



الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ



*Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;*

## *Quran English Translation & Commentary*

*By*

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### *Appendix V*

#### **Egyptian Religion and its Steps Towards Islam**

**(see 7:123, n. 1082)**

This should be read alongwith [Appendix IV](#) in which a discussion of Egyptian chronology will be found.

Allah's Plan works silently but surely among all nations and at all times. In the most fantastic forms of religion appear gleams of His Light of Unity, calls to Islam, i.e. man's submission of his will to the Will of Allah (see C. 7-10).

From that point of view, the religious history of Egypt from the most ancient times to the present day is most interesting, as is indeed the religious history of any country for which we have records of thought and development. That of India touches us dearly, but it is not directly relevant in a translation and exposition of the Quran.

The religious history of Israel is just an earlier chapter of the history of Islam, and our doctors and commentators have written in great detail about it. Sometimes, I think, have attached exaggerated importance to it. But none of them has paid much attention to Egypt from this point of view. Our people know very little of ancient Egypt and have shown little interest in it. It is a healthy sign that modern Egypt is showing much interest in it, and I hope that it will in time recognize in it a valuable unfoldment of religious ideas leading up to Islam.

The field of Egyptology is vast and is being extended everyday by the diligent researches of archaeologists and scholars. I do not propose to write an essay on Egyptian religion. But I wish to put forward a few considerations to show how Allah's Plan and Will worked steadily, in Egypt as elsewhere, towards a greater and greater appreciation, on the part of the people, of Allah's true nature and the real purpose of religion.

The eternal light of Unity and Islam shines in many ways, and its rays give light to the spiritual aspiration of mankind in the darkest periods. With a gifted and artistic people like the Egyptians, their religious sense was led, in spite of many rebuffs, gradually to a purer and purer conception of man's eternal destiny, until Muhammad's Message was preached to them in the very language in which it was originally preached in Arabia. And that language, Arabic, became and is now the language of the Egyptian people themselves.

In the pre-Dynastic Egypt, there must already have been a great deal of development in the religious conceptions which afterwards showed such vitality to Dynastic Egypt.

The Old Kingdom, including the Pyramid Period, shows that the Egyptian mind was obsessed with the certainty of life after death. It was also impressed with ideas of grandeur, order, and precision in the universe-ideas which found eloquent expression in the grand conceptions and mathematical symmetry and simplicity of its architecture. Its massive dignity and repose are

also reflected in the faces and poses of the figures in Egyptian statuary and painting.

The unending expanse and the mystery of the desert seem to have acted on the Egyptian mind like a soporific and made it less active in mundane affairs and less practical in speculation than that of some other races of similar gifts. What mysteries are typified in the proportions of the Pyramids and their internal galleries and mysterious chambers, we shall probably never know with certainty. But a haunting sense of death and of the other world seems to oppress us in its atmosphere, as it does in the grim senses of the "Book of the Dead". As Prof. T.E. Peet remarks (Cambridge Ancient History, vol I, p. 354),

"the Egyptian mind closely associated together men, gods, and the dead as merely three species of a single genus."

Each of these is considered was subject to an irresistible force called Hike or Heka: hence the force of Magic, Incantations to the Dead, and Rites and Formularies in daily life.

The Middle Kingdom brings us face to face with fresh ideas. We have no data with which to appraise the influence of foreign cults and foreign ideas during the period. But knowing, as we do, how Egypt acted as a magnet to the world at large and how many points of contact the Euphrates valley civilizations and the Nile valley civilizations had with each other, we may well suppose a broadening of Egyptian culture and civilization in consequence. The Hyksos may have been Egyptianised in Egypt, but they could not have failed in their turn to contribute Syrian as Semitic ideas to Egypt.

Among these were Monotheism, a patriarchal organization of society, and an impatience of priestly or caste denomination. These must have contrasted strangely with the chaotic Pantheon of countless deities, the lash-driven slaves living huddled in the cities, and the dedicated priests and richly endowed temples, which catered for the privileged few, but lived by the sweat of the brow of the unprivileged many.

The New Empire was the flowering period of Egyptian genius and requires special consideration. The crudities of the old pre-Dynastic chaotic Pantheon had been in process of attrition through the centuries. Local gods tended to be absorbed into general gods. Some sort of rationalism and spiritualization had

been going on throughout the Dynastic period. A process of systemization and unification was now consciously undertaken. The primitive worship of animals had gradually been transformed into a system of animal gods, with human bodies and animal heads.

The human bodies represented the anthropomorphic tendencies, while the animal heads became types of qualities. For example,

- Anubis, with the dog emblem, was the doorkeeper, the messenger, the custodian of the dead.
- Apis, or Hapis, the sacred bull of Memphis, symbolized the renewal of life, he was identified with Osiris;  
there were great rejoicing when a new Apis (a black bull calf) was found, and great mourning and costly burial when one died.
- Thoth, the god of wisdom and magic, was symbolized by an ibis, that stately, mute, mysterious bird of passage in the Nile valley.

In addition to the symbolism of animals, there was the worship of the great phenomena of nature, the Nile, the giver of agricultural bounties to Egypt, and the sun, which, as the god Ra, became the supreme god in Egypt.

Then there was the myth of Osiris the good, who came to the earth for the benefit of mankind, was killed by the magic of Set, the power of evil, and reign as the judge of the dead in the lower world. His faithful wife Isis and his falcon-eyed son Horus figure in the mysteries. It is possible that the Osiris myth itself arose from a myth of the Nile, or the sun.

There was a gradual perception of Monotheism, a realization that Allah is One and above names. But the picturesque forms, festivals, and representations remained, and as the priests of all grades enjoyed special privileges and monopolized knowledge and learning, the people remained ignorant. They were exploited and practically enslaved.

It was in the midst of such conditions that Moses came. He came to rescue his own people from the bondage of Egypt, a task which he performed. But it must not be forgotten that his

mission was also addressed to the king of Egypt, and to the people of Egypt. Here also he sowed the seed, although he did not reap the fruit. The king, the Pharaoh, was almost looked upon as a god, and looked upon himself as a god. He had to be humbled, and he was humbled.

Bur Allah's purpose is not merely to humble. It is also to lead from darkness to light. If the particular Pharaoh was too hard hearted to respond, his descendant in the fifth or sixth generation made a public confession of the One True God, as we shall see presently.

What of the people?

The wise men of Egypt, who were confronted with Moses, repented of their deceit, and saw the light by the Grace of Allah, according to the Quranic narrative. Though they were threatened and perhaps martyred, their fate must have opened the eyes of the people and prepared them for the remarkable religious revolution which we shall now proceed to describe.

The Pharaoh of the Exodus was probably Thothmes I (about 1540 B.C.). the Pharaoh Amenophis IV (about 1350 B.C.) adopted the worship of the One Supreme God as the State religion. He had been a high priest of the Sungod at Heliopolis, but had begun to look upon the multiplicity of gods in the Egyptian Pantheon as a blot on Egyptian religion. His original name had been Ahmen-hotep ("Ammon is satisfied") as being devoted to Ammon the great god of the State religion at Thebes. He changed the name to Akhan-Aton ("Pious to Aton") and worshipped the Supreme God under the name of Aton. He abandoned the city of Thebes as being devoted to Ammon and founded a new city near the site of what is now Tel al Amarna, between Thebes and Memphis, and dedicated it to Aton the Supreme God.

The clay tablets discovered at Tel al Amarna in 1887 throw much light on the relations of Egypt with her tributaries in Syria. The alphabet on the tablets is the Cuneiform of Assyria: the language is Semitic, and closely akin to Hebrew. unfortunately the religious revolution of Amennophis IV did not last.

The city was only inhabited twenty years. His second son-in-law and successor, Tutankh Aton, carried out a counter-revolution.

He went back from Aton to the cult of Ammon. The recent finds from his tombs show what exquisite skill the artists and artisans of Egypt had been attained. The pure religion remained established on the throne only for two generations but we need not suppose it was rooted out of the minds of the people.

The later Dynasties, XXI to XXXI, saw the decay of Egypt as a Power. The Assyrian and Persian invasions ultimately extinguished the freedom of Egypt. With the coming of Alexander the Great (332m B.C.) and the foundation of the city of Alexandria, a new era dawned on the culture of Egypt. It mingled with Greek and other thought, and became cosmopolitan in nature. Already in the time of Herodotus, the sensitive Greek mind had been impressed with the mystery and wisdom of Egypt. It now made the soil of Egypt cosmopolitan in religion, culture, and philosophy.

The Ptolemaic dynasty held a broadly tolerant attitude, and even imported the rites of Serapis from the Black Sea and assimilated him to Apis the Bull of Memphis. The new cult of Serapis widely over the East, and later, when Egypt came under the Roman Empire (30 B. C.), into the very heart of the Empire. The Serapion in Alexandria, with its famous library, became for a few centuries the true intellectual centre of the world.

The very unfavorable picture drawn of Egyptian religion in Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii* must be referred to the somewhat hybrid cult of Isis as practiced in foreign lands rather than to Egyptian religion generally. What course real Egyptian religion took in this period we have no means of judging accurately. In the light of earlier and later events we may suppose that the steady honest industrious Egyptian peasantry and people went on pursuing the even tenor of their career with the same mystic longing for a practical religion which was preparing them for purer forms of worship and a juster distribution of the fruits of labour.

Alexandria in the first centuries of the Christian era was resounding with the shouts of every kind of philosophy and the teaching of every kind of religious sect, from East and West, North and South, but mainly from the East, which was ever been a nursery of religious ideas. A special quarter was assigned to the Jews in the city. It became the true centre of Hellenised Judaism, and may claim Josephus among its

disciples. Neo-Pythagoreanism, Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism found a home there. Mithraism, which was so widely spread in the Roman Empire, especially in the army, in the first three centuries A.C., was probably represented on its philosophic side in Alexandria. Its intermixture of races, creeds, philosophies, and religions, produced an atmosphere of chaos, which was not cleared until the advent of Islam.

But from a religious point of view our greatest interest in Egypt in the first seven centuries of the Christian era is in the development of Christianity itself. It is difficult to say even when exactly Christianity began to displace the older Egyptian cults. But when Christianity was well-established, we find Egypt one of its most important centres. But the new Christianity which was evolved out of the ruins of the Christ's simple teaching had four distinct attitudes towards organization, speculative doctrine, asceticism and mysticism.

1. The native Egyptians or Coptic Church was contemplative, ascetic, and mystical. Monasticism became so rampant that it seriously affected the growth of population and degraded the position of women.
2. The Alexandrian school developed on Greek lines-political, ambitious, speculative, philosophical, and liable to break up into numerous sects and heresies, each party trying to dominate and put down the others as heretical by the strong arm of the law.
3. The Bishop of Rome, when the seat of the Empire was transferred to Constantinople in 330, gradually developed political power in Italy. He inherited the Roman genius for organization, and the invasion of the Germanic tribes gave him an opportunity not only of extending the Roman Catholic Church over the whole of Central and Western Europe, but of establishing the Church as superior to the state when the Papacy became an established political power.
4. The Orthodox Eastern Church, and all the sects which it fought in the East, tended ultimately to vanish before the advance of Islam. Had it not been for the vast Slav territories over which it obtained sway, in and around Russia and afterwards in Siberia, the Orthodox Eastern

Church would have been reduced to a negligible position like the Coptic Church in Egypt. With pretensions to rule the State, it had yet become, in Kingley's words in Hypatia, the "stipendiary slave-official" of the Empire.

But we are anticipating. Before the Roman Catholic Church parted from the Orthodox Eastern Church, the united Church fought with and suppressed many so-called "heresies", some of which represented the view of primitive Christianity, and the scene of many of these doctrinal fights was in Egypt.

The one that interests us most is Aryanism. Arius was an Alexandrian Presbyter early in the fourth century A.C. and fought hard for the doctrine of Unity, the simple conception of the Eternal God, as against all the hair splitting and irrational distinctions in the nature and persons of the Godhead, which finally crystallized in the doctrine of the Trinity, propounded and maintained with much personal acrimony by Athanasius.

Athanasius himself was born in Alexandria and became Bishop of Alexandria. He may be counted as the father of Orthodoxy (as now understood by Christianity) and the real systematiser of the doctrine of the Trinity—"three in one and one in three." Up to the third century A.C. the Unitarians had been in the majority in the Christian Church, though subtle metaphysicians had started dispute as to the meanings of "God becoming man." The Logos or the Word, the Power of Allah, whether the Father and the Son were of the same substance or of similar substance, whether the Son could be said to have been created by the Father, and numerous questions of that kind. They do not interest us now, but they rent the Christians world into many jarring sects until the mission of our Holy Prophet dissipated the mists and reestablished the doctrine of Unity on a firm and rational basis.

As I have said, the Christian Churches in the East, as well as the Germanic nations which came later into the fold, adhered to Unity although not in the pure form which was made clear in the Holy Quran. The issue was joined between Arius and Athanasius, and the first General Council on the Christian Church, that of Nicaea (in Bithynia) in 325, decided against Arius and Unitarianism.



The controversy, however, still continued to rage until 381, when the Council of Constantinople, called by the Emperor Theodosius the Great, confirmed the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity and declared it to be the only Orthodox one. Though controversies, protests, and persecutions continued long afterwards, we may take that date as the date of the fall of Christianity. Even in Western Christianity, as late as 496, Clovis, the Frankish king, was the only Christian sovereign sophisticated enough to follow the subtle doctrine of the Trinity. The others were brought into line by political power later.

The Christian creed became narrower and narrower, less and less rational, more and more inclined in use earthly weapons to suppress the eternal truth of Allah.

In 415 the Jews were expelled from Alexandria. In the same year and in the same city the beautiful, modest, eloquent philosopher and mathematicians, Hypatia, was murdered-an outrage against both rationalism and the intellectual and religious position of woman in human society. The murder was a particularly brutal one. She was dragged from her chariot in the streets, stripped naked, and suffered a lingering death in a Christian Church. Her body was then cut to pieces and burned.

The worst features of the crime was the complicity of the Patriarch of Alexandria, who was not only the chief religious dignitary of the Orthodox Church in Egypt but the de facto repository of political power. Meanwhile the native Christian community-the Coptic Church-which had all along clung to the Monophysite doctrine, a corrupt form of Unitarianism, was out of the pale, and its members were held down as a depressed class by their Orthodox brethren. The latter also, basking in official sunshine, collected power and property into their own hands. As Kingsley remarks in Hypatia, the Egyptian Church

"ended as mere or false, were equally heretical in their mouths because they used them as watchwords for division."

The social conditions produced an amount of discontent, for which the redress came only with the advent of Islam.

It was for this reason that the Copts and the inhabitants of Egypt generally welcomed the forces of Islam under 'Amr as deliverers in 639 A.C. the power was taken over by the victorious army of Islam from Cyrus (called Muqawqas in Arabic

through the Coptic), the Patriarch of Alexandria, but it was used by the army of deliverance to enlarge the liberties of the Egyptians, to admit them into the universal brotherhood of Islam, and to improve the resources of the country for the benefit of the people. Except a negligible remnant of conservatives, the Egyptians as a nation accepted the religion, the language, and the institutions of the Arabs and embarked on a new course of history, which it is necessary to follow further in this note.

It should be remarked, however, that what happened in Egypt happened generally in western Asia. The jarring sectarian irrational religious gave place before the triumphant religion of Unity and Brotherhood, and the Byzantine Empire receded and receded until it was swept out of existence. The feeble efforts made by the Emperor Leo the Isaurian in 726-731 to restrict the use of images were a reflection of the puritanical zeal of Islam. But they did not succeed in the area of his authority, and they completely alienated the Papacy from the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The Bishop of Rome had been consolidating his power, and in the person of Gregory I (590-604) had already assumed the control of Italy and was seeking the aid and support of the Barbarian invaders who eventually became the pillars of the Papacy.

The final and open rupture between the Orthodox Eastern Church and the Roman Catholic Church took place in 1054. but the earlier dates are remarkable. After the birth of the Holy Prophet of Islam the disruption of the Orthodox Christian Church (which had now become an anachronism) began.

When Islam was making its triumphant march in the 8<sup>th</sup> century after Christ, the original (Greek) Church began to take some steps to put its own house in order. But it had lost its mission, and the new Islamic people took its place. The Western Church has since worked on definitely new lines, and its offshoots among the Protestant Church have consciously or unconsciously, been influenced by the broad principles of Islam.

What the course of future religion may be and how Allah will unfold His All-Wise Plan is not given to us mortals to know.

In the Islamic Brotherhood many changes have taken place and are taking place. Egypt, in spite of her many vicissitudes in the Islamic period, is in the intellectual forefront among the Arabic-speaking nations of Islam. We pray that her people may be guided, through their educational, cultural, and religious channels, to work with a new spirit for the progress of Islam and the glory of Allah.

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## References:

Those given for Appendix IV: and in addition:

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Budge. Book of Dead; A.W. Shorter, Introduction to Egyptian Religion (1931);

Adolf von Harnack, History of Dogma, 7 vols., is an elaborate detailed German account of how Christian Dogma grew up and may be read in an English translation;

a handier book is R.W. Mackay, Rise and Progress of Christianity (1854);

C. Kingsley's novel Hypatia gives a good picture of social and religious conditions in Christian Egypt in the fifth century. On the identity of al Muqawqas (Pkauchios) with Cyrus,

see Dr. A.J. Butler's "Arab Conquest of Egypt." (Oxford 1902), pp. 508-562.

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