

Hymn to the Nile ca. 1350-1100 B.C.E.

Ancient Egypt, unlike Mesopotamia, shared a unified political structure, religious beliefs, and culture for most of its history. Around 3100 B.C.E., King Narmer-Menes unified the two separate kingdoms of Egypt: Lower Egypt, the delta land where the Nile emptied into the Mediterranean, and Upper Egypt, a narrow strip of land that the Nile watered as it ran north through the desert. The economy of the ancient Egyptians depended entirely on the success of crops and trade along the river, and the Egyptians worshipped the river as a god. As this hymn extols the river's virtues, it becomes a catalogue of daily life in Egypt.

WORSHIP OF THE NILE

Hail to thee, O Nile, that issues from the earth and comes to keep Egypt alive! Hidden in his form of appearance, a darkness by day, to whom min-strels have sung. He that waters the meadows which Re created, in order to keep every kid alive. He that makes to drink the desert and the place dis-tant from water: that is his dew coming down (from) heaven. The beloved of Geb [God of the earth], the one who controls Nepri [God of grain], and the one who makes the craftsmanship of Ptah 15 to flourish.

The lord of fishes, he who makes the marsh-birds to go upstream. There are no birds which come down because of the hot winds. He who makes barley and brings emmer [wheat] into being, that he may make the temples festive. If he is sluggish, ... the nostrils are stopped up, and every-body is poor. If there be (thus) a cutting down in the food-offerings of the gods, then a million men perish among mortals, covetousness is practiced, the entire land is in a fury, and great and small are on the execution-block. (But) people are different when he approaches. Khnum 16 constructed him. When he rises, then the land is in jubilation, then every belly is in joy, every backbone takes on laughter, and every tooth is exposed.

The bringer of food, rich in provisions, creator of all good, lord of maj-esty, sweet of fragrance. What is in him is satisfaction. He who brings grass into being for the cattle and (thus) gives ... sacrifice to every god, whether he be in the underworld, heaven, or earth, him who is under his authority. He who takes in possession the Two Lands [Upper and Lower Egypt], fills the magazines,¹⁷ makes the granaries wide, and gives things (to) the poor.

He who makes every beloved tree to grow, without lack of them. He who brings a ship into being by his strength, without hewing in stone. The enduring image with the White Crown. 18 He cannot be seen; (he has) no taxes; he has no levies; no one can read of the mystery; no one knows the place where he is; he cannot be found by the power of writing. (He has) no shrines; he has no portion. He has no service of (his) desire. (But) generations of thy children jubilate for thee, and men give thee greeting as a king, stable of laws, coming forth (at) his season and filling Upper and Lower Egypt. ... (Whenever) water is drunk, every eye is in him, who gives an excess of his good. He who was sorrowful is come forth gay Vomiting forth and making the field to drink. Anointing the whole land. Making one man rich and laying another, (but) there is no coming to trial with him, who makes satisfaction without being thwarted, for whom no boundaries are made.

A maker of light when issuing from darkness, a fat for his cattle. His limits are all that is created. There is no district which can live without him. Men are clothed ... with flax from his meadows, for (he) made Hedjhotep [Goddess of weaving] for his service. (He) made anointing with his unguents, being the associate of Ptah in his nature, bringing into being all service in him, all writings and divine words, his responsibility in Lower Egypt.

Entering into the underworld and coming forth above, loving to come forth as a mystery. If thou art (too) heavy (to rise), the people are few, and one begs for the water of the year. (Then) the rich man looks like him who is worried, and every man is seen (to be) carrying his weapons. This is no companion backing up a companion. There are no garments for clothing; there are no ornaments for the children of nobles. There is no listening at night, that one may answer with coolness. There is no anointing for anybody.

He who establishes truth in the heart of men, for it is said: "Deceit comes after poverty." If one compares thee with the great green sea, which does not ... control the Grain-God, whom all the gods praise, there are no birds coming down from his desert. His hand does not beat with gold, with making ingots of silver. No one can eat genuine lapis lazuli. (But) barley is foremost and lasting.

Men began to sing to thee with the harp, and men sing to thee with the hand. The generations of thy children jubilate for thee. Men equip mes-sengers for thee, who come (back) bearing treasures (to) ornament this land. He who makes a ship to prosper before mankind; he who sustains hearts in pregnant women; he who loves a multitude of all (kinds of) his cattle.

When thou risest in the city of the ruler, then men are satisfied with the goodly produce of the meadows Oh for the little lotus-blossoms, everything that pours forth upon earth, all (kinds of) herbs in the hands of children! They have (even) forgotten how to eat. Good things are strewn about the houses. The land comes down frolicking. When the Nile floods, offering is made to thee, oxen are sacrificed to thee, great oblations¹⁹ are made to thee, birds are fattened for thee, lions are hunted for thee in the desert, fire is provided for thee. And offering is made to every (other) god, as is done for the Nile, with prime incense, oxen, cattle, birds, and flame. The Nile has made his cavern in Thebes, and his name is no (longer) known in the underworld. Not a god will come forth in his form, if the plan is ignored.

O all men who uphold the Ennead,²⁰ .. fear ye the majesty which his son, the All-Lord, has made, (by) making verdant the two banks. So it is "Verdant art thou!" So it is "Verdant art thou!" So it is "O Nile, verdant art thou, who makest man and cattle to live!" It has come to a good and successful end.

Studying Questions:

1. In what ways did ancient Egyptians worship and describe the Nile?
2. What does the Nile provide for Egypt? What harm can the Nile cause?

15 Ptah: God of creation who was associated with inundated fields.

16 Khn um: God who was both the source of the Nile and creator of human bodies.

17 magazines: Stores for military equipment.

18 White Crown: The symbol of Upper Egypt worn by the pharaohs.

19 oblations: Offerings.

20 Ennead: A group of nine deities.