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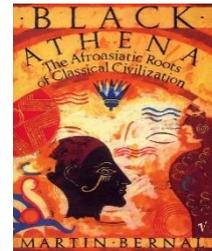
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## EGYPTIAN WISDOM AND GREEK TRANSMISSION FROM THE DARK AGES TO THE RENAISSANCE

### MISIR BİLGELİĞİ VE YUNANLILARCA KARANLIK ÇAĞLARDAN RÖNESANS'A AKTARILMASI

Bernal, M. (1991). *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Vol.I., The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*, Vintage, London.



Martin Bernal, in the second chapter of *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, addresses Ancient Egypt after the fall of its highly developed civilization. Egyptian religion survives within Christianity and in other heretical sects such as the Gnostics and Hermetics, who were actually pagan. The destruction of the great library of Alexandria by a Christian mob and the murder of brilliant philosopher and mathematician Hypatia in the same city by monks demonstrate the end of Egyptian-Paganism and the beginning of the Christian era. However, the Aryanists see these events as “a resurgence of Egyptian Oriental fanaticism against Hellenistic rationalism” (Bernal, 1991:122).

Roman rulers, the Macedonian and Egyptian upper-classes, and even priesthoods fused together in the Hellenistic civilisation with Egyptian religion. However, poor and middle-class Egyptians came to represent the Christianity that came from Palestine after the second century BC to the Hellenized upper classes who still held the beliefs of Egyptian paganism. Compared with Judaism, Christianity was more universal and had the capacity for organisation. These two factors affected the destruction of Egyptian religion and the beginning of a new age for the world. Both for the Jews and the Roman Empire, a new age was dawning which is expressed in Messianism and was associated with a new astrological change from Aries to Pisces with the discovery of a new equinox. Christians and Egyptian-paganists shared some symbols such as the star and the fish. While stars are associated with important Messianic leaders in Christianity, they are associated with gods in the Egyptian religion. Fish are also sacred images in Christianity that are closely linked with Christ and the Last Supper; similarly, some Egyptian gods are associated with fish. The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is seen in both religions. The social, economic, and national pressures on Egyptian religion and the coincidence of the change from Aries to Pisces and the Sothic cycle completion brought the destruction of Egyptian religion.

While Egypt was diversifying politically and religiously, people were uncertain about the various forms of religious practices, so they began to develop different kinds of practices. Hermeticism, Neo-Platonism, and Gnosticism did not have formal organizations but instead offered individual systems of

beliefs so they seemed perfectly suited to life after the collapse of Egyptian religion. Among these three, Hermeticism is thought to be the oldest and it contains Greek, Judaic, Mesopotamian, Persian, and Egyptian influences. Hermeticism is based on the sacred texts of the Hermetic Corpus which was written by Hermes Trismegistus. Thoth was the inventor of writing and the originator of mathematics, a master of magic spells, and a great communicator with Anubis the Jackal, a guide to the soul and messenger of death. Hermes as the messenger of gods in Greek religion is the combination of Thoth and Anubis. As a syncretic combination of Egyptian Thoth and Greek Hermes, Hermeticism presents the justification of the Ancient Model despite modern Aryan thinkers. Reitzenstein and Festugiere see Hermeticism as Persian, hence Aryan; however, their judgements are anachronistic since the writing of the Hermetic Corpus antedates both Alexander the Great and Plato. Another element that the Aryanists opposed was abstract Platonic philosophy. They denied that the Egyptians were capable of abstract and philosophical thought. However, the Egyptian text *Memphite Theology* describes a cosmogony that has Ptah, the local god of Memphis and his emanation Atum as the primal beings. "Ptah created the world in his heart, the seat of his mind, and actualised it through his tongue, the act of speech" (Bernal, 1991:140). Although Father Festugiere and Boylan deny it, it clearly fits with the Christian idea of logos, "the Word which already was, the Word dwelt with God, and what God was, the Word was, the Word was with God at the beginning" (Bernal, 1991:140). James Breasted, the translator of *Memphite Theology*, claims that the Greeks received the first impulse of their Gods from Egypt.

Hermeticism has two types of euhemerism: the first is the non-personalised abstraction of natural forces and the second is the turning of gods and goddesses into mortal sages. As an example of the first type, in Egyptian religion, the temples of cults were sometimes equated with the divinities. Beginning with Hermes, one can see euhemerization which turns a god to a sage when Hermes becomes a philosopher and a moral teacher in later tradition. J. E. G. Hoffman clearly shows the euhemerization process, stating that Thoth-Taautus, founder of knowledge and wisdom, was identified with Hermes-Mercury of the Greeks and Romans under the title of Hermes Trismegistos. Euhemerism was used in early Christian times to diminish and tame pagan gods, but contradictorily it allowed them to survive under the new religion. For example, Neit/Athena was incorporated as St. Catherine, Horus/Perseus as St. George, and Anubis/Hermes as St. Christopher. In Islam, Hermes Trismegistos is identified with Idris, a prophet who appears in the *Quran*. Idris is seen as the father of philosophers in Sabiis' belief. Their sacred book was the *Malakat-ul Hermes* and it consisted of counsels that Idris gave his son. Apart from this, Sabiis' beliefs resemble those of Egyptian religion especially in their glorification of the light and the Sun.

All three sects-Hermeticism, Neo-Platonism, and Gnosticism-contain the same elements: "the concept of man as the measure of all things, the eight spheres or firmaments which can be transcended, and the tendencies towards magic" (Bernal, 1991:147). Judaism had this kind of mysticism that is best expressed in the Kabbalah tradition wherein mystery is revealed through the intense study of the significance and numerology of the letters of the Bible. It also includes the trinities, the concept of the Hidden God, the logos or mediating spirit, and the eight spheres and their transcendence by the well-trained mystics. The Byzantium Empire and Christian Western Europe were very interested in Neo-Platonism and Hermeticism. The hierarchy was the Bible, Egyptian and Oriental wisdom, and the Greeks, but the main interest was actually Egyptian wisdom. In the Dark and Middle ages, Hermeticism did not die out since the interest in magic continued.

Early twentieth century historians presented the Renaissance as purely influenced by the Greeks, but its relation to Egypt and the Oriental was integral to the whole movement. Those Renaissance scholars were not interested in the Greeks of Homer or Perikles but instead picked from pagan Antiquity. It was like showing respect to Egypt, the East and Oriental mystery. The most important characteristics of the Renaissance -the "vision of the infinite potential of man" and "man is the measure of all things"- were taken from the Neo-Platonic and Hermetic traditions. (Bernal, 1991:152) In the fifteenth century, Italian scholars were aware of the importance of Egyptian and Hermetic texts. *Hieroglyphika* by Horapollo, an Egyptian, was brought to Italy and translated. The book proved that the hieroglyphs were about mysteries since one sign included many secret meanings. During the Renaissance, the Egyptians were seen as the origin of all wisdom and arts. There was also the great interest shown by Renaissance men and women in Egyptian philosophy. Giordano Bruno supports this idea in the following century: "We Greeks own Egypt, the grand monarchy of letters and nobility, to be the parent of our fables, metaphors

and doctrines” (Bernal,1991:153). Renaissance scholars looked beyond Plato because, for them, there were Pythagoras, Orpheus, and Egypt for their magic, science, and philosophy. In the fifteenth century, Pico Della Mirandola combined Neo-Platonic ideas with Kabbalah to form a belief that was based on Christianity, as well as on the mystical basis of Egyptian hieroglyphs and Hebrew numbers and letters. Moreover, in the sixteenth century, Thomas Campanella mentioned Kabbalism, which is the fusion of Jewish and Egyptian traditions, in his works.

Renowned scientist Copernicus believed Neo-Platonism and put the sun in the centre of the world as the source of light, seeing it as a second or third god; thus, he shared the same belief as to the Ancient Egyptians who also considered the sun the central divinity. Also, his mathematical modelling was based on Islamic sources that again show Oriental influences on him. In the sixteenth century, the great scientist Giordano Bruno went beyond Christianity not just intellectually but also politically by believing in Egypto-Paganism, but he was burnt for his beliefs by the Inquisition. After the Reformation, the Calvinist Lambert Dan-eau claimed that the Egyptians were the teachers of the Greeks and that we learned natural philosophy from them; in other words, science came from the Egyptians. He even claimed that the Egyptians learned astrology from the Syrians, specifically from a man called Moschos, who is claimed to be Moses. Finally, it is clear that the Ancient model is not reliable since there are many gaps and anachronisms in the Aryanist’s accounts. It is obvious that the Egyptians were the father of all wisdom and arts and their role was foundational in the development of Greek culture. Although many Aryanist scholars claim just the opposite, the Egyptians’ philosophy, art, astronomy, and magic became a starting point for one of the most important intellectual eras in Europe, the Renaissance.

## REFERENCES

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