CHAPTER THREE

CREATION STORIES IN ANCIENT EGYPT

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ich zweifle nicht daran, daß sie zum größten Teil
Dichtung sind, nicht aber im Sinn willkürlicher Erfin-
dung, sondern im Sinne eines Ausdrucksversuches,
der tief erlebte seelische Vorgänge im Kleide sicht-
barer Ereignisse darstellt
Hermann Hesse, Der Steppenwolf, Suhrkamp 1974, 29

Introduction

Historians of any period or place popularised in their time face the particu-
lar challenge of levelling the field, to ensure accurate appreciation. This task is the same for ‘ancient Egypt’ as for ‘Elizabethan England’. Therefore, in an account of evidence from Egypt 3000–30 B.C., the reader must first attempt consciously to set aside or at least to recognise prejudices and assumptions they might hold. Contemporary European attitudes to Egypt involve two and a half thousand years of written transmission, a mythopoesis over the long duration. Egypt has become contested terrain in the debates over history of beliefs, and of peoples. Egyptology represents a typical branch of philological orientalism, professing neutrality, yet implicated in the story of Western colonialism, with its essentialist historical constructs such as ‘(ancient) Egypt’ and ‘the (ancient) Egyptians’. Attitudes to race have reinforced barriers between disciplines. A deep Western racism denies Africa any human profile other than that of the village level, safely containable within a Western construct of African archaeology and African anthropology as study of the rural, not the urban. Archaeologists and anthropologists

3 For early urban Egypt, cf Kemp 1977.
working with material from, for example, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Niger, Sudan, or Zimbabwe must contend openly and self-critically with this often sub-conscious prejudice. If they fail, the study of humankind cannot achieve any level comparison, and the equal humanity in each society—rural or urban or both—disappears.

At present, we all tend to fail. Identical content, for example number symbolism or the poetic imagery of flowers, is subject to markedly different reception according to provenance. If the imagery come from a setting approved by the modern audience, from Kabbalah to Veda, it can be praised as an intellectually sophisticated mysticism; if not from an approved source, the same imagery may be considered primitive magical thought. In part this differential reception reflects different degrees of familiarity with written and visual content, and here the orientalist philologists may find an opportunity to redeem themselves, by disseminating forgotten or marginalised written and visual content.4

Certain preliminary observations may be made to encourage innovative research in the comparative study of creation stories. In the first place, the objects of this comparative research involve human subjects that are difficult to reduce to the level of similar and different, however heuristically and didactically useful this may be for introducing an unfamiliar society. Differences and similarities may mislead when taken separately. A tendency to focus exclusively on similarities between different societies or periods resulted in postwar structuralist anthropology, and in prewar diffusionist archaeology and history.5 More recently, the differences between societies have been identified as more appropriate objects of research, in the continuing specialisation within both archaeology and anthropology. Although this is dominant in contemporary research, it is not necessarily much more productive than the opposite extreme. Similarities and differences may be interesting in comparative study, but they should be understood as interpretative and partial aspects of the complexities of human social interaction.

It is also important to emphasise how much the history of ideas across societies includes history of science, with a material focus on the technologies of knowledge within the history of science. Creation belief involves the specific ideas of the particular society or group on both ‘physics’ (notions of space and of time), and ‘medicine’ (explicit or implicit theories of human conception and anatomy). There is a

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4 Cf Assmann 1990a: 14.
5 Cf Renfrew and Bahn 2000: 34.