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Ocular desire in a time of darkness. Urban festivals and divine visibility in Ancient Egypt

In the cult chapel of a certain Pairi in Thebes (Theban Tomb Nr. 139), erected around 1420 BCE, a visitor named Pawah, some 80 years later, scribbled a graffito on the left jamb of an inner doorway¹ which has been generally understood as being the complaint of a man about his blindness and the prayer for restoration of his sight.² The true meaning and significance of the text becomes only clear, however, when we look closely into what the man is really complaining of.³

Year 3, third month of inundation, day 10.

The king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the two lands,
Ankh-kheprure, beloved of..., the son of Re Nefernefruten beloved of
Wan[re].

1 Giving praise⁴ to Amun,

2 prostration before Onnophris⁵,

1 For the location see B. Porter, R. Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings*, I.1, Oxford ²1960, 253 (5). The text has been edited by Gardiner, "The Graffito from the Tomb of Pere", in: *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 14, 1928, pp. 10–11; for a recent German translation see my *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete*, Zürich 1975, Nr.147.

2 See most recently A. Barucq, F. Daumas, *Hymnes et prières de l'Égypte ancienne*, Paris 1980, pp. 203ff. No. 71: "prière d'un aveugle à Amon".

3 The following translation makes use of G. Fechts reconstruction of Egyptian metrics. The text (including title but not date and subscript) seems to be divided into two parts of 23 and 19 verses, each of them containing 4 stanzas.

4 Instead of *j3w* "praise", which is what the formula requires, the text reads *dw3* "adoration".

5 The divine names are written in cartouches like royal names, corresponding to the Amarna convention of writing the name of the god Aten. The formula implies an equation of Amun and Osiris (called Onnophris) which, as far as I know, is unparalleled elsewhere.

- 3 by the web-priest, scribe of the divine offerings of Amun
 4 in the house of Ankhkheprure in Thebes,
 5 Pawah, born of Itiseneb. He says:
- 6 My heart longs to see you, Lord of the Persea-trees⁶,
 7 when your neck receives garlands⁷!
 8 You give satiety without eating,
 9 drunkenness without⁸ drinking.
 10 My heart longs to see you, that my heart may rejoice,
 11 Amun, you fighter⁹ for the poor!
 12 You are the father of the motherless,
 13 the husband of the widow.
- 14 How sweet it is to pronounce your name:
 15 it is like the taste of life,
 16 it is like the taste of bread for a child,
 17 (like) clothing for the naked,
 18 like the smell of fragrant herbs¹⁰
 19 in the time of heat.
- 20 You are like [...]
 21 You are like the taste of [...] ruler,
 22 (like) breathing air for him who was in bondage.
 23 [...]

6 *sw3b* “a (holy) tree: Persea (mimusops Schimper)”, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* IV, p. 435.10–14.

7 Read *m3hw* “wreaths, garlands”, *Wörterbuch* II, p. 31.1–4, which occurs in this writing. The generally accepted reading *mhjt* “northwind” presupposes emendation and does not make sense, because it does not refer to a *visible* phenomenon. *hh* as a word for neck is usually employed in connection with decorations like collars, wreaths and the like.

8 “Without” is written *bw* in verse 8 and *r bw* in verse 9. There are two possibilities: either we cancel the *r* in verse 9 and take *bw* to be a (common) mistake for *bn* “without”, or we read *r bw* in both verses and read “instead of”. Gardiner, who prefers the former alternative because “the sense is infinitely more satisfactory” seems not to be aware of the fact that the sense is exactly the same in both readings. Giving satiety “instead of eating” means, of course, satiety without eating.

9 From *hnwt* “spear” (*Wörterbuch* III, p. 110.11)? Or “protector”, from *hn* “to protect” (*ibid.*, p. 101.8–11)?

10 *Wörterbuch* III, p. 221.

- 24 Be merciful, [...]
 25 [... cal]ling the lord of virtue, that he may turn.
 26 Turn your face towards us, o lord of eternity!
 27 You were here before 'they' arose,
 28 you will be here when 'they' are gone.¹¹
 29 You caused me to see a darkness of your making.
 30 Bestow light upon me, so that I may see you.¹²
 31 As your Ka endures, as your beautiful beloved face endures,
 32 you will come from afar¹³
 33 and grant that this servant may see you,
 34 the scribe Pawah.
 35 Give to him "merciful is Re" (a blessing¹⁴).
 36 How¹⁵ good it is to follow you, Amun:
 37 A lord great to be found¹⁶ for him who seeks him.¹⁷

11 Read *hn* "to go", *Wörterbuch III*, p. 103.6–21.

12 Read *tw* for *tn*.

13 This assertion is cast in the form of an oath, cf. similarly Berlin Stela 20377: "As your Ka endures, you will be merciful" (*w3ḥ k3.k jw.k r ḥtp*). In the same text we read: You are the one who comes from afar!"

14 Cf. Cerny-Gardiner (eds.), *Hieratic Ostraca*, pl. xxxiii No. 4 rto: "I have come to say to you 'merciful is Re!'".

15 Read *hjj*, not *zp snw* ("twice").

16 *gmj* "to find" has a pregnant meaning in the context of "Personal Piety". It refers to the personal experience of a divine intervention, especially of a rescuing character. The intervention as such is referred to as "coming".

May Amun be found having come,
 the sweet brieze before him. (Pap. Anastasi IV, 10.3–4).
 I found the lord of the gods having come with northwind
 the sweet brieze before him
 (Berlin Stela 20377)
 I found her having come with sweet brieze
 (Turin Stela 1593+1694)
 My voice circulated in southern Heliopolis,
 I found Amun having come since I called him
 (Battle of Qadesh, Poem 122–23).

The idea of god's rescuing coming is expressed, in our text as elsewhere, as "coming from afar".

17 Lit. "Great for him who seeks him in finding him". For the use of the suffix pronoun after participles as well as infinitives s. A. Eрман, *Neuägyptische Grammatik*, 82.

38 Dispell fear, give joy into the heart(s) of men!

39 How rejoices the face that sees you, Amun.

40 It is in feast every day.

41 For the Ka of the wab-priest, the scribe of the temple of Amun.

42 in the house of Ankhkheprure, Pawah, born of Itiseneb.

(subscript)

To your Ka! Spend a happy day in the midst of your fellow-townsmen!

(By) his brother, the outline draughtsman, Batjai of the house of Ankhkheprure.

We are dealing here with the complaint and the prayer of a man, who feels he is living in darkness and who longs for the sight of the face of God. The wish to see God occurs not less than five times in the text:

- in the introductory lines of the first two stanzas (vs. 6 and 10)
- in the appeal for light (vs. 29–30, 33)
- and in the closing benediction¹⁸ (vs. 31–32).

The text is a complaint, an expression of longing and unfulfilled desire. Yet, the speaker is not in utmost misery and desolation. Though deprived of the sight of the god Amun, he still enjoys the sweetness of his name. The mere sound of the name is of unspeakable sweetness, like the taste of life, like breathing air for him who was in bondage. In speaking of the name, the lamentation turns into praise. The style of this praise is lyrical in the highest degree of Egyptian poetry; it is immediately reminiscent of a famous poem in praise of death in a much older text which is rightly held to be the apex of Egyptian poetry¹⁹:

Death is before me today

like a sick man's recovery

like going outdoors after confinement.

Death is before me today

like the fragrance of myrrh

like sitting under a sail on breeze day.

18 For the use and significance of the "makarismos" form in Egyptian texts see Assmann, "Weisheit, Loyalismus und Frömmigkeit", in: E. Hornung, O. Keel (Hrsg.), *Studien zu ägyptischen Lebenslehren*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 28, 1979, pp. 12–72.

19 A text known as the "Tired of Life" or "The Dispute between a Man and his Ba" preserved on Pap. Berlin 3024, see H. Goedicke, *The Report about the dispute of a Man with his Ba*, Baltimore 1970.

Death is before me today
 like the fragrance of lotus
 like sitting on the shore of drunkenness.
 Death is before me today
 like a well-trodden way
 like a man's coming home from warfare.
 Death is before me today
 like the clearing of the sky
 as when a man discovers what he ignored.
 Death is before me today
 like a man's longing to see his home
 when he has spent many years in captivity.²⁰

Obviously our poet aimed at a similar lyrical achievement, metaphor being the hallmark of high lyrical style in Egypt. Also, the topic is very similar. The older poet enjoys the thought of death, very much as the author of our prayer enjoys the sound of the divine name. But the parallel goes even further: death, in the older text, is praised for being the transition into the presence of God, into an existence in proximity to God. The calling of the divine name, in our text, is praised for providing an experience of divine presence. Like the thought of death, or rather: of paradise, the sound of the divine name turns desire into fulfillment, need into abundance, captivity into freedom. The implication is that even in a time of darkness, when the vision of God is obscured, there is still a 'sensing' of divine presence, though it is confined to audition, to the sound of the name. God, who has disappeared from visible reality, remains approachable in and by language. He "comes from afar" and can be "found"²¹ by him who seeks and follows him. Clearly, our man is a "follower" of Amun. "How good it is to follow you", he exclaims in verse 28. Thus, he is not in ultimate desolation.

Still the poem is a complaint. The discrepancy between sight and name, denied vision and enjoyed audition, is painful and unbearable. The situation which the text refers to is one of distress and affliction. What can we learn from the text about this situation?

The clearest verses are 19–23. The god has turned his face away from "us" and has caused Pawah, the speaker, to "see a darkness of his making", i.e. a

20 I am following closely the translation by Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I*, Berkeley 1973, p. 168.

21 "Finding" god is a *terminus technicus* for the experience of a divine revelation, cf. n.16. See G. Posener in: Fs. Ricke, p. 60 with note 6.

darkness as only Amun can create. Thus, Pawah implores Amun to make light for him, so that he may see Amun. Darkness, in this context, can only mean divine absence caused by Amun's turning away from "us", whomever this "us" may refer to. But there is also the mention of "them", in contraposition to "us". "They" are here, but only momentarily: Amun was here before them and will be here after them. But as long as "they" are here, Amun has turned himself away. His followers are denied the blessing of his sight – satiety without eating, drunkenness without drinking – and reduced to the sweet consolation of his name. Let us first look at what might be intended by this allusion to "them", and then ask, what kind of vision this text is longing and praying for.

A clue to the identity of "they" is given by the date of the text. Semenchkare^c, in whose third year the text was written, is the son-in-law and successor of the heretic king Akhenaten, who abolished traditional religion, closed the temples and had the name of Amun erased wherever it could be found on official and private monuments.²² In its stead, he established a new religion: the cult of the sun-god Aten who was to be worshipped as the only divine power. Akhenaten was the first founder of a new religion in the history of mankind, but his religion did not survive his reign and that of his successor Semenchkare^c. At the time our text was written the new movement was already approaching its definitive collapse. Nevertheless, Pawah's prayer still belongs to a time of persecution. As a follower of Amun he must have been part of an underground movement, a member of a group of dissenters who clung to the forbidden worship of Amun in spite of prohibition and persecution. Such a group of worshippers bent on resistance seems to be meant by "us", in opposition to the régime which is denoted by "those". Now that it is becoming clear that "those" are or will soon be "gone", the exiled god is asked to turn himself once again towards his followers and to grace them with his light.

There is a certain irony in the fact that the Amarna period could be referred to as a time of darkness, as the new religion consisted of a monotheistic worship of light. Light was recognized as the one and sole principle of being. The discovery or invention of Akhenaten, which he himself experienced or interpreted as a kind of divine revelation, was based on a rather deep insight into the nature of the sun. For him, the sun emitted not only light but also time: light through its radiation and time through its motion.²³ Light and time appeared to him as

22 For a recent and competent treatment of this king and his reign see D. B. Redford, *Akhenaten: the Heretic King*, Princeton 1984.

23 Cf. Jan Assmann, *Zeit und Ewigkeit im Alten Ägypten*, Abh. d. Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Heidelberg 1975, 49ff.; id., "Akhanyati's Theology of Light

one and the same manifestation of divine creative power and presence. His was a god not to be worshipped in statues and symbols but in the real corporeal presence of his light and time. Akhenaten was able to show, by a kind of reasoning which anticipated presocratic natural philosophy by some 800 years, that all existence may be explained as the work of – and as being dependent upon – light and time. In such a world, there can be no room for other gods. One might even say: there is no room for religion. Akhenaten replaced religion by a kind of natural philosophy²⁴ which he proclaimed and established as a new form of religion.

From the point of view of traditional Egyptian religion this new philosophy of light must necessarily have been felt as a time of darkness and persecution. But tradition, suddenly cast into a state of negation, persecution and abolition, assumed a new quality. Being denied its outward expression, its visibility, it underwent a process of internalization and invisibility, in the sense that it became an object of inward reflection. The gods, no longer being visible, turned into objects of desire.

But what kind of visibility were the traditional gods denied during the Amarna period? And also: what kind of vision is Pawah longing for? The text is explicit in this respect. It characterizes the longed-for vision by a specification. Pawah wants to see Amun “when his neck receives garlands” or “wreaths of flowers”. This is an important hint, for it refers to a religious feast. If there is any possible doubt about this reference, it is dispelled by the closing verses of the text (the “subscript”), which explicitly address Pawah as a participant in an urban festival. We are now in a position to better understand the location of the text in a private tomb. As a text belonging to a persecuted religion it could not be inscribed publicly. A location had to be found that is both hidden and contextually significant. The place in Pairi’s tomb is both: because the text appears there in close proximity to a scene representing the banquet, the central scene of the valley festival.²⁵ The subscript addresses Pawah as one of the participants in this banquet.

and Time”, in: *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* VII.4, 1992, pp. 143–176.

24 Cf. J. P. Allen, “The Natural Philosophy of Akhenaten”, in: W. K. Simpson, *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, Yale Eg. Studies 3, 1989, pp. 89–101. See also E. Hornung, *Conceptions of god in Ancient Egypt*, Ithaca 1982, pp. 244–250.

25 Cf. J. Assmann, “Der schöne Tag. Sinnlichkeit und Vergänglichkeit im altägyptischen Fest”, in: W. Haug, R. Warning (eds.), *Das Fest. Poetik und Hermeneutik XIV*, München 1989, pp. 3–28.

The religious feast in ancient Egypt is the one occasion when the gods leave their temple and appear to the people at large, while they normally dwell in complete darkness and seclusion inside the sanctuaries of their temples, inaccessible to all save to the priest in service. The Egyptian temple is definitely not a place where a person could enter and pray – for the common people it was more a symbol of absence and inaccessibility than of presence and contact. The Egyptian concept of the holy is connected with the secret, the hidden and the inaccessible. Contact and communication did of course take place in the temple, but this contact was of very symbolic, indirect and complex nature. It was nothing the common person could participate in. He knew himself somehow distantly represented and involved in this sacred communication which went on constantly inside the impermeable temple walls, inside the endless sequence of courtyards, pylons, halls and chapels, but there was no possibility of him playing a part in this sacred game. The cult, by its very complexity, makes the distance between the spheres of the holy and of everyday life, which it is meant to bridge, all the more palpable. But on the occasion of a feast these boundaries between secrecy and publicity, sacred and profane, inner and outer, were suspended. The gods appeared to the people outside the temple walls. Every major Egyptian religious feast was celebrated in the form of a procession.²⁶

The Egyptian concept of the feast finds its verbal expression in the songs which are chanted on this occasion and is centered around two basic ideas: the idea of a union of heaven and earth, and the idea of the “coming”, the “advent” of God.²⁷ The image of a union between heaven and earth translates precisely what we described as the suspension of the boundaries between inner and outer, secrecy and publicity, sacred and profane. It is this boundary which marks the normal state of reality.

According to Egyptian belief, the gods are real and living powers. But they do not live on earth among men. They are not to be encountered and experienced in everyday life. Certainly, there was a time when they did live on earth, but on account of some tragic events they withdrew to heaven and underworld, leaving the earth to mankind and thus creating that relatively profane sphere of human order and activity which is indispensable for ordinary everyday life.²⁸ But on

26 J. Assmann, “Das ägyptische Prozessionsfest”, in: J. A., Th. Sundermeier (eds.), *Das Fest und das Heilige*, Gütersloh 1991, 105–122.

27 See my article on “Kultlied”, in: *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* III, pp. 852–855; J. Assmann, *Liturgische Lieder an den Sonnengott*, Berlin 1969, pp. 254–260 gives a selection of festival songs celebrating the “union of heaven and earth”.

28 These events are dealt with in a mythological composition ed. by E. Hornung, *Der*

the occasion of the feast this state of affairs is reversed and the original paradisiac state of divine presence is restored to the world – or at least to the city where the feast takes place. Heaven and earth unite, God returns to mankind.

The idea of the ‘coming’ god is the other nucleus of the Egyptian concept of the feast. It is this ‘coming’ which is expressed in the symbolic form of processional motion. The oldest processional song runs: “the god comes, beware, earth!”²⁹ The earth must be warned and prepared, because it must give up its usual profanity and adapt to the heavenly conditions which the divine presence requires. In the feast, God – who is usually absent, i.e. usually residing far above in heaven and only symbolically present on earth within the inaccessible secrecy of his sanctuary – comes to his city. It is he who takes the initiative. While in the temple, he is passive and attended to by the priest. But in the feast, he is active and the processional motion is the symbol of his living activity and real presence. This turn from passivity to activity marks the event celebrated by the feast. The whole city participates in this ‘happening’, “is in feast” as the Egyptian phrase runs. What the temple normally is for the god, is now the city: a vessel of his earthly presence.

The Egyptian idea of the city is centered around and shaped by this festive situation.³⁰ The city is the place on earth where, on the occasion of the main processional feast, the divine presence can be sensed by everyone. The more important the feast, the more important the city. People from all parts of the country assemble there during the festival period, to participate in the event and to “see the god”. To see the god, in Egyptian, has the pregnant meaning of participating in a feast. Being an inhabitant of a city means being granted the chance of seeing the god of the city on the occasion of his “coming”. The inhabitants of a city form a festive community (*Festgemeinschaft*) and conceive themselves as “followers” of their particular city-god. It is the feast which establishes and secures their identity as ‘Thebans’ or ‘Memphites’. Festive participation is for the concept of the Egyptian city what political and commercial participation is for the Greek city and the city of the Italian Renaissance. It is the focus of civic identity. The text refers twice to this festive community: by the 1st person plural in verse 26, and by the explicit mention of the “fellow-townsmen” in the sub-script.

ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh. Eine Ätiologie des Unvollkommen, OBO 46, 1982.

29 Cf. *Wörterbuch* III, p. 416.8.

30 Cf. J. Assmann, *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur*, Stuttgart 1974, ch. 2.1 “Stadtgötter und Gottesstädte”, pp. 25–35.

Only now may we fully understand what is meant in our text by the deprivation of the sight of God. The Theban feasts are no longer celebrated. Ocular desire means the longing for the festive experience of divine presence, for the “coming” of the god. On this experience depends the identity of a Theban. If the god does not come to his city, it loses its meaning as a holy city. It turns into a place of exile and misery.

The alternation of divine invisibility and visibility is constitutive for the distinction between normality and festivity. But it becomes, by metaphoric extension, constitutive for other distinctions and experiences as well. One is the distinction between knowledge and ignorance of God, another the distinction between health and illness, bliss and misery, divine wrath and mercy.

In another prayer to Amun, which may have been composed immediately after the collapse of the Amarna movement, we read:

The sun of him who ignores you went down, Amun,
but he who knows you says: it has risen in the courtyard.
He who attacks you is in darkness,
even when the whole land is in the sun.
But everyone who gives you into his heart –
lo, his sun has risen!³¹

In this text, light and darkness stand for knowledge and ignorance of God.³² This text also seems to allude to the Amarna attack against Amun as to a time of

31 Tablet BM 5656, ed. J. Cerny, A. H. Gardiner, *Hieratic Ostraca*, pl. 89; German translation: ÄHG 190, pp. 20–25.

32 This metaphor seems to have been developed in the royal sphere: the loyal adherent of the king is in the light, his sun has risen, whereas his opponent is in the dark. Cf. W. Helck (ed.) *Urkunden des Ägyptischen Altertums* IV, p. 1722:

It is his (the king's) eye that makes light for everybody.

Blessed the man who sees him: his sun has risen.

A text in Theben Tomb Nr. 49 reads:

[Everyone who places you (the king)] in his heart,

lo, his sun has risen.

See “Weisheit, Loyalismus und Frömmigkeit”, 42 note 110. The most explicit comparison of king and sun, knowing and seeing, occurs in a letter which Abimilki, king of Tyre, addresses in Babylonian language to the Egyptian king (Akhenaten):

As for him who hearkens to the king his lord
and serves him in his place,
the Sun-god shall rise over him

darkness. The impious and heretic is in darkness, even at noon, whereas the pious one is in the light of his sun, even at midnight. With the expression “taking God to heart”, lit. “to put God into one’s heart”, the notion of visibility is internalized. It does not refer to festive visibility, to “visible religion” in the sense of ritual enactment, procession, ceremonial performance, sensual delight and gratification, but to the permanent knowledge of, and obedience to, God. To put something into one’s heart has to do, in Egyptian, with learning and remembering.³³ But what is learnt and remembered “by heart” is not a text but an experience of God’s overwhelming magnitude and power. What enters through the senses must be made steady and permanent in the heart: be it the revolutionary doctrine of the heretic king or the festive vision of the god in procession. It is the understanding, remembering and obedient heart which makes the sun rise.

Seeing is the sense of orientation. Only he who sees knows where to go. The first texts where the idiom of taking God to heart appears speak of guidance and security:

God is father and mother for him who takes him into his heart,
He turns away from him who neglects his city, (...)
But he whom he leads will not loose his way.³⁴

And in a prayer:

I gave you into my heart because of your strength. [...]
You are my protector. Behold: my fear has vanished.³⁵

and sweet breath from the mouth of the king my lord shall give him life.
But as for him who hearkens not to the word of the king his lord,
his city shall perish, his house shall perish,
his name shall not exist in the whole land for ever (etc.)

See Albright, in: JEA 23, 1937, p. 199.

33 Much in the same sense as in Deuteronomy 6,6 cf. 11,18 and Jer 31,33. For the Egyptian idiom *rdj m jb* “to place somebody in one’s heart” see “Weisheit, Loyalismus und Frömmigkeit”. The 24th chapter of the demotic Pap. Insinger, a sapiential text, has the title: “The teaching of knowing the greatness of god, so as to put it in your heart”: M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* III, Berkeley 1980, p. 209.

34 J. Assmann, *Sonnenhymnen in Thebanischen Gräbern*, Mainz 1983, pp. 228–230; ÄHG Nr.75.

35 oCairo CG 12217 recto ed. G. Posener, in: “La piété personnelle avant l’age amarnien”, *Revue d’Égyptologie* 27, 1975, pp. 206f.

These texts date back to more than 100 years before the Amarna revolution. In the Amarna texts, however, this notion of inward or knowing vision is exclusively confined to the king. In Amarna, the festive notion of real, non-symbolical presence of God, was generalized. God was light, and as light he was present on earth, so that every eye could see him.

But seeing, in Amarna, does not mean knowing. People see the god, but they don't know him. The "Great Hymn" of Akhenaten makes this distinction very clear:

(By night), when you are gone and there is no eye
whose vision you have created
in order not to be reduced to looking at yourself
as the sole of your creations –
even though you are in my heart –
there is nobody who knows you
save your son Akhenaten
because you let him know your thoughts and your power.³⁶

This is a very difficult text, and by the very complexity of its formulation it shows how much importance the king attached to this idea.³⁷ He wanted to make it absolutely clear that his was the only heart on earth to have a knowledge of the god and that no one else on earth could claim to put Aten into his heart.

In its attempt at monopolizing the inward, spiritual/intellectual vision of God and reducing the people to an experience of mere physical vision, the Amarna revolution reveals itself as a counter-movement, directed against the beginnings of individual religiosity and its idea of "taking God to heart", of

36 M. Sandman, *Texts from the Time of Akhenaten*, Bibl. Aeg. VIII, 1938, p. 95.14–16.

M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature II*, 1976, p. 99 abstains from translating this passage.

37 In a very fragmentary early text on a "talatat" from Karnak, D. B. Redford has been able to decipher the following traces:

[(Aten) ... who himself gave birth] to himself,
and no one knows the mystery of [...]
he [go]es where he pleases, and they know not [his] g[oi]ng...]
[...] to him (?) by (?) night, but I approach [...]

Cf. D. B. Redford, "A Royal Speech from the Blocks of the tenth Pylon", in: *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar New York* 3, 1981, pp. 87–102; id., *Akhenaten. The Heretic King*, Princeton 1984, pp. 172f.

“knowing God”. The first testimonies of individual religiosity point to precisely the same context or “Sitz im Leben” where the graffito of Pawah belongs: to Amun, his city and his feast. I am referring to a group of ostraca with prayers which petitioners laid before the god when he passed through the streets of the city on the occasion of his ceremonial procession.³⁸ One of these small prayers has already been quoted. The themes of seeing the god and of “ocular desire” are very prominent in them. But they apparently neither refer to the festive appearance of the otherwise invisible deity nor to the knowledge of God as an inward vision. With these, we pass to the third meaning of invisibility and visibility: illness and healing, suffering and salvation, misery and bliss. In the following fragments, suffering and ocular desire are closely connected:

Amun, come to me in peace
that I may see the beauty of your face.
O the beautiful face of Amun,
which is seen by³⁹ the whole land –
people look at it till drunkenness⁴⁰
more than at any beautiful colour.⁴¹

Amun-Re, great in wrath (but also) lord of mercy,
may you grant that I see <you?> by day as well as by night,
may you illuminate my way.⁴²
Turn your face, Amun-Re,
you are the beloved one, you are the one who turns away from his wrath.⁴³

This is the cry of a sufferer who finds himself under the wrath of God and who calls for mercy and forgiveness, in the language of ocular desire.

The language of ocular desire and the suffering behind it has generally been interpreted as physical blindness.⁴⁴ There is indeed the case of a man from Der

38 G. Posener, loc.cit., pp. 195–210.

39 Read *jn* for *n*, rather than taking *n* to be a mere “space-filler” as Posener proposes.

40 Here we have again the motif of “drunkenness without (or instead of) drinking”.

41 oCairo CG 12202 verso, ed. Posener, loc.cit. p. 202.

42 The hieratic sign in question is certainly *w3t* “way”, not *jrt* “eye” as Posener reads.

43 oCairo CG 12202 recto, ed. Posener, loc.cit. p. 201. In my translation I take Posener’s verso to be the true recto and viceversa, because “come to me” is the usual starting formula of such prayers, cf. ÄHG Nr. 176, 179, 181, 189.

44 Cf. H. Brunner, “Blindheit”, in: *LÄ* I, 1973, pp. 828–833.

el Medine, of whom we possess two stelae speaking of darkness and ocular desire, and a letter to his son, complaining of blindness and asking for medicine.⁴⁵ In both stelae he addresses Chons, the god of the moon, saying:

Behold: you cause me to see darkness of your making.
Have mercy upon me, that I may proclaim it.⁴⁶

To be sure, blindness was and is still among the most wide-spread diseases in Egypt. But even more important is the fact that blindness represents a type of disease which, in Egypt as well as later in Greco-Roman antiquity, lent itself more readily than others to religious interpretation. If the gods wish to punish a trespasser, they strike him with blindness in order to expel and excommunicate him from the body of the community whose laws have been violated and which is illuminated by God. We are dealing here with the equation of "justice" and "light" so common in ancient thought. In this interpretation, physical blindness appears as a metaphor itself. It means banishment from the face of God as well as from social intervention. In Egyptian texts, furthermore, the face of God, its radiance and visibility, is the central expression for a state of blessing and salvation. In the same sense, darkness refers to a state of misery and suffering. In the time of Tutankhamun, the viceroy of Nubia, Huja, erected a small stela with the following inscription:

Come (to me) in mercy, my lord Tutankhamun.
I see darkness of your making, day by day.
Make light for me that I may see you.
Then will I proclaim your power to the fish in the river
[and to the birds in the sky].⁴⁷

Huja is certainly not complaining of blindness but of the king's absence or of disgrace, using the same formulaic language of suffering which seems to have become, in the city of Amun, an established oral tradition during the time of persecution.

A paradigmatic experience of ocular desire, even a kind of "primal scene", is death and bereavement. By far the most exclamations of ocular desire occur

45 Ostrakon Berlin 11427 ed. Erman, in: *Amtliche Berichte der Berliner Museen* 40, 1918, pp. 22ff.

46 ÄHG Nr. 152 and 153.

47 Helck, *Urkunden der 18. Dyn.*, Heft 22, 1976.

in the “lamentations for Osiris”, cultic recitations sung by virgins in the role of Isis and Nephthys. Thus Isis, lamenting the dead Osiris, complains of seeing darkness by day:

O that we might see thee in thy former shape,

Even as I desire to see thee!

I am thy sister Isis, the desire of thine heart.

...

Come to me quickly,

since I desire to see thy face after not having seen thy face.

Darkness is here for us in my sight even while Re is in the sky;

the sky is merged on earth and a shadow is made in the earth today.⁴⁸

Isis is not struck with blindness but bereaved of her husband Osiris.

Applied to Ancient Egypt, the notion of ‘ocular desire’ thus appears to be a central and meaningful concept. Its meaning extends into three different directions or contexts which are, however, closely interconnected:

- the context of the feast: the visibility of the “coming god”, where invisibility refers to his absence caused by the abolition of the feasts during the Amarna period,
- the context of a pious life: the visibility of the god “taken to heart”, where invisibility refers to ignorance or even persecution, and
- the context of suffering and salvation: the visibility of the merciful god, who turns his face to the sufferer and illuminates his yearning eyes.

All three meanings merge already in the first instances of the motif as they are present in the graffito of Pawah.

Let me conclude with a text which belongs to the same genre, but from another city, and which also expresses religious desire, though with a different imagery:

O Thoth, bring me to Hermupolis,

your town, where life is sweet.

Supply my needs of bread and beer

and guard my mouth in speaking!

⁴⁸ Pap. Bremner-Rhind (BM No. 10188), 7.1–3 ed. Faulkner, *Bibl.Aegyptiaca* III, Brüssel 1933, pp. 12f.

If only I had Thoth behind me tomorrow.
 'Come!' They would say,
 when I enter before the lords,
 "that you may leave as one who is justified!"

You great dum-palm of 60 cubits,
 on which there are nuts.
 There are kernels in the nuts,
 there is water in the kernels.
 You who bring water <from> afar,
 come rescue me, the silent one.

O Thoth, you well that is sweet
 to a man who thirsts in the desert!
 It is sealed to him who has found his mouth,
 it is open to the silent.
 Comes the silent, he finds the well,
 <to> the heated man you are hidden.⁴⁹

In this text, a man is yearning for a god and his city. Here, 'bread' and 'beer' appear in the same place as 'satiety without eating' and 'drunkenness without drinking' in the graffito. A feast, in Ancient Egypt, means sensual gratification: abundance in divine presence but also in food and drink. It is a prayer of someone who is separated from his city and its god. He is thus suffering from the same kind of deprivation as Pawah: he is unable to enjoy the divine presence on the occasion of the god's feast. Pawah, it is true, is not far away from Thebes, but Thebes without the feast of Amun is not Thebes, the holy city, sweet of life. It is darkness, exile.

But God comes from afar to the rescue of his follower. For this 'coming from afar', this seeking and finding, even in a situation of misery and divine absence, our poet uses a striking image: that of a dum-palm. The dum-palm, by virtue of its very deep roots, is able to grow in the desert. In its fruit, one finds water where no one would expect it, drawn from a miraculous distance. In a second image, the devotee compares his god to a well in the desert. This well, too, has a mystical quality. It can be found only by the silent one, i.e. the pious, the

49 Pap. Sallier I, 8.2–7 ed. A. H. Gardiner, *Late Egyptian Miscellanies*, p. 85f.; G. Fecht, *Literarische Zeugnisse zur "Persönlichen Frömmigkeit" in Ägypten*, Abh. Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften 1965, pp. 73–133; ÄHG Nr. 182.

Egyptian zaddiq. Both images develop the metaphor of thirst, not of darkness and ocular desire. But the meaning is the same.

"Desert" in this text, and "darkness" in the graffito, refer to a situation of suffering stemming from a separation: from the god, his city and his feast. Both texts view this separation not as absolute but as bridgeable. God hears from afar, he can be sought and found, but not by everybody.

This is the decisive distinction, the "great divide" which appears only in the context of personal religiosity: the divide between believers and non-believers, those who took God to heart and those who did not. Even the hidden and invisible god remains approachable by those who gave him a permanent seat in their heart.

In these texts Egyptian religiosity comes closest to what we understand by 'Faith'. But there is still a fundamental difference which should not be blurred. For the Egyptian, images like 'darkness' and 'desert' denote a concrete situation of suffering and misery which could be averted, in this world and in this life, by returning to Hermupolis or Thebes, by participating again in the feast of Thoth or Amun, by reconciling an offended deity and regaining health, bliss and mercy. It is definitely not an image for the world and for the human condition as such.

But what if the Aton Religion had succeeded? The question does not seem to me altogether futile. For the followers of Amun, the 'time of darkness' would have turned into a 'world of darkness'. The traditional religion would either have died out or would have changed into "Faith" in the later sense, based on trust, resistance and inner apprehension. But this was obviously not the case in Egypt.