allow me a brief personal observation. Maspero, Wendel, Hornung, and others underline that translating the word *nuter* as 'God' is misleading. Given our understanding of the word, God cannot be 'One and Many.' To 'us,' according to these scholars, this notion appears as an absurdi-

ty. Therefore, they conclude that *nuter* has a different meaning to 'them,' the ancient Egyptians, not fully comprehensible to the Western contemporary mind. Besides, by mentioning the masonic roots of the monotheistic interpretation of Egyptian religion, Hornung seems to imply that there may be ideological motives behind this scientific theory. This is entirely possible, but the same could be said of alternative interpretations aimed at emphasizing the uniqueness of Abrahamic monotheism.

I think that the idea of the incommensurability of the two concepts can be easily rejected on historical grounds. The key is to clarify who 'us' and 'them' are. The diverse approach of Egyptian religion, which blurs the clear distinction between monotheism and polytheism, can disorient those with a rigid understanding of monotheism, such as Jews and Muslims. It should be noted, however, that Christians, being ready to admit that God is 'One and Triune,' and yet consider their religion monotheistic, should have less trouble accepting that there can be a monotheism in which God is 'One and Many.' In other words, much depends on how we understand the concepts of 'monotheism' and 'polytheism.' Is the concept of the Trinity contradictory or absurd? It is worth remembering that Tertullian proudly embraced the accusation of absurdity leveled against Christianity, stating that he believed because it is absurd (credo quia absurdum). When non-believers or those with different beliefs ask Christian theologians for a logical explanation of the Trinity, the usual response is that it is a mystery beyond logic. The concept of mystery was also frequently used by ancient Egyptian priests in their sacred texts. Thus, the alterity and incommensurability of the two ways of thinking is not as evident as it may seem.

The notion of God as 'One and Many' is actually rooted in Indo-European culture, and we cannot exclude the possibility that we inherited it from Egypt. Several ancient Greek philosophers (Xenophanes, Plato, Aristotle, and others) speak of the divine reality using both the singular nominative *Theos* (Θεός) and the plural *theoi* (θεοί) in the same text, as if admitting simultaneously the belief in a single God and the worship of the twelve Olympian gods and other minor deities. This pattern of reasoning also applies to Gnosticism, where the Aeons are understood as manifestations of the true God, divine entities positioned between humans and the *Agnostos Theos*, manifestations of the ineffable One, and foundations of the Universe. For the Neoplatonists, too, God is 'One and Triune' (the three hypostases of Plotinus), and this notion is still presented as a philosophical truth by Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa in modern times (cf. Campa 2023, 42-47). Besides, God is 'One and Many' in Hinduism. Thus, the Egyptian conception of God may be alien to the ancient and contemporary Middle Eastern mind but is surely familiar to the ancient and contemporary Indo-European mind.

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