Egyptian Myths

Don Nardo

THE MYTHOLOGY LIBRARY

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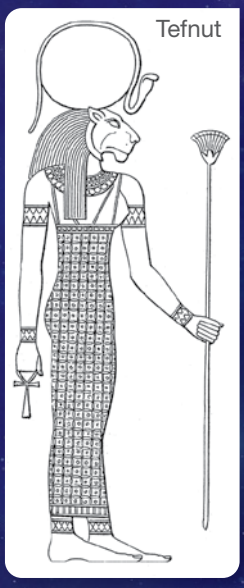
GODS OF CREATION

Atum
(The First God)

Shu
(God of Air)

+

Tefnut
(Goddess of Moisture)



Geb
(Earth God)

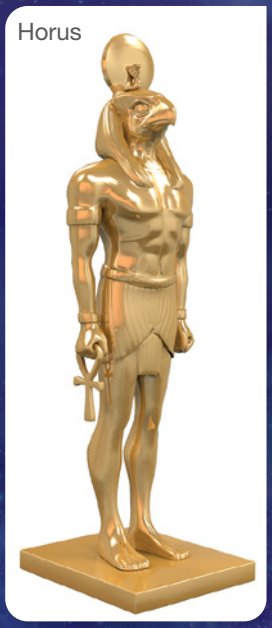
+

Nut
(Sky Goddess)

Isis
(Mother Goddess)

+

Osiris
(Ruler of the Underworld)



Horus
(God of Kingship + Egypt's Protector)

Nephthys
(God of Mummies)

+

Seth
(God of War + Storms)

Anubis
(God of the Dead)

How the World and People Came to Be

At first there was only an infinite expanse of water. There was no land at all, nor did any living things dwell within that limitless primordial sea. But this situation was not destined to exist forever. To this day no one can say for sure how it happened, but in some wonderfully miraculous manner, the mysterious and gifted god Ptah quite suddenly sprang into being and floated above the boundless ocean. From the start, he possessed the power of speech, and it was through that ability—the uttering of one command after another—that he began creating things. It was the power of Ptah's tongue, an ancient inscription states, that brought into being "all gods, all people, all cattle, all creeping things that live."[4]

PTAH
An Egyptian god who protected craftspeople and created the world through the spoken word

After setting the creation in motion, great Ptah decided he wanted help in that mighty endeavor. One of the first gods he "spoke" into being was Atum. Atum had inherited Ptah's driving urge to create meaningful things out of nothingness. As a result, Atum proceeded to create the first patch of dry land, the *ben-ben*. Standing upon it, he aided Ptah in carrying on the miraculous process of the creation.

So say the words carved into the Shabaka Stone. Dating from the late 700s BCE, that ancient text was a copy of a far older text created in ancient Egypt's first capital, Memphis, located 15 miles (24 km) south of modern-day Cairo. The original

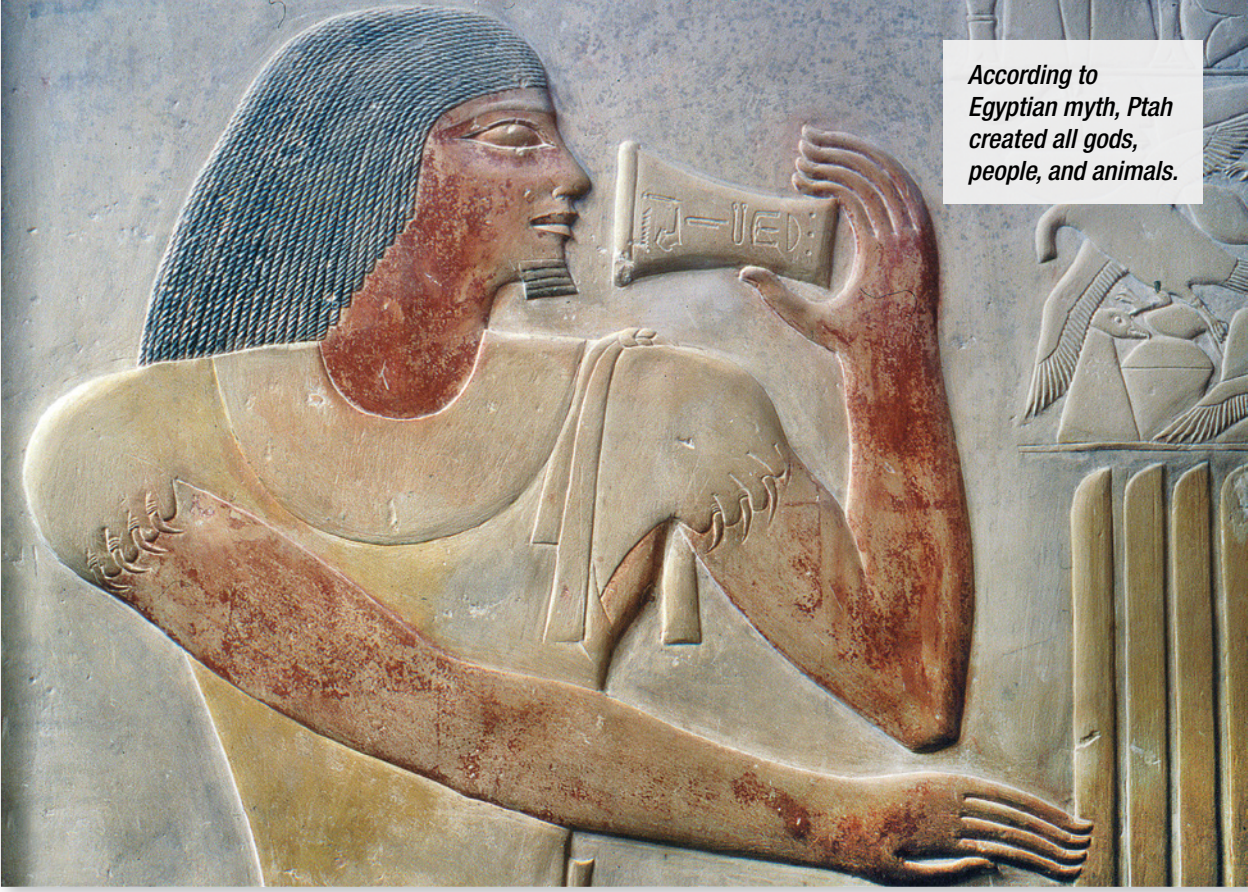
text summarized the creation account championed by the city's high priests. For that reason, it has come to be called the Memphite Theology.

Because these priests lived so long ago and left behind so few writings, it is difficult to know exactly why they chose to promote Ptah as the initial creator deity. However, modern Egyptologists and other scholars have made some educated guesses in that respect. The selection of Ptah, they suggest, may have been related to the fact that he was seen as the champion and protector of craftspeople and artists. Such individuals had an ability to do something that most other people could not. They could conceive of a useful or beautiful object and then, through talent and skill, create that object from various raw materials. The belief was that such special skills came from Ptah himself. It made sense, therefore, that this deity was the original creator of *all* things. Egyptologist James P. Allen summarizes what may have motivated the thinking of the Memphite priests:

> Crafts such as building and sculpture involve an initial concept in the artisan's mind. Eventually, through the artist's skill, this concept takes shape as a finished building, or a statue carved from stone. To the Memphite [priests], the link between the artist's concept and the ultimate transformation of his raw material was the force embodied by the god Ptah. Ptah's theologians united the two concepts of craftsmanship and the creative word into a single theory of creation.[5]

A Nation Favored by the Gods?

A tale such as the Memphite Theology—describing how the world and all things within it got started—is called a cosmogony. Although the cosmogony detailing Ptah's creation exploits was well known throughout ancient Egypt, so were three other major creation stories. One came from the city of Iunu (located where modern-day Cairo now stands), better known in later ages by



According to Egyptian myth, Ptah created all gods, people, and animals.

its Greek name—Heliopolis. Another cosmogony came from the town of Khemnu (located100 miles [161 km] south of Memphis), later better known by its Greek name, Hermopolis. And the fourth major creation story originated in the city of Thebes (lying a few hundred miles south of Hermopolis).

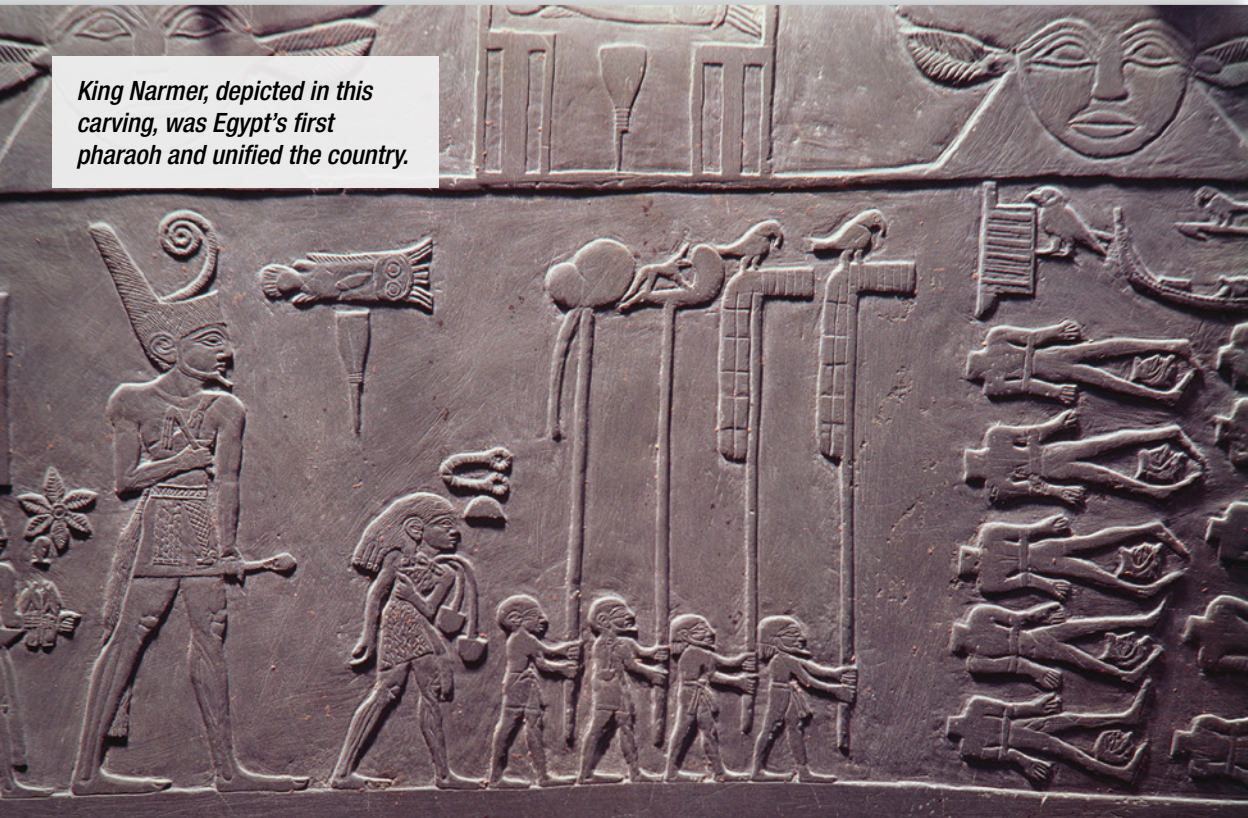
These four cosmogonies have certain similarities. All feature a primeval, infinite ocean, for example, and all four call the first land to appear within those waters the ben-ben. But the four stories also differ in certain respects, especially about which god or gods did the creating and exactly how. Moreover, some parts of the four creation accounts actually contradict one another. And yet the Egyptians accepted all four cosmogonies as equally valid.

The reason for this can be found in Egypt's ancient history. Before Egypt became a unified country under the first pharaoh, Narmer, in about 3100 BCE, each of the many Egyptian regions and towns worshipped a local deity or deities. Those gods,

thought to oversee and protect the local people, were often different from the ones worshipped a mere hundred miles to the north or south. Similarly, a given region or town sometimes had its own creation myth, usually featuring the local protector god.

When Narmer eventually united all these regions and towns into a single nation, he recognized that selecting only one cosmogony and creator deity for everybody would likely cause widespread discontent. For the sake of maintaining order and loyalty, therefore, he wisely kept all the former gods and religious traditions. As scholar Leonard H. Lesko explains, "Gradually, or perhaps quickly, local myths from throughout the country were brought together into a system. . . . One cannot be sure how long it took to create this national mythology, which sought to include almost every god and thereby to satisfy almost every person. It was a product of genius, however, and laid the foundation for one of the longest-lived civilizations in history."[6]

In spite of the differences in the four creation stories, the fact that they had all become part of the national mythology was one



King Narmer, depicted in this carving, was Egypt's first pharaoh and unified the country.

Speech via the Heart or the Brain?

According to the Memphite creation tale, the god Ptah created things via the spoken word. That is, he either named or verbally described an object or living being, and within mere seconds that object or being materialized, seemingly out of nowhere. For example, a surviving stone carving found at Memphis quotes Ptah as saying that he created the deity Atum "from [my] tongue." Interestingly, the same inscription has Ptah say that Atum "came into being from [my] heart." Moreover, "every word of [mine] came into being through what the heart thought and the tongue commanded." At first glance, creating something via the heart appears to contradict the idea of creation through the tongue, or speech. However, Egyptologists point out that the word *heart* in the inscription does not mean the same thing it means today. The fact is that the Egyptians mistakenly believed that the heart, rather than the brain, is the seat of intelligence, thinking, and personality. As a result, it was also believed that the gods sometimes spoke to humans via the heart.

Quoted in Leonard H. Lesko, "Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology," in Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Religion in Ancient Egypt*. Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 96.

reason the Egyptian people came to view them as equally acceptable. The other reason was the air of mystery surrounding the creation. The country's priests, regardless of which cosmogony they promoted, reminded the citizenry that the creation was so ancient that the exact facts surrounding it would likely always be unclear and perhaps even beyond human comprehension. According to this view, the important thing about the creation was that it had occurred in Egypt. And that made Egypt what later Latin writers would call the axis mundi, or center of the world. Therefore, the gods favored Egypt above all other nations and peoples.

Atum and the Sacred Ennead

Still another reason that the four differing creation stories seemed acceptable to average Egyptians was that some of those accounts combined elements from others. A prominent example was the Memphite cosmogony, in which Ptah created Atum, who then fashioned the first patch of land. This version of the creation essentially added Ptah and his contributions to another version in which Atum was the main creator deity.

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