



## The myth of cataclysm

The myth of cataclysm is a major example of the temporary disturbance of the rapport between gods and mankind. The underlying factors were the deep suspicions of the sun god towards men and the over-reaching confidence of the human race – the result was rebellion and a catastrophic death toll.

The relationship between the human race and the gods depended on a myriad of diverse microcosms scattered throughout the Nile Valley. These were the temples, each governed by a hierarchy of priests. The priests' responsibilities, entrusted to them by the pharaoh, included daily rituals of reciting religious formulae and providing victuals in the sanctuary. If this service was performed correctly and no offerings were deficient then the gods and goddesses in each temple would feel satisfied and act benignly towards Egypt.

The detailed liturgy which a High Priest delivered was a response to the order of the universe established by the creator god at the beginning of time. This cosmic structure was personified as Maat, the goddess of truth, right and orderly conduct. Pharaohs are frequently shown holding her effigy, the form of a kneeling woman with an ostrich-feather on her head, to indicate their allegiance to the laws of the creator god. All the stages of making an offering or attending to the divine statue were rigorously documented on temple papyri. On the walls of the temples themselves it is the pharaoh who can be seen symbolically carrying out the requisite rituals in the inner sanctum, in a way visually indicating personal responsibility for the actions of his appointed representatives in the higher echelons of the priesthood.

This system created a mood of optimism in the people, who believed that the deities of the Egyptian pantheon were on the side of the human race. Individuals could of course transgress and be punished by a god or goddess as a result of their misdeeds. Fine examples of this lapse of respect towards the gods, dating to Dynasty XIX (c. 1307–1196 BC), are found in the stela from the village of workers on the royal tombs, known today as Deir el-Medina. Originally dedicated in local temples, these stelae reflect penitence for human errors and humbly request the offended deity for release from punishment. The draughtsman Neferabu managed to upset a god and a goddess on separate occasions and left votive stelae to them emphasising his contrition. On one stela, in the Turin Museum, Neferabu has clearly offended Meretseger, 'she who loves silence', a snake goddess residing on the peak overlooking the royal necropolis for which she was responsible.

For his offence, not specified, Meretseger caused Neferabu to be in agony – his pain is likened to the last stages of pregnancy. Eventually the goddess relented and brought 'sweet breezes' to cure him. On the other stela, in the British Museum, Neferabu admits that he took an oath in the name of the god Prah Lord of Maat but swore falsely. Consequently, the god caused Neferabu to see 'darkness by day' – he struck him blind. Neferabu professes the justice of Prah's action and begs for mercy from the god.

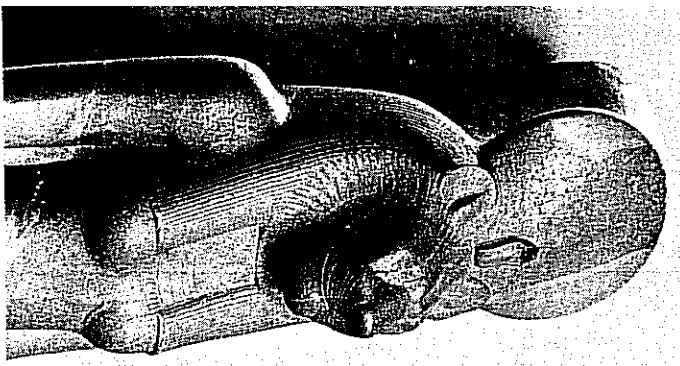
It was also possible for a monarch to govern in a way that upset the gods. The reign of the pharaoh Akhenaten (1353–1335 BC) saw the supremacy of the sun disc, called the Aten, the closure of temples and the eclipse of the traditional pantheon, including Amun-Re. When his son Tutankhamun succeeded to the throne of Egypt there was a reversal of Akhenaten's policies and the established temples were back in business. On a stela set up in the Karnak temple (now in the Cairo Museum) the pharaoh describes the mood of the traditional gods at the excesses of Akhenaten:

... the temples of the gods and goddesses ... were in ruins. Their shrines were deserted and overgrown. Their sanctuaries were as non-existent and their courts were used as roads ... the gods turned their backs upon this land ... If anyone made a prayer to a god for advice he would never respond – and the same applied to a goddess. Their hearts ached inside them and they inflicted damage left right and centre.

The restorations made by Tutankhamun, particularly for Amun-Re and Prah, rectified the distress throughout the land and the gods and goddesses once again became favourable towards Egypt.

The cataclysm myth survives as an element in a corpus of magical spells called the *Book of the Divine Cow* aimed at protecting the body of the sovereign. The earliest copy of sections of this book is found on the interior of the outermost of the four gilded shrines that fitted over the sarcophagus of Tutankhamun (r. 1333–1323 BC), originally in his tomb in the Valley of the Kings and now in the Cairo Museum. There is a longer version of this text in a side room off the sarcophagus-chamber of the tomb of Sery I in the royal valley. Other royal tombs from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties carry portions of this work so that we can put together a reasonably full account of the myth. The role of the Divine Cow will become clear as the sequel to the myth of cataclysm.

The scene is set in the era when Egypt was under the direct rule of the sun god Re. This period is of course unquantifiable in terms of history and belongs to a remote mythological past – although it is interesting to note that an important historical papyrus (the Turin Royal Canon) and Manetho's survey of dynasties begin with Egypt under the kingship of a series of gods, before the unification of the country under the first pharaoh around 3000 BC. In an infuriatingly unspecific manner, the *Book of the Divine Cow* describes the human race as 'plotting evil plans' against Re – possibly there was the feeling that he had grown too old to govern. Certainly, later in historical times, pharaohs took elaborate precautions to avoid the impression that age was against them being effective rulers: the essence of the Jubilee



*The lioness goddess Sakhmet, the instrument of vengeance used by the sun god against mankind. Black granite statue from the precinct of the temple of the goddess Mut at Karnak, c. 1350 BC.*

Festivals lay in ceremonies designed to rejuvenate the prowess of the monarch, and the presence of the sun god was conjured up in the imagery of a temple cult-statue whose bones were of silver, flesh of gold and hair of lapis lazuli. Learning of mankind's plot against him Re summons a secret council of the gods in his Great Palace, and is apparently unwilling to warn the human race.

Re first addresses Nu, the primeval material out of which he arose at the time of creation. In his statement he mentions how mankind emerged from the tears of his eyes – a pun on the similar sound between 'men' and 'tear' in the Egyptian language (i.e. a phoneme) – and now they are conspiring against him. He wants to know Nu's opinion before he kills the entire human race. Nu's reply is that the Eye of Re, the solar eye, will be the instrument to terrorise and slay mankind. Re now becomes aware that men know he is angry over their plot and discovers that they have fled into the deserts of Egypt. The gods in unison urge Re to take vengeance on the conspirators.

The symbol of the Eye of Re is complex but an underlying feature of it is that it can form an entity independent of the sun god himself – even to the extent of going off on journeys to remote regions and having to be enticed back. Here the Eye of Re becomes his daughter, the goddess Hathor. Most often we find Hathor in the role of a divine mother-figure to the pharaoh, suckling him with her milk, as a guardian of the Theban necropolis or as the goddess of love and joy whom the Greeks equated with Aphrodite. In the myth of cataclysm, however, Hathor becomes a deity of invincible destructive powers, pursuing men in the desert and slaughtering them. When she

returns to Re she exults in the lust for blood, glorying in the massacre. To complicate the nature of the Eye of Re the myth now explains how Hathor became transformed into the goddess Sakhmet – a ferocious leonine deity whose name means the 'Powerful One'. Thus the myth provides us with the vivid imagery of a raging lioness wading in blood who savaged mankind in an ecstasy of slaughter.

The Eye of Re now rests, recuperating her strength for further killing the next day. But the sun god himself has changed his mood from vengeance to sympathy for mankind. We are given no clues as to the reason for this transformation. Possibly it is the realisation that the temples of Egypt would be without their priestly occupants and consequently their altars would be empty of offerings for the gods. The cosmic pattern that the creator god had established would thus become deficient. Possibly the *voite-face* had to do with the reluctance of Re to consign beings created out of matter from himself (i.e. his tears) to oblivion. This last possibility would be in keeping with the Egyptian belief that no element of the body ought to be alienated into another's possession or destroyed – hence the four funerary jars to contain the organs eviscerated as part of the process of mummification.

Whatever the reason, Re organises the rescue of mankind from the fierce and merciless goddess whose blood-lust is totally beyond control. The gods only have the night to save the human race before the goddess wakes up. Re therefore sends his personal messengers to run at top speed – the Egyptian says 'to run like the body's shadow' – to Aswan and bring back a large quantity of red ochre. He then tells no less a personage than the 'One of the sidelock of Heliopolis', an epithet for the High Priest of the sun god, to squeeze the red ochre into a substance that slave girls can mix with barley beer. Soon seven thousand jars of this popular drink have been filled with beer that looks like human blood. Towards the end of the night Re and his entourage carry the jars to the place where the goddess will come to continue her slaughter and there they flood the region with the blood-beer to a height of 'three palms', about 22.5 cm. In the morning the goddess sees the 'blood' and, rejoicing in the unexpected bonus, drinks deeply and becomes intoxicated. As a result she fails to find the remainder of mankind left over from the previous massacre.

The rest of this compilation, following the punishment and near extermination of the human race, is concerned primarily with the rebirth and ascension of the sun god, and therefore of the monarch, into heaven on the back of the 'Divine Cow'. Both the shrine of Tutankhamun and the tomb of Sery I have depictions of the Cow 'Meher wer' or 'Great Flood' who forms the celestial firmament, identifying with the sky goddess Nut. Thus Re, now a cynical sun god and weary of mankind, eventually leaves Egypt. But it is not a total abdication of responsibility because Re appoints Thoth, god of wisdom, as his regent or deputy to keep control of the human race. From Thoth, on the orders of Re, people are given knowledge of the 'sacred words' (i.e. hieroglyphs) in which all scientific wisdom, medicine and mathematics are embodied.