

κοογν̄ – The Late Egyptian Background of *gnosis*

by

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There was a time when Egypt's share in the formation of the Hermetic and Gnostic currents of the 1st to 4th centuries was held in low esteem. At the famous colloquium of Messina, Bleeker (1967) and Kakosy (1967) argued in favour of some Egyptian influence, or at least an Egyptian 'Bodengeschmack', in Gnostic literature, but were met with general scepticism. Already some years before the Messina colloquium, however, scholars had begun to doubt that Egyptian elements in the Hermetic literature could be reduced to mere pseudoepigraphic pretensions,¹ and today, there is a consensus among scholars that ancient Egyptian religious traditions have contributed in a profound and substantial way to the formation of Hermetism.² We have seen this reflected in the papers of Hans Dieter Betz, Martin Krause, and Jean-Pierre Mahé. In the case of the Nag Hammadi Texts, the situation is different. Instances of Egyptian influence has been pointed out or suggested³ but the fact remains that in the non-hermetic texts there is very little that points to the religious tradition of ancient Egypt.

Although the Nag Hammadi texts are written in the Egyptian language, their key notions and even a number of the conjunctions used to blaze the path of arguments are Greek loan words, and some of the texts are undoubtedly translations from the Greek. References to – and borrowings from – the Greek, the Jewish and the Christian religious traditions are extremely common in the texts, and some texts simply presume in their readership a rather de-

tailed knowledge of the Old Testament. On the whole, such loans and borrowings almost dominate the greater part of the library. There are very few original motifs and ideas in these texts. An important exception, however, is the idea of *gnosis*.

Hans Jonas excellently characterized the logic of the gnostic idea of religious knowledge by stating that as the knowledge of God, of the order and development of the upper worlds, and of the salvation of man it is a knowledge of the unknowable "and therefore itself not a natural condition."⁴ This condition is attained in revelational experience, "either through sacred and secret lore or through inner illumination"⁵, and not through rational argument. It is not rationally conveyed information that guides its receiver towards salvation; the knowledge called *gnosis* implies in itself a modification of the human condition and is thus more directly instrumental in the bringing about of salvation.

"Thus gnostic "knowledge" has an eminently practical aspect. The ultimate "object" of *gnosis* is God: its event in the soul transforms the knower by making him a partaker in the divine existence (which means more than assimilating him to the divine essence). Thus in the more radical systems like the Valentinian the "knowledge" is not only an instrument of salvation but itself the very form in which the goal of salvation, i.e. ultimate perfection, is possessed. In these cases

knowledge and attainment of the known by the soul are claimed to coincide – the claim of all true mysticism.”⁶

In this way Jonas points out the fundamental difference of the gnostic idea of knowledge from those of Greek epistemology; it is in fact one of his major merits to have brought out the originality of Gnosticism. The very idea of gnosis, he says, “defeats all attempts at derivation that concern more than the outer shell of expression.”⁷

The very precise formulations of Jonas were important in their time because they took a stand against simplifying and distorting views like von Harnack’s idea of Gnosticism as “the acute Hellenization of Christianity” and the current view of the Corpus Hermeticum as a collection of Middle Platonic commonplaces, clad in Egyptian mystifications. Although these views are no longer part of the debate, it is still important to be aware that *gnosis*, although a Greek word, was to the Greek-speaking world a novel and original concept.

Kurt Rudolph’s monograph on Gnosticism has a much broader empirical basis than was available to Jonas, due, of course, mainly to the publication of the Nag Hammadi library and the general increase in Gnostic studies that it caused. Yet Rudolph’s account of the idea of gnosis cannot be found in any disagreement with that of Jonas, even though it has a clearer historical reference. Also Rudolph sees Gnostic knowledge as distinct from intellectual or theoretical knowledge, and as having a liberating and redeeming effect. It is given to the elect through revelation and is thus esoteric in character. To this formal account of the notion of gnosis Rudolph adds an important statement on the nature of Gnostic teachings:

“All gnostic teachings are in some form part of the redeeming knowledge which gathers together the object of knowledge (the di-

vine nature), the means of knowledge (the redeeming gnosis) and the knower himself. The intellectual knowledge of the teaching which is offered as revealed wisdom has here a direct religious significance since it is at the same time understood as otherworldly and is the basis for the process of redemption. A man who possesses “gnosis” is for that reason a redeemed man ...”⁸

This statement unfolds Jonas’ account of the notion of gnosis to include the very texts that are the basis for the historical study of gnosis and Gnosticism. Gnostic teachings and gnostic texts are more or less identical, since it is fair to assume that the texts were used in teaching and also reflect the situation of teaching. The teachings of gnostic texts are not information, they are a revealed knowledge which, due to its otherworldly origin, will redeem the knower.

Now the highly original and, as Jonas has it, underivable notion of gnosis has an autochthonous coptic equivalent: $\text{COOY}\bar{\text{N}}$. It is used in Eugnostos (NHC III, 3 and V, I), probably one of the oldest Nag Hammadi texts, exactly in the sense attributed to gnosis by Kurt Rudolph: Eugnostos speaks of his own teachings as $\text{APXH NC O OY}\bar{\text{N}}$, ‘beginnings of gnosis’.⁹ Among the Nag Hammadi texts, Eugnostos is also the one that most conspicuously brings out what Jonas called the “eminently practical aspect” of gnosis. Eugnostos ends his epistle with the following words:

“But all this, which I have told you above, I have told in such a way that you will be able to bear it, until that which cannot be taught is revealed in you – and all this shall it tell you in joy and pure knowledge ($\text{COOY}\bar{\text{N}}$) (III, 90,4ff.).

Eugnostos speaks of gnosis or $\text{COOY}\bar{\text{N}}$ as the revelational experience which cannot in itself be taught, since it transcends rational discourse, but of which the teachings of his epistle are

nevertheless the *arche* or, to emphasize the practical, pedagogical aspect, the preparation.

ϙοογῆ is an Egyptian word, and in fact only the Greek letters distinguish it from Late Egyptian and Demotic *swn*. The authors or the translators of those Gnostic texts that use this word must thus have felt that their own language had a word that would appropriately render the novel and original concept of a revelational religious knowledge. It would therefore not be without interest to trace the history and the meanings assumed by the word *swn*.

The short history of *swn*, which comes into religious use in the Hellenistic period, has, however, a long prehistory. In Egyptian funerary literature from the Pyramid Texts to the Greco-Roman Period, there was an idea of ritual knowledge, for which the word *rh* was used. – *rh* was the everyday word for knowing, but as a religious concept it shares many logical properties with gnosis as characterized by Hans Jonas and Kurt Rudolph. One of the points made by Jonas is that in gnosis, the relation of knowing is mutual: to know is also to be known.¹⁰ A very similar idea is very widespread in ancient Egyptian funerary literature; let me just quote a Pyramid Text from c. 2200 BC:

“Whoever really knows it, this utterance of Re, and recites them, these spells of Harakhti, he shall be the familiar of (lit. one known by) Re, he shall be the companion of Harakhti.” (Pyr. 855-856).¹¹

This may conveniently be compared with one of the texts from the Gospel of Truth which Rudolph quotes as illustration of his account:

“If anyone has gnosis, he is a being who comes from above ...”¹²

Due to the time schedule of our conference, you will have to take my word that there are hundreds of examples in Egyptian funerary lit-

erature of a kind of ritual knowledge – of spells, gods, mythological events and features etc. – which serves to render the deceased person co-primeval with the gods and the mythological features of which he claims to have knowledge. The knowledge is a ritual competence, as priests and kings have it, but at the same time, not unlike gnosis, the fulfilment of the ritual purpose. A few examples will have to represent the whole bulk of evidence:

In the *Coffin Texts* extant from the end of the Old Kingdom through the Middle Kingdom, this idea of religious knowledge becomes very important and very explicit, both in the spells and in rubrics. In the spells, the deceased claims knowledge of gods, mythology, and the beyond, and the spell itself represents such a knowledge:

“As for him who knows this spell for going down into them (the paths of the beyond), he himself is a god, in the suite of Thoth ...”¹³

The spell may also, not unlike some Gnostic and apocalyptic texts, claim for itself a primeval status:

“This is the word which was in (the primeval) darkness. As for any spirit who knows it, he will live among the living. (...) As for any man who shall know it, he will never perish there ...”¹⁴

A few texts from the New Kingdom *Book of the Dead* may assist us in clarifying the idea of religious knowledge in Egyptian funerary literature. In its introduction, the text of the famous chapter 17 is said to be “*akh* to the person who performs it on earth.”¹⁵ *Akh* is a state of self-generative or -regenerative power attributed to the gods, the dead, and occasionally, as a ritual status, to the living.¹⁶ Some variants add at the end of the chapter, that if a man recites it, being in a

state of purity, he will *after death* be able to go out into the day and assume whatever shape he may desire. And recited daily by a living man it will keep him hale as long as he lives. It is a fact that tends to be disregarded that chapters of the *Book of the Dead* could be recited by living individuals. The evidence just cited implies that such a recitation had soteriological aims: regeneration after death and protection in life. We have no idea as to the actual frequency of such recitations, but the conclusion is inevitable: there were already in the New Kingdom privately performed rituals in which complicated mythological texts like chapter 17 of the *Book of the Dead* were recited for soteriological purposes. This takes us rather close to the self-initiatory spells of the Greek magical papyri,¹⁷ with which we shall deal below.

This use of the *Book of the Dead* “on earth” is also called knowledge. Chapter 70 ends with the words:

“As for him who knows this book on earth, he shall come out into the day, he shall walk on earth among the living, and his name shall not perish for ever.”¹⁸

The corresponding Coffin Text, spell 228, promises a lifetime of 110 years to him who knows it and would thus also have to be known “on earth”. But the text just quoted is particularly instructive also because the prospects of the knowledge that it holds out are among the general aims of the *Book of the Dead*. A rubric at the end of chapter 72 adds another perspective:

“As for him who knows this book on earth or it is put in writing on the coffin, (...) he shall go out into the day in any shape he desires ...”¹⁹

The knowledge “on earth” and the possession of the mortuary text as a piece of funerary equipment are here said to be equivalent alter-

natives. This has a bearing both on the general character of the funerary literature and on the character of the idea of religious knowledge in these texts: As the recurrent *dd mdw*, “to be recited” suggests, funerary texts represent or replace recitation; the “knowledge” they claim or represent for the deceased is thus no personal, subjective knowledge, but rather a matter of funerary equipment. The *Book of the Dead* is no devotional tractate, and its idea of religious knowledge is still that of a ritual knowledge, efficacious in a ritual sense and without the subjective and experiential dimension of *gnosis*.

On the other hand, even the few examples here adduced from the Pyramid Texts, The Coffin Texts, and the *Book of the Dead* do establish that classical Egyptian religion was acquainted with an idea of religious knowledge uniting the knower and the known and both a prerequisite and a result of ritual. And like revelation, ritual also makes the primeval or the beyond accessible here and now.

There are, of course, obvious differences between ritual and revelation. Above all, in the sense which is relevant here, revelation presupposes a dualism alien to classical Egyptian religion, but prominent in the Hellenistic and Roman world. During the Late Period and the Greco-Roman Period, however, Egyptian religion develops both a “mental” and an apocalyptic dimension that bridges, at least to a certain extent, the gap between ritual and revelation.

This development can be traced above all in the Demotic and Greek magical papyri, which are still very faithful to the classical Egyptian way of constructing magical formulae,²⁰ but open to new applications of the magic art. Whereas classical Egyptian magical texts were designed for practical purposes such as healing or the handling of dangerous situations, their late descendants are definitely more luxurious: Love magic and formulae designed to give enemies nightmares and other disturbances are

frequent, and as the most salient feature, the Demotic and Greek grimoires abound in the kind of "do-it-yourself apocalypticism" that Hopfner (1921) called *Offenbarungszauber*. It is a kind of divination procedure, in which a god is made to appear, sometimes in a dream, sometimes in a vision, in order that he may answer questions. A few examples will illustrate the general character of this revelatory practice:

In a Demotic instruction to produce a horoscope by "the great god Iymhotep",²¹ the magician is told to bring a stool of olive wood, clean and never used by any man on earth, put it in a clean place near his head and cover it with a cloth. He should also provide four bricks and a clay censer, on which to burn wild goose fat pounded with myrrh and a mineral, probably hematite. Then he should recite a spell in Greek for the horoscope and, "without speaking to anyone on earth", lie down and sleep. Then he will see the god "in the likeness of a priest wearing clothes of byssus on his back and wearing sandals on his feet." The god will speak with him about anything he might wish – "with his mouth opposite your mouth". In addition, the magician must prepare the tablet for the horoscope and write his business on a new roll of papyrus to be placed on the tablet. "It sends your stars to you whether they are favorable for your business."

As we gather from the last instructions, the practical outcome of the procedure is a horoscope, related to a definite problem which the user is supposed to state in the Greek formula he recites, and again on the papyrus. This divination procedure has, however, an elaborate and dramatic framework, in which a face to face encounter between the god and the magician is arranged. The vision is a dream, but there is nevertheless a ritual to bring it about; and the ritual and divinatory procedure is reinforced by the subjective religious experience; apocalypticism has entered the private sphere of magic and divination.

The Demotic magical papyri give many similar instructions in the art of revelation and encounter with gods; often a boy acts as intermediary, who sees the gods and reports to the magician. There was probably always a practical divinatory purpose connected with the revelations, but this is not always expressly stated in the text. One formula²² has no other explicit purpose than the one given in its headline: "to see the bark of Pre."

The Greek magical papyri offer a similar, but more varied picture. They have formulae for revelation,²³ sometimes through a dream,²⁴ and instructions and spells that produce a 'direct vision'²⁵ or even a trance.²⁶ The formulae for direct vision often have a supplementary spell for the dismissal of the god, e.g. "Go away, Anubis, to your own thrones, for my health and well-being."²⁷

Side by side with the practical purpose of divination, there is in these instructions and spells an important element of self-initiation, of which the *Mithrasliturgie*²⁸ is the most famous example. The object of the ritual is often the magician himself. He is the person marked out for ritual, he is the one who beholds the god, and the one on whom the blessings of this spectacular revelation, this thrilling experience of the divine or the beyond, are bestowed.

The idea of knowing the unknown or even the unknowable is not alien to Egyptian religion. It is rather so that in the Greco-Roman Period, this idea assumes a novel colouring and a new meaning when contrasted with the normal and reluctantly accepted human condition. To obtain knowledge one must unveil the truth, spread the clouds, penetrate into the deep; it is a matter of apocalypticism, in a broad and not necessarily sinister sense. In the magical papyri, knowledge and experience of the divine was no longer the privilege of kings or priests, and no longer a matter of funerary equipment. In principle, at least, everybody could dress up as a

high priest and share the joy of divine knowledge, but he had to work for it, to prepare his mind and follow certain ritual prescriptions.

In other words, knowledge was no longer only a matter of ritual competence. It was also an act of uncovering and penetrating into the object of knowledge. To this novel aspect of the idea of knowledge corresponds also a new word: *swn*,²⁹ not very frequent in Egyptian, including Demotic, texts, but as Coptic ⲥⲟⲟϣⲏ an important equivalent of the Greek *gnosis*.³⁰

The word *swn* occurs already in a Ramesside juristic text³¹ with the meaning of ‘recognizing’ or ‘identifying’ a stolen thing. This meaning is preserved in Demotic, where it is used about persons recognizing each other,³² but it has also acquired a set of meanings related to the “apocalyptic” aspirations of the time. We catch a glimpse of it in a 30th dynasty statue inscription published by Daressy as “La statue d’un astronome”.³³ In line 3 of the inscription, which deals with the professional merits of the owner in the field of astronomy and calendrical matters, Daressy translated *swn* as ‘clairvoyant’. The text is, however, extremely difficult, and all I dare say is that, as it stands in this text, *swn* refers to the owner’s skill in observing and understanding celestial phenomena.

The Demotic evidence yields a much more accurate idea of the meaning and scope of *swn*. In the famous *Mythus vom Sonnenauge*, the Cat who is the solar Eye creates a sandstorm, so that the poor Kufi, the other protagonist of the story, is no longer able to see the sky. Spiegelberg translates:

»Die Sonne verfinsterte sich am Mittag,
(und) er erkannte (*swn*) den Himmel nicht
(mehr).«³⁴

This is not only to say that to Kufi the sky did not look as he was used to; it means that his sight could not penetrate to the sky. The same story has a more positive example:

»Ich sehe (*swn*) durch [das Meer] bis zum Urgewässer.«³⁵

As a parallel, Spiegelberg (1917, 37, note 13) points to the story of Setne with the wonderful magical formulae found by Naneferkaptah, and by which it becomes possible, among other things, to “see the fish of the deep ...” The story of Setne does not employ *swn*, but Spiegelberg is right in pointing out the similarity of the motifs. The example just quoted from the *Mythus vom Sonnenauge*, however, is not only about sightseeing in the deep, it is about penetrating to the primeval source of existence: Nun.

Very instructive is also a passage about “Psais, the great god”, who has hidden certain things or persons, but *rmt rh p3 nt swn=s*, “der Weise erkennt sie.”³⁶ The use of both *rh* and *swn* side by side clearly demonstrates that *rh* denotes the competence or the capacity, whereas *swn* is the very act of acquiring knowledge by discovery. On the whole, the German ‘*erkennen*’ is a very good standard translation of *swn*, since it means both ‘recognize’ and ‘discover’.

Of related interest are the Instructions of Pap. Insinger,³⁷ which exemplify several nuances of *rh* and twice employs *swn*. The verb *rh* is sometimes almost reduced to an auxiliary, e.g. “He who knows how to hold his heart has the equivalent of every teaching.”³⁸ On the other hand a main idea in these instructions is the *rmt rh*, the knowing or wise man, contrasted with the “fool.”³⁹ Knowledge is even valued as an alternative of fate:

“There is he who is satisfied by fate,
there is he who is satisfied by his wisdom
(*rh*).”⁴⁰

Knowledge, thinking, understanding are key values in the text, and M. Lichtheim (1983, 136 ff.) has convincingly proposed that the author worked towards some Hellenistic concept of *logos* or *nous* on the basis of the idea of the heart

as a center of influences in man. An Egyptian basis for this is, as we have seen, already provided in *The Instruction of Amenemope*. The heart of P. Insinger is, however, considered "secretive and mysterious", as Lichtheim has it, and it is in two passages on knowing the heart that the word *swn* occurs:

"The great god Thoth has set a balance in order to make right measure on earth with it. He placed the heart hidden in the flesh for the right measure of its owner.

(...)

He who knows (*swn*) his own heart, the fate (*š3y*) knows (*swn*) him.

He who is gentle by virtue of his good character creates his own fate."⁴¹

The heart, hidden in the human body, is like a reflection of the balance set for the world. This means that the source of the right measure can be found in one's own heart; and since the heart is hidden, this requires an act of unveiling or penetrating: *swn*. More difficult is the reciprocity of the man who knows his heart and fate. Lichtheim (1983, 140 f.) has pointed out that the text employs two words, *š3y* and *shne*, fate and fortune, as adaptations of the *ananke/tyche* dichotomy of Hellenistic philosophy. If fate is understood as something like *ananke*, it must be related to the right measure and the balance set by Thoth; and since the heart was there for the right measure of its owner and as a reflection of the balance there are evident links between the heart and fate. Thus, as the next line has it, one may create one's own fate when it preexists as an inner "good character". Another aspect of the reciprocity is brought out by a passage a few lines below:

"The god lays the heart on the scales opposite the weight.

He knows (*swn*) the impious and the pious man by his heart."⁴²

The traditional Egyptian idea of the weighing of the heart is here interpreted, or almost *entmythologisiert*, as the god's insight into or through the heart of man. Since we have just been told how the god put it into the flesh of man, this is one of the passages in P. Insinger which are likely to raise discussions about free will, determinism, and theodicy, problems to which neither European philosophy, nor P. Insinger have offered waterproof solutions.⁴³ The interest of the latter was, I believe, much more in the heart as a source of knowledge, a place where divine and human knowledge meet.

But still there remains the mystery of knowing and being known, an inherited mystery, it seems, since we have found it in Egyptian ritual since the Pyramid Texts. There it was intimately linked with ritual imitation, and knowledge was a name for the ritual participation in things divine and primeval and in many ways equivalent to the identification with gods so often found in Egyptian funerary texts. The knowledge by which one became primeval, and therefore also known, was no personal, subjective knowledge. It was ritual, or, to put it bluntly, it was funerary equipment. The knowledge of one's own heart in P. Insinger is undoubtedly personal and subjective, but it has preserved the efficacy of the ritual knowledge. To penetrate to the source of the right measure in oneself is to participate in fate, or even to preexist in the *ananke*. The great god Thoth is not yet Trismegistos, and the *rmt rh* is not yet a Gnostic – but these passages from P. Insinger demonstrate that in the 1st century CE an Egyptian vaguely versed in Hellenistic philosophy, but still recommending to adopt no custom "which differs from those of the land"⁴⁴ could combine the traditional ritual idea of religious knowledge both with the more recent apocalyptic trend, and with novel ideas of an inward quest.

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Notes

1. Cf. Derchain 1962
2. Cf. Daumas 1972; Fowden 1986; Krause 1969; Mahé 1978-82. During the Symposium, Drs. H. Hoffmann & J. Quack called attention to what may prove a "missing link" between ancient Egyptian and Hermetic literature: a Demotic *Book of Thoth* to be published by R. Jasnow & K.-Th. Zauzich – cf. now Mahé 1996.
3. Cf. e.g. Böhlig 1968, 134; Wilson 1988; Parrott 1987; Linder 1991; Quack 1995
4. Jonas 1963, 34
5. Jonas 1963, 34-35
6. Jonas 1963, 35
7. Jonas 1963, 36
8. Rudolph 1983, 55-56

9. NHC III, 74, 20; the parallel text in V, 4, 7-8 has [ἀρχη] ἠπ̄Γ̄η̄ω̄ς̄ῑς̄. III, 76, 13
10. Jonas 1963, 35
11. transl. Faulkner 1969, 152
12. Rudolph 1983, 56: NHC I, 22, 1
13. CT VII 282-283, transl. Faulkner 1973-78, III 132
14. CT VII 364-365, transl. Faulkner 1973-78, III 150
15. Naville 1886 vol. II, 30, 2-3. The text is briefly treated in Englund 1978, 151 f. and correctly interpreted as attributing the state of *akh* to a living person.
16. For the idea of *akh* in general, cf. Englund 1978
17. e.g. PGM IV, 930-1114
18. transl. Faulkner 1989, 71
19. transl. Faulkner 1989, 73
20. Cf. Podemann Sørensen 1992, 172-177
21. PDM xiv. 93-114. Imhotep, the divinized architect of the step pyramid and high priest of heliopolis in the Old kingdom, the Egyptian personification of wisdom, was in the Ptolemaic period also a healing divinity. The hermetic Asclepius is the *interpretatio Graeca/Romana* of Imhotep.
22. PDM xiv. 295-308, cf. 805-816
23. e.g. PGM II. 1-64 f.; III 187-262; IV 1-25; XII 153-160
24. e.g. PGM VII 664-685
25. PGM III 633-731; IV 930-1114; V 54-69; Va 1-3; VII 319-334; VII 335-347; VII 727-739
26. PGM IV 830-929
27. PGM VII 319-334
28. PGM IV 475-829, cf. Dietrich 1923; Meyer 1976
29. Wb. IV 69, 1
30. Crum, Dict. 370 b; For the etymology, cf. Černy 1976 s.v. and Vyciel 1983 s.v.
31. P. Brit. Mus. 10383, 3, 1. Cf. Peet 1930 I, 125 and 127 with note 11
32. Petub. 16,20; Mythus vom Sonnenauge 18, 28; P. Krall 19, 22; Rylands Pap. IX 3,5; Saqqara Demot. Pap. I, Text 2 Back, 35
33. Daressy 1916, 1-5
34. Spiegelberg 1917, 12, 29; cf. Cenival 1998: "il ne reconnut plus le ciel."
35. *ibid.* 13, 30
36. *ibid.* 18, 28
37. Text edition: Lexa 1926; for text variants, philological commentaries and translations, see the bibliography in AEL III, 185-186 and Lichtheim 1983.
38. P. Insinger 8, 3 – cf. AEL III, 191.
39. Cf. Lichtheim 1983, 116 ff.
40. P. Insinger 5, 4 – cf. AEL III, 189; corrected in Lichtheim 1983, 200.
41. P. Insinger 4, 17-18 and 4, 23-5, 1 – cf. AEL III, 188-189.
42. P. Insinger 5, 7-8 – cf. AEL III, 189
43. Cf. Lichtheim 1983, 138-150
44. P. Insinger 4, 10 – cf. AEL III, 188