

AXIAL “BREAKTHROUGHS” AND SEMANTIC “RELOCATIONS” IN ANCIENT EGYPT AND ISRAEL

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1. *Introductory Remarks*

The theory of the Axial Age was formulated around the time of World War II, between 1935 and 1956. It was developed by three thinkers, the sociologist Alfred Weber, whose *Kultursoziologie* appeared in 1935, the philosopher Karl Jaspers, whose *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* followed in 1949, and the political philosopher Eric Voegelin, who started publishing his monumental *Order and History* in 1956. Although they never formed a school of thought, there is little doubt about their intellectual connection. Voegelin spent a year at Heidelberg (1929) and studied with Alfred Weber and Karl Jaspers. Further, we can also assume that both Jaspers and Voegelin were significantly influenced by Alfred Weber even though they didn't do much to acknowledge their debt to him.¹

In all three accounts of the transition from a “pre-axial” to an “axial” age, the common element was the opposition between, on the one side, the “pre-axial” civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Egypt and Mesopotamia, and, on the other, the “axial” civilizations of Greece and Israel. This does not mean that reference to other civilizations was lacking. Weber and Jaspers extended the scope of their work to the Far East, by including India and China, while Voegelin devoted several chapters to Zoroastrianism and to China. However, as far as the “pre-axial” world was concerned, Egypt and Mesopotamia constituted its only representatives—and rightly so, given that these are the only civilizations where the written evidence

¹ In this respect, the meaning of the long and rather critical endnote, where Karl Jaspers discusses the points of connection and difference between Alfred Weber's approach and his own (Jaspers (1955) 265; n. 5), is not entirely clear.

reaches back until the beginning of the third millennium BCE. And yet, this very world was closed to Weber and Jaspers. Neither of them was able to reach a closer understanding of its cultural heritage. Voegelin was the first to study the ancient documents in a more in-depth way. Unable to read the texts in their original languages himself, he had nonetheless the good fortune to get into contact with leading Assyriologists and Egyptologists, most of them emigrants like him, who fled from Germany and other parts of Nazi-occupied Europe. After what must have been years of study of Assyriological and Egyptological literature, Voegelin was able to draw a convincing picture of the "pre-axial" world, for which he coined the term "cosmological". In the first part of the first volume of *Order and History*, titled "The Cosmological Order of the Ancient Near East", the first sentence reads:

The societies of the ancient Near East were ordered in the form of the cosmological myth. By the time of Alexander, however, mankind had moved, through Israel, to existence in the presence under God and, through Hellas, to existence in love of the unseen measure of all being. And this movement beyond existence in an embracing cosmic order entailed a progress from the compact form of the myth to the differentiated forms of history and philosophy.²

Voegelin explains this decisive transformation in terms of a "break" from the "cosmological myth", or a "leap in being", leading, in Israel, into the openness of history "under God" (thus, history in the sense of *historia sacra*) and, in Greece, to philosophy and a form of existence "in love of the unseen measure of all being".

Unlike Weber and Jaspers, Voegelin was thus able to give a comparably clear description of the world which Israel and Greece had left behind. What in Weber's and Jaspers' accounts was nothing more than a pale counter-image of Europe, a mere "not-yet", in Voegelin's description, assumed a positive coloring as a world in its own right, a positive alternative to monotheism and philosophy. Nonetheless, being forced to use translations and to rely on secondary literature, Voegelin was unable to form an independent view of the cultural and intellectual development of the civilizations he was studying, and perceived them as rather monolithic blocks almost without any interior changes and evolutions; in short, without any history. To him,

² Voegelin (1956), 13.

these cultures "lived" from beginning to end within the frame of the "cosmological myth", while the breakthrough into a new world-view was solely the achievement of Israel and Greece. Despite three decades of intensive research and discussion, the restatement of the Axial Age theory by S. N. Eisenstadt³ in the mid-eighties remains open to similar criticisms. As its critics argue, the theory places too much emphasis on the relatively uniform pattern of transformation, while the historical diversity of interpretative frameworks is not adequately addressed.

Of course, it is true that neither Mesopotamia nor Egypt invented philosophy or monotheism in the Greek and Jewish sense. It is also equally true that the relation between these "pre-axial", or "cosmological", societies and Israel and Greece can only be theorized in terms of revolutionary transformations. Yet, notwithstanding this general impression, in Egypt (but surely the same holds for Mesopotamia), several lesser "breakthroughs" seem to be pointing in the direction of the sort of transformation which would come to full fruition later in Israel and Greece. Seen in this broader perspective, the idea of the Axial Age loses much of its dramatic character. The revolutionary breakthroughs occurring between 800 and 200 BCE fall into line with similar, if lesser, steps in the intellectual history of the Ancient Near East. In this paper, my point of focus is Ancient Egypt and the changes that announced the "axial" transformations in Israel, rather than Greece. The first part looks at three such changes (that is, transformations within the intellectual and religious history of ancient Egypt, which led to considerable changes, though not to what could be called an "axial transformation"); while the second part deals with the "Mosaic distinction" and the "axial transformation" that took place in the slow transition from the "cosmological immanence" of the oriental civilizations to the transcendental monotheism of Israel.

Voegelin described this process of conceptual transformation as a "breakthrough" from "compactness" to "differentiation". Israel and Greece were able to recognize differences and to draw distinctions where the oriental societies used "compact" concepts, which blurred these differences in a systematic way. The Egyptian evidence confirms this approach, especially with regard to the distinction between

³ See Eisenstadt (1986). Cf. Eisenstadt (1987); and (1992).

the political and the religious sphere, or what I have called elsewhere, "Herrschaft" and "Heil".⁴ In particular, the specific axial transformation, which the Bible represents as the exodus (from Egypt) and the entrance into a new form of religious and political order, involves primarily the distinction between religion and politics and, as such, it must be reconstructed and interpreted in terms of political theology. At the same time, historical experiences in the political sphere, that is, breakdowns and disappointments of a rather traumatic character, may also be identified as the decisive factors in the emergence of the Egyptian forerunners of axiality. It is to them that I now turn.

2. *Antecedents of Axiality in Ancient Egypt*

2.1 *The Judgment of the Dead*

The first in this set of changes concerns the idea of a *general* judgment of the dead.⁵ In the Old Kingdom (2800-2150 BCE), the judgment of the dead took place before a tribunal modeled on earthly courts, in that it would be in session only if there were a case to pursue. Of course, the deceased had to be prepared for any possible accusation, the more so as s/he had to reckon not only with human but also with dead and divine accusers. Yet, if there were no accusers, there would be no trial, and, thus, this tribunal was considered as one of the many dangers of the liminal state between this world and the next. That is to say, it was not yet thought as a necessary and inevitable threshold, or passage, between life and afterlife.

The idea that all the dead had to go through an assessment before entering the other world developed during the Middle Kingdom, at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE. It is clearly expressed in a wisdom text dating from that time:

The court that judge the wretch,
You know they are not lenient
On the day of judging the miserable,
In the hour of doing their task.
It is painful when the accuser has knowledge.

Do not trust in length of years.
They view a lifetime in an hour!

⁴ See Assmann (2000).

⁵ For the history of this idea, see Griffiths (1991).

When a man remains over after death,
His deeds are set beside him as a sum.

Being yonder lasts forever.

A Fool is he who does what they reprove!

He who reaches them without having done wrong

Will exist there like a god,

free-striding like the lords of eternity!⁶

Here, we are clearly dealing with a tribunal where everybody is to present him/herself after death. In addition, and this is another decisive difference between the old and the new conception, here the accuser is a god, and a "knowing god" for that, who looks into the heart of the deceased, and forms his judgement on the basis of that knowledge. However, and this needs to be stressed, the role of this god is not what, in the Old Kingdom conception of the judgement of the dead, was the role of the "prosecuting" side. His role, rather, is one, which was formerly played by the king, society or posterity.

In the tombs of the Old Kingdom, biographical inscriptions begin to appear during the latter half of the 3rd millennium in which a tomb-owner addresses posterity and gives an account of his achievements. The following is an inscription from the fifth dynasty, that is, the 25th c BCE.

I have come from my town

I have descended from my nome,

I have done justice for its lord,

I have satisfied him with what he loves.

I spoke truly, I did right,

I spoke fairly, I repeated fairly,

I seized the right moment,

so as to stand well with people.

I judged between two so as to content them,

I rescued the weak from one stronger than he

As much as was in my power.

I gave bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked,

I brought the boatless to land,

I buried him who has no son,

I made a boat for him who lacked one.

I respected my father, I pleased my mother,

I raised their children.⁷

⁶ Instruction for Merikare P 53-57; see Quack (1992), 34f.

⁷ K. Sethe (1933), 198f.; Assmann (1990), 100.

The apologetic tone of this inscription is unmistakable. The speaker addresses the tribunal of posterity, knowing that his afterlife depends on its verdict. As a well-known proverb of the time puts it, "the true monument of a man is his virtue; the evil character will be forgotten."⁸ The immortality of the tomb-owner depends on the verdict of posterity, on the memory of future generations and their willingness to read the inscriptions and recall his personality. In other words, what guaranteed the immortality of the deceased was his inclusion in the continuity of a living social memory. The monumental tomb had a crucial function in this, according to Egyptian beliefs, in that it made possible the communication with future generations, who, when visiting the tomb hundreds and thousands of years after the death of its owner, would read the inscriptions, look at the scenes, and marvel at his virtue. The hope of the deceased was that they would be so taken in by the importance of his life that they would recite a prayer in his name.

The breakdown of the Old Kingdom in the last quarter of the third millennium, shattered the belief in the durability of monuments and the continuity of social memory. In this situation of anxiety and reorientation, the verdict of posterity was "divinized". It took the form of a judgment made by a divine court, the court of Osiris, before which every deceased was supposed to appear. The idea of such a general judgment of the dead, where the decision about the immortality or annihilation of the deceased, was relegated to a divine authority, could be interpreted as a breakthrough into a kind of transcendence.⁹ Compared to this-worldly institutions (such as king, society and posterity) the divine tribunal has undoubtedly a transcendent, that-worldly character. However, I would not speak of "breakthroughs" and "transcendental visions" here but rather of "semantic relocations", whereby a complex of ideas, concepts, and values, is transferred from one sphere to another; in this case, from the socio-political sphere of social memory to the transcendent sphere of the divine.¹⁰ The semantic relocation, here, was caused by a severe disappointment in the political sphere. In the Old Kingdom, people

⁸ *Stele* London UC 14333, ed. Goedicke (1962), 26; cf. W. Schenkel (1964), 11f.

⁹ For this interpretation, cf. Assmann (1990), ch. 5.

¹⁰ The German term is "Umbuchung", see Assmann, 2000, *passim*. The English word, "relocation", has been suggested by Johann Arnason.

would invest all their means into the erection of monumental tombs, which they considered absolute guarantees of immortality. By means of such a tomb, they hoped to continue their existence in the vicinity of their lord, the pharaoh, and in the memory of future generations. The breakdown of the Old Kingdom along with the disappearance of kingship and the pilloring and destruction of the tombs showed these hopes to be illusory. Longing for safer warrants of immortality, people turned elsewhere, beyond the social sphere. The "break-down" in the order of the political caused a "break-through" towards "meta-political" foundations of order.

2.2 *The Discovery of Inner Man*

The idea of the judgment of the dead by a divine court meant a break-through not only with respect to an outer but also to an inner transcendence, involving an important shift in what may be called "the history of the heart".¹¹

The central symbolization in the judgment scene showed a scales with the heart of the deceased on one side and the symbol of truth and justice on the other. During the weighing of his/her heart, the deceased had to recite two long lists of possible crimes and violations blocking his/her immortality, and explicitly declare his/her innocence with respect to each. One list had to be recited before Osiris, the other before 42 judges. Every lie would make the scale with the heart sink a little deeper. In what follows, the deceased implores his heart not to betray him:

O my heart which I had from my mother,
o my heart which I had upon earth:
do not rise up against me as a witness
in the presence of the lord of things;
do not speak against me concerning what I have done,
do not bring up against me in the presence of the Great God, lord of
the West.¹²

In a late papyrus, the deceased asks Atum for support:

May you give me my mouth that I may speak with it,
may you lead my heart for me in the moment of danger.
May you create my mouth for me that I may speak with it

¹¹ Cf. Assmann (1993), 81-112.

¹² *Book of the Dead*, ch. 30, in the transl. by R.O. Faulkner (1985), 27.

in the presence of the Great God, lord of the Netherworld.¹³

What he fears is that every discrepancy between the speaking mouth—declaring his innocence—and the heart on the scales would make the heart sink every time a little deeper until it sinks beyond redemption and the tribunal denies him immortality.

The emergence of a general judgment of the dead puts, thus, quite a new emphasis on the notion of the heart, that is to say, on inner man as the center of moral responsibility, conscience and accountability. The biographical inscriptions reflect this discovery of inner man in a very clear way. As far as I can see, the word “heart” plays no role in the autobiographical inscriptions of the Old Kingdom.¹⁴ What these texts show us is an official acting solely on the basis of royal orders. Planning, after all, is the prerogative of the king. It is on his initiative that each arm is set in motion. The inscriptions of the later part of the Old Kingdom, moreover, despite the fact that they dwell a lot on the achievements of their owners, also show that everything is done on royal orders. This is what David Riesman called

¹³ Pap.Louvre 3279, ed. J.C. Goyon (1966), 28.

¹⁴ This statement requires several explanations and qualifications. By “autobiographies”, I understand a genre of tomb inscriptions which developed during the early 4th dynasty (ca. 2600 BCE) from two different sources: (a) from the names and titles of the tomb-owner, which were expanded into a narrative of his career (“career biography”); and (b) from a commentary on the tomb and its sacrosanct nature, which were developed into declarations of the owner’s moral integrity (“ideal biography”). The two genres of auto-thematization were kept apart during the Old Kingdom and merged only at the end of the Old Kingdom into the classical type of Egyptian autobiography. On this, see further Lichtheim (1988).

In the history of this genre, the notion of the “heart” appears only in the Middle Kingdom. This does not mean that it may not occur much earlier in other genres. The Pyramid Texts (the mortuary texts of the Old Kingdom), contain many references to the “heart”, but these belong to the a-historical “deep structure” of the idea. Yet more important, in this respect, are two other sources: proper names and literary (“wisdom”) texts. If the name *Hq3-jb* (that is, “ruler of (one’s own) heart” or “(My) heart is (my) ruler”), which appears in the 6th dynasty, can be really said to express the notions of self-control and of “heart-directedness”, then it has to be regarded as a precursor of ideas which become prominent in autobiographies only in the Middle Kingdom. The other “problem” case is a literary text, the “Teaching of Ptahhotep”, a text pretending to be composed under king Asosi of dynasty V, where the idea of self-control (*hrp jb*: “submerging the heart”) plays a great role. However, the question of whether this indication is to be taken literally or, rather, to be regarded as a literary fiction remains controversial. My reconstruction of the history of the heart in ancient Egypt rests upon the assumption that the *Teaching of Ptahhotep*, or at least the pertinent sections, belong to the Middle Kingdom.

"outward directedness",¹⁵ which, in Old Kingdom Egypt, took the form of "king-directedness". The invention of the heart as a symbol of "inner directedness" and moral responsibility is the result of a long process, which started with the end of the Old Kingdom and led to a new configuration of personhood, anchored on the concept of the "heart-directed" man.¹⁶ The most explicit elaboration of the "heart" in this way (that is, as the seat of inner qualities and the leading force of the person) appears on the *stela* of Antef, who lived under Thutmosis III, and who, in his "autobiography", seems to have followed closely the model of the Middle Kingdom:

It was my heart that induced me to do this,
according to its instruction for me.
It is an excellent witness for me:
I did not violate its injunctions.
Because I feared to transgress its orders
I prospered exceedingly well.
I did very well because of its instructions concerning my way of action.
I was free of reproach because of its guidance.
(...) It is a divine utterance in every body,
blessed be he whom it has conducted on the right way of action.¹⁷

In this configuration, the heart appears not only as an inner motor of will, initiative and self-determined activity, but also, and more importantly, as a moral instance, as an agency whose orders and instructions must not be "violated" and "transgressed". And yet, the voice of the heart is not that of a self-reliant individuality. It is the voice of social and moral responsibility, and, as such, of divine character. In this respect, the notion of the heart comes close to our notion of conscience (*Gewissen*). The heart, in short, is the organ through which individuals open up to the rules of togetherness, are bound to one another, and brought into the structures (and the strictures) of community.

¹⁵ Riesman (1950).

¹⁶ Miriam Lichtheim, very aptly, interprets this process as a veritable "discovery of the self": The new attitudes of self-reliance and self-reflection are mirrored in a vocabulary which continued to grow as man discovered his "self" and began to formulate its manifestations (Lichtheim (1988), 142).

¹⁷ Louvre C 26: K. Sethe (1961), 974f.; Assmann (1987), 225f.

2.3 *The Appearance of "Personal Piety"*

Both the emergence of a *general* judgment of the dead and the discovery of "inner man" can be interpreted as cases of "semantic relocation"—that is, as operations where a complex of values and concepts is being transferred from one cultural sphere to another; say, from the socio-political to the religious sphere. With the generalization of the judgment of the dead, what was once a decision made by society, the king, or posterity, concerning the worthiness of a deceased to continue his/her life beyond the threshold of death is now transferred to the sphere of the divine. Now, it is a divine tribunal and its president, Osiris, who decide upon the immortality of the deceased, while immortality as such is transferred from the "mundane" sphere of social memory to the "transcendental" sphere of the divine world. Becoming immortal no longer means living on in the memory of one's community, both present and future, but living on in a radically other sphere, beyond human reach, in the realm of Osiris.

A similar interpretation applies to the concept of the heart as the center of human action and responsibility. In the Old Kingdom it was the king who acted as the collective heart of the society. Every individual activity was thought to occur only by royal order. However, with the disappearance of this motivational center, god and the heart filled the gap. Indeed, we find some nobles claiming to have acted on divine orders, while others to have been motivated by their heart. From the Middle Kingdom onwards, the idea that the heart constitutes the inner center of human motivation becomes the dominant anthropological assumption. Now, it is the heart that leads a man to follow the king and to act on his orders. In this shift, we encounter, thus, another instance of "semantic relocation", whereby the concepts of initiative, motivation and responsibility are "transferred", or "relocated", from the "mundane" sphere of political obedience to the "transcendental" sphere of interiority, conscience and "personal" decision.

Now, the third in this set of changes, which announce the moment of axiality in Egypt, represents the most distinct case of such "relocation". It concerns the appearance of a religious trend, which Egyptologists call "personal piety",¹⁸ where individuals form special

¹⁸ See Assmann (1996), 259-277. The term "Persönliche Frömmigkeit" was

relationships with certain deities. In Egyptian, this is expressed in formulas such as "putting god N into one's heart" and "walking (or acting) on the water of god N", which we encounter in prayers and tomb inscriptions from the 15th century onwards. In a tomb inscription we read, for instance,

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.¹⁹

And in a prayer:

I gave you into my heart because of your strength. [...]
You are my protector. Behold: my fear has vanished.²⁰

The following extract from a hymn to the crocodile god Sobek of Crocodilopolis, dating from the Ramesside period, provides us with one of the most representative instances of this trend

I want to praise your beautiful face
And to satisfy your Ka day by day,
For I have placed myself on your water
And have filled my heart with you.

You are a god whom to invoke,
With a friendly heart towards mankind.
How rejoices *who has put you into his heart!*
Woe to him who attacks you!
For your wrath is so great,
Your plans are so efficient,
Your mercy is so swift.²¹

The language of these texts has a long history.²² Many expressions can be traced back to the First Intermediate Period (2150-2000 BCE), where they describe the relation of patron and client. During the Middle Kingdom (2000-1750 BCE), the ruling dynasty adopted this relation, together with its rhetoric, to forge a new kind of rapport

coined by Erman in 1910 and translated as "personal piety" by James Henry Breasted, who, in his magisterial and highly influential book *The Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (Breasted, [1912] 1972), identified this concept as the hallmark of a whole period of Egyptian history ("The Age of Personal Piety"), referring to the Ramesside Age (1300-1100 BCE).

¹⁹ J. Assmann (1983), 228-30; 1999; my emphasis.

²⁰ Cairo CG 12217 recto ed. Posener (1975), 206f; my emphasis.

²¹ Cube statue of Ramose, Herbin (1980), 187; doc. 189.

²² For details, see Assmann (1979), 11-72.

between the king and his officials, wherein the actions of the latter would be directed by their “hearts” (that is, an inner core of “uncommanded” loyalty, motivation, virtue and responsibility). After the Amarna revolution, this attitude, which we call “loyalism”, was transferred to the divine sphere and served to describe the relation between god and man more generally. Typical of the rhetoric of “loyalism” is the opposition of wrath and mercy, the formulae of heart and water, and especially the stylistic device called “macarism” or “beautitude” (“Happy the man who ...”, “blessed is the man who”), known to all of us as the beginning of the Book of Psalms. The rhetoric of “loyalism” had also an important revival in the Amarna age, and often sentences from that period read like the following:

Blessed the man who puts you into his heart,
For he will spend his old age in perfection.²³

At this point, let me briefly explain a few things about the Amarna period, a period known as an age of religious revolution,²⁴ when Akhenaten replaced the countless traditional cults with the cult of the one and only Aten, the god of light and time. What was crucial in this move was not so much the replacement of the many by the One, but the terms in which this took place. That is to say, for Akhenaten, the fact that the totality of reality could be reduced to the workings of light and time made all the other deities appear as inert, superfluous, fictitious, and false, with nothing to contribute to the explanation of the world. Akhenaten was thus the first in the history of mankind to apply the distinction between true and false to religion—that is, the same distinction which later, in the form of biblical monotheism, led to a transformation of “axial” dimensions. At the same time, although Akhenaten radically changed traditional Egyptian cosmology, he did not break with it. His god, the sun, was a cosmic energy also, the source of light and time, without any personal and ethical traits. Further, and more importantly, his intervention left untouched the “compact” unity of religion and politics. In fact, it seems that Akhenaten did everything to cement this “undifferentiated” rapport between the two and counteract the beginnings of “personal piety”, as if sensing its revolutionary potential.

²³ Sandman (1938), 97.11-12.

²⁴ The most recent literature on Akhenaten is Hornung (2000); Montserrat (2000); and Reeves (2001).

Thus, in the new cosmological schema, Aten acted towards humanity as a cosmic energy, while Akhenaten appeared as a personal god to individuals and took the place of the object in the relationship of "personal piety":

He shows his wrath against him who ignores his teachings
And his favour to him who knows it.²⁵

In this way, Akhenaten reinstalled the king as the sole mediator between god and man, where "personal piety" tended to form an immediate relationship between a deity and an individual, outside the official institutions of cult and temple. In this respect, the Amarna religion was clearly a restoration rather than an innovation.

Akhenaten failed in his project. Everything that he sought to suppress reappeared stronger than ever. After his death, the Egyptians not only returned to their traditional deities but the trend of "personal piety" developed into the dominant mentality and religious attitude of the time—so much so, in fact, that Breasted, at the beginning of this century, called this "the age of personal piety".²⁶ However, this was undoubtedly a new form of "personal piety", where God had the role which Akhenaten had in the Amarna Period, and before him the king in the Middle Kingdom, and before him the patron in the First Intermediate Period, acting as father and mother to all: father to orphans, husband to widows, refuge to the persecuted, protector to the poor, good shepherd, judge, pilot and steering oar, merciful to his followers, terrible to his enemies. And this was not all. In fact, what was radically new about this form of "personal piety" can be best analyzed in terms of a double "semantic relocation", where, on the one hand, the concepts and the rhetoric of "loyalism" were transferred from the political to the divine sphere and used as the model for the relationship of god and man more generally; while, on the other, protection was no longer sought on the "mundane" sphere, from king or patrons, but on the divine sphere, from a deity. Thus, sentences like the following come up frequently in prayers of this period:

I have not sought for myself a protector among men,
God N is my defender.²⁷

²⁵ Sandman (1938), 86.15-16.

²⁶ Breasted (1972), 344-370.

²⁷ See, e.g. Assmann, (1999), #173.12-13, 42ff., 62ff., 102ff.; 177, 5-11.

In the time of Ramses II, a man called Kiki, a follower of the goddess Mut, who donated all his property to her temple, wrote in his tomb “autobiography”:

He bethought himself
That he should find a patron:
And he found Mut at the head of the gods,
Fate and fortune in her hand,
Lifetime and breath of life are hers to command.
(...) I have not chosen a protector among men,
I have not sought myself a patron among the great.
(...) My heart is filled with my mistress.
I have no fear of anyone.
I spend the night in quiet sleep,
because I have a protector.²⁸

The triggering factor for this kind of “relocation” seems obvious. It involves the political trauma of the Amarna revolution and the monstrous spectacle of a kingship turning sinful and criminal towards its own gods. Thus, the breakdown of a politics stressing the religious monopoly of the state, led, on the one hand, to the loss of this monopoly on the part of the state, and, on the other, to the proliferation of personal forms of religiosity.

Further, the upsurge and spread of “personal piety” meant a new chapter in the “history of the heart”. The ideal of the “heart-directed man” of the Middle and early New Kingdoms now changed into the ideal of the “god-directed heart”. In the tomb of the Vezir Pasiara from the time of Seti I (ca. 1300 BCE), a short invocation of Amun is put in the mouth of the sculptor:

Amun the steering oar
for him who puts him into his heart.²⁹

This idea finds its most explicit, and as it were “classical” expression, in a famous passage in the teaching of Amenemope:

Keep firm (*dns* “make heavy”) your heart, steady your heart.
Do not steer with your tongue.
If a man’s tongue is the boat’s rudder,
the Lord of All is yet its pilot.³⁰

²⁸ Mohammad (1960), 48ff.; Negm (1997); Wilson (1970), 187-92; Assmann (1999), Nr. 173

²⁹ Assmann, Hofmann, Kampp, Seyfried (forthcoming), Text 173.

³⁰ Amenemope XX.3-6: Lichtheim (1976), 158.

The ideas of the "leading heart" and the "heart-directed individual" are very different from the idea of the "god-directed heart" in that they belong to a different historical situation and respond to a different set of needs. On the one hand, the notion of the "heart-directed man" seems to be shaped by social needs. The virtues that go with it, responsibility, reliability, self-control, commitment and confidence, are social virtues. There is no other place on earth to establish Ma'at than in the heart of man. On the other hand, the idea of the "god-directed heart", seems to be shaped by individual needs: shelter from fear and anxiety, guidance in a pathless and unintelligible world, protection against persecution, human injustice, malign demons and deities, dangers of all sorts, including the Pharaoh.³¹ Typical requests refer to the injustice of judges and to calumny (e.g. "may you rescue me from the mouth of men"³²). It is not only man's *inner* world of passions, fears, drives and emotions that is considered unsteady, irrational, and subject to abrupt change, but also the *outer* world of society and nature:

Do not say "Today is like tomorrow".
How will this end?

Comes tomorrow, today has vanished,
the deep has become the water's edge.

Crocodiles are bared, hippopotami stranded,
the fish crowded together.

Jackals are sated, birds are in feast,
the fishnets have been drained.³³

The world has become unintelligible, incalculable, unstable. It no longer inspires comfort and confidence. In such a context, where nothing but god provides some sense of relief and stability, god becomes the sole resting point in a swirling world. The texts of "personal piety" bespeak an unmistakable distrust in the "mundane sphere", which after all had proved so unreliable in the Amarna age. Those who yearned for some sort of fixity and stability would put their trust in god. We are very close, in the Ramesside period, to a kind of "axial transformation". However, for various reasons, which,

³¹ Morenz (1969), 113-125; Assmann (1976), 359-367.

³² tBM 5656 (ÄHG Nr.190) in Assmann, 1999, 38-40; for other references, see p. 612. Cf. Job 5.21. Also the teaching of Amenemope promises to "save him (the disciple) from the mouth of strangers" (I.11), Lichtheim (1976), 148.

³³ Amenemope 6.18-7.4: Lichtheim (1976), 151.

although interesting to explore further, cannot be examined in the present context, the decisive axial breakthrough did not happen in Egypt but in Israel. Crucial in this, in my opinion, was the inability, or the unwillingness, of the Egyptians, to draw a clear line between the religious and the political. Despite the numerous and significant "relocations" that occurred after the breakdown of the Old Kingdom, pharaonic kingship, by mirroring in its rule the solar circuit (that is, allegedly the way in which the creator ruled the heavens), never gave up its claim to represent the divine sphere and to act on earth as a representative of the creator. The unity of heaven and earth, this strong relationship of analogy and representation, wherein the spheres of the "transcendental" and the "mundane" appeared as one, prevented Egypt from undergoing an axial transformation in the end.

3. *The "Mosaic Distinction" as an Axial Transformation*

By "Mosaic distinction" I mean the distinction between true and false in religion.³⁴ This distinction was alien to "primary religion",³⁵ which was based on distinctions such as pure and impure, sacred and profane, and its introduction was revolutionary in that it created a *new type* of religion. For the first time, and quite unlike "primary religion", a religion set itself off, not only against other religions including its own religious tradition, but also against other cultural spheres such as politics, law and the economy. At the same time, in addition to setting itself up as an autonomous cultural sphere in its own right, this new type of religion claimed for itself a superior form of authority and normativity *vis à vis* other spheres.

The radicality, therefore, of the "Mosaic distinction" between true and false, as opposed to the one made by Akhenaten, lies in its connection to the distinction between religion and politics, or "state" and "church". In Akhenaten's case, as we saw earlier, the distinction between true and false formed the basis for the abolition of the traditional religion of ancient Egypt but did not lead to a separation between the spheres of religion and politics. Kingship kept its

³⁴ See Assmann (1997), 1-8; and *passim*.

³⁵ For the distinction between "primary" and "secondary" religions, see Sundermeier (1987), 411-423; and Sundermeier (1999).

mediating role between god and man, and, even after the Amarna period, in the "age of personal piety"; what was broken was only its monopoly of that role. In Egypt, the state always acted as a kind of church, being, as it were, the only institutionalized instance of religion. Thus, the separation of politics and religion, "Herrschaft" and "Heil", the mundane and the transcendental, was exclusively the achievement of Israel; an achievement, which, in the biblical account, is connected with the name of Moses and with the legend of the exodus from Egypt.³⁶

The political meaning of the "Mosaic distinction" becomes evident in the Exodus tradition. By leaving Egypt, Israel separates itself from a political system, which is denounced as false, oppressive, and humiliating. Seen from the view-point of the biblical texts and in the narrative enactment of the Exodus, monotheism appears both as a political movement of liberation from pharaonic oppression and as the foundation of an alternative way of life, where humans are no longer subject to human rule but freely consent to enter into an alliance with God and adopt the stipulations of divine law.³⁷ In this context, Egypt appears, as the symbol, not so much of "false religion" (i.e., paganism and idolatry), but, above all, of "false politics", as the "house of serfdom", and the significance of the Exodus lies in the double move, which, signals, on the one hand, leaving behind the "house of oppression" and, on the other, entering the realm of freedom. "Freedom", to be sure, is not a biblical word and does not occur in this context. It is obvious nonetheless, that the alliance, or "covenant", established with God at Mt Sinai is presented in the narrative as a liberation from the serfdom of human rule. Further, entering into an alliance with God and accepting His Law did not simply mean the founding of yet another state. Insofar as Egypt appears as the paradigmatic "state" representing both political and divine power and order, it also meant a radical break with the oriental principle of rulership and the establishment of a different kind of polity altogether, a polity, that is, where the principle of kingship

³⁶ As has been shown by Rodney Needham and Louis Dumont, a similar distinction underlies the Indian system of "dual sovereignty", which involves, on the one hand, a religious (Brahmin), and, on the other, a political (Kshatriya) authority. In fact, the duality of religious and military leadership seems rather widespread even among tribal societies and has little to do with what I describe as the political implications and consequences of the "Mosaic distinction".

³⁷ For details and bibliography, see Assmann (2000), 46-52.

was allowed only a minimal place.³⁸ It is precisely this anti-regal impulse, which in the narrative forms the basis of the resistance to pharaonic oppression. In addition, and this is another crucial point, in the same way that the people liberate themselves from political oppression, God also “emancipates” Himself from *political* representation. Religious salvation becomes thus the exclusive competence of God, who, now, for the first time, takes the initiative of historical action and withdraws the principle of salvation (“Heil”) from *political* representation and “mundane” power.

The events in the story of the exodus from Egypt are located³⁹ at a time strangely close to Akhenaten and his monotheistic revolution (that is, sometime in the 14th or the 13th century BCE). The story, however, *was told* much later, between the 7th and the 5th centuries, in Judah and Babylonia during a time which for the Israelites was marked by Assyrian oppression, Babylonian exile and Persian domination. In some respects, the “semantic relocation” it involves, from the mundane sphere of politics to the transcendental sphere of religion, can be compared to “personal piety” in Egypt, where, as we saw earlier, the semiology of loyalism was transferred from the political to the religious sphere. In the Exodus story, what we are dealing with is the transfer of the semiology of Assyrian foreign politics (vassal treaties) from the political to the religious sphere. It is also obvious that, in both cases, the relocations were occasioned by severe disappointments, crises, and traumatic experiences in the political sphere. The difference between them is that the relocation as effected in (and by) Israel had a much more radical character and led to completely different results than the one in Egypt. The use of the model of political alliance, as a new form of the relationship between god and man, meant the creation of a completely new form of religion, which proved able to withstand the pressures of political oppression. The biblical texts, especially in Deuteronomy, use the language of Assyrian loyalty oaths⁴⁰ and vassal treaties.⁴¹ The

³⁸ For the theory of the weak state, see Malamat (1990), 65-77; and Handel (1981). For the concept of “counter-society” (or “Kontrastgesellschaft”), see Lohfink (1987a), 33-86, esp. at 44. A similar concept is put forward in Clastres (1974). Lohfink also applies the concept of “Kontrastgesellschaft” to early Israelite society, in Lohfink (1987b), 106-136, esp. 119ff.

³⁹ The events, that is, not in the historical sense of “what really happened”, but in the narratological sense of related time.

⁴⁰ Otto (1999); and Steymans (1995).

⁴¹ Baltzer (1964).

political theology of Assyria was thus adopted by way of a "subversive inversion" and transformed into the political theology of Israel.⁴² Whereas the first stressed the inseparable unity of the divine and the political, the latter stressed the categorical separation of the two.

From now on, politics and religion, or "state" and "church", are different spheres whose relationship has to be laboriously negotiated and whose re-unification can only be achieved by force. Political theology turns into a critical discourse which, in the biblical tradition, is critical of government, and in the Greek tradition is critical of religion. The distinction between, and the separation of, religion and politics, or state and church, has to be regarded as one of the most important features of axiality. Subsequent attempts, therefore, at reuniting and "streamlining"⁴³ these two spheres, such as in the French tradition of the "*rois thaumaturges*", or in totalitarian forms of civic religion,⁴⁴ are to be regarded as shifts towards de-axialization.

The anti-Egyptian, or, more generally, the anti-state character of biblical monotheism and its political theology finds its clearest expression in the prohibition of images. Idolatry means, in the first place, the legitimization of rulership in terms of divine representation. Political authority presents itself in its images, symbols and ceremonies as a representative of the Divine. From the viewpoint of the Bible, this is idolatry. From the Egyptian viewpoint, however, this was precisely what the state was there for.⁴⁵ The Egyptians believed the gods to be remote and hidden. In their world-view, the gods withdrew from earth and became invisible, and, as a substitute for their real presence, they instituted the kingdom on earth to re-present them in the form of kings, images and sacred animals. The most important task of political authority was thus to ensure divine presence in a condition of divine absence and to maintain the seamless unity of the relationship between man, society and the cosmos. Within this schema, the king acted as representative of the creator:

Re has installed the king
on the earth of the living
for ever and ever,

⁴² Otto, (2001), 59-76.

⁴³ A helpless attempt to translate the Nazi-German term "Gleichschaltung".

⁴⁴ See Voegelin (1993).

⁴⁵ For a more detailed treatment of this topic, see Assmann (1989), 55-88.

administering justice to humans, satisfying the gods, creating true order and banishing disorder. The king gives divine offerings to the gods and mortuary offerings to the transfigured dead.⁴⁶

The king thus depended on the god, whom he imitated and represented, and the god depended on the king for maintaining the order of creation on earth among the living. In other words, God had created the king “in his image”, so to speak—and, in fact, “image of god” was one of the most usual epithets for the Egyptian kings.

Now, biblical political theology is the exact opposite. In this perspective, it is the very category of representation which shows the falseness of pharaonic politics and religion in its most obvious and abhorrent form (that is, as the sphere of kings, images and sacred animals). Thus, the prohibition of images means more than anything else that god must not be represented.⁴⁷ The presence of images contradicts the *real presence* of the divine in the world, an idea which is also at work in the very notion of a covenant with God, since the very possibility of such a covenant is a God who turns towards the world in a way that is both political and “living”. Images are the medium of a “magical” representation of the absent divine, and, as such, imply or presuppose the idea of divine absence. A “living” God, however, hides or reveals Himself as He chooses and forbids any attempts to make Him present through magic. This is why the “living God” (*Elohim hayim*) must not be represented, and at the same time this is the political meaning of the prohibition of images. The Golden Calf was meant to replace Moses, the only form in which God allowed Himself to be represented. The Israelites, who believed Moses dead, wanted to replace the representative of God by another representation. The function of the Golden Calf was therefore clearly political. Rather than a cult figure, it constituted a political symbol of leadership, in the same way that Moses did when he led the people out of Egypt, and its destruction put an end to all attempts of political representation. Images were artificial gods, and, as such, “other” gods—that is to say, not inexistent gods, as the ones whose worship Akhenaten abolished. They were forbidden gods, given that,

⁴⁶ See Assmann (1995), 19ff.

⁴⁷ On the prohibition of images see, for instance, Dohmen (1987); Mettinger (1995); Uehlinger (1998), 52-63; Berlejung (1998); Dick (1999), 1-54; Keel (2001), 244-281.

where an alliance is formed with *one* (over)lord, any other relationship with "other" lords (*elohim aherim*) is forbidden. Thus, the political meaning of monotheism in its early stage does not deny the existence of other gods. On the contrary, without the existence of other gods, the request to stay faithful to *the* Lord would be pointless.

The radical destruction of representation meant that the divine, or "transcendental", sphere became independent of political institutions. It was thus able to survive the Babylonian exile and the loss of sovereign statehood under the Persians, when the former kingdom of Judah became integrated into the Persian empire as a province within the satrapy of Transeuphratene. Religion became an autonomous sphere, constituting and consolidating a vantage-point from which all other cultural spheres, including the political one, could be transformed. Max Weber, in his "Zwischenbetrachtung", identified the tension between religion and other cultural spheres such as economy, politics, aesthetics, the erotic and the intellectual spheres, as characteristic of "Erlösungsreligionen" (religions of salvation or redemption).⁴⁸ Tension presupposes distinction and differentiation, and I think that the process of differentiation, especially concerning the religious and the political spheres, is a characteristic feature of axuality.

Voegelin reconstructed the process, which led from the "cosmological societies" of the Ancient Near East to the rise of new, meta-cosmic, or "transcendental", world-views in Israel and Greece, in terms of a shift from "compactness" to "differentiation". In this account, "compactness" would constitute the hallmark of myth and the totalizing tendency of mythical thinking,⁴⁹ while "differentiation" would appear as the hallmark of axuality. Axuality, however, should not be equated with either antiquity (a certain time-period around 500 BCE) or modernity, where the differentiation of autonomous spheres is seen (by Weber, Habermas and others) as the most characteristic feature.⁵⁰ Weber, along with all those who followed his lead,

⁴⁸ Weber (1920), 536-573.

⁴⁹ See especially the work of Claude Lévi Strauss. Cf. Godelier (1973), 309-329; and Habermas (1981), 72-113.

⁵⁰ I would like to thank Johann Arnason who drew my attention to the problem of reconciling my concept of "distinction and differentiation" with Max Weber's theory of the separation of cultural spheres, closely related to Weber's concepts of occidental rationalization and modernization. I think it is important to distinguish

including Voegelin and Habermas, interpreted differentiation as a purely mental process and a form of rationalization. What I wanted to show in this paper, with regard to Ancient Egypt, is the close relationship between historical and intellectual processes. Distinctions and differentiations in the intellectual sphere were brought about, and forced upon, the human mind by catastrophic and traumatic experiences on the level of history. There is no doubt that the rise of monotheism in the ancient world had historical consequences.⁵¹ Yet, the rise of monotheism may itself be seen as a consequence of historical changes. In this sense, I take the emergence of certain intellectual and religious concepts in Ancient Egypt (such as the emergence of a general judgment of the dead, the “heart-directed man” and “personal piety”) to be, if not directly caused, at least occasioned, or, in some other way, related to, historical traumas such as the breakdown of the Old Kingdom and the Amarna revolution.

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between “axiality” and “modernity”, especially if we take axiality as a non-evolutionary concept (the “axial” paradigm, that is; not the “axial age”).

⁵¹ See Stark (2001).

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