THALES ON WATER:
THE EGYPTIAN CONNECTION

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Thales, we are told, believed that the first principle of all things was water (Aetius *Placita* 1. 3). The search for a material first principle of reality is said to mark the differentiation between mythologists and philosophers, of whom Thales is said to be the first. Aristotle specifically makes that claim in the following passage:

> Most of the first philosophers thought that principles in the form of matter were the only principles of all things. . . . But Thales, the founder of this type of philosophy, says that it is water. (*Met.* A3, 983b 6)

Aristotle speculates that this supposition arose, perhaps,

> . . . from seeing the nature of all things to be moist, and the warm itself is generated from moisture and persists in it; and getting the idea also from the fact that the germs of all beings are of a moist nature, while water is the first principle of the nature of what is moist. (Ibid.)

This standard view has been perpetuated in most books on ancient philosophy and may be found in virtually all introductory books on both history and problems of philosophy.

But Kirk and Raven in *The Presocratic Philosophers* warn that our knowledge of the cosmology of Thales, specifically this point with regard to the first principle of things, is dependent entirely upon two passages of Aristotle (*de caelo* B13, 294a 28; *Met.* A3, 983b 6). Indeed, Aristotle's own philosophy of accounting for things in terms of four causes would have necessitated his interpreting Thales' "water" as material cause.[1]

Kirk and Raven suggest the possibility that "Thales' view that the earth floats on water seems to have been most probably based upon direct contact with near-eastern mythological cosmology."[2] Might not, then, Thales' idea that the first

principle of things is water be similarly based on such mythological conceptions drawn from Egyptian cosmological accounts? Indeed, two ancient writers, Plutarch (*de Is. et Osir.* 34, 364D) and Simplicius (*de caelo* 522, 14), unequivocally suggest that Thales drew his ideas on water from Egyptian sources; and, Aetius (I, 3, I) and Proclus (*in Euclidem*) both hold the tradition that Thales visited Egypt and studied philosophy there.

It was at Annu, which the Greeks called "Heliopolis," "city of the sun," that the priests of Ra established their religious capital. Here both temple and college were founded, in addition to an important library. The system of theology that evolved here from approximately 2780-2300 B.C. during the third, forth, and fifth dynasties, became the dominant theology of Egypt, eventually merging with the mythology from Memphis sometime during the fifth dynasty, as Robert A. Armour explains in his book, *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt.* In this mythology, the first of the gods emerges out of chaos and darkness.

> In the beginning were the primeval waters, named Nun (variant spelling: Nu) which, since they were unconscious and inanimate, were incapable of independent action. Out of the waters Ra raised himself on a hill and created himself. Ra says that at the moment of his creation nothing else existed, neither the heavens, nor the earth, not the things upon the earth. Until this moment he had lived alone in primeval waters, where he developed in darkness. . . .[3]

The "Pyramid Texts," so called because they were found in the burial chambers in the royal pyramids during the fifth and sixth dynasties, are among the oldest known of religious texts. The cosmogony and theogony are not outlined in detail in these documents, presumably because they are of a much more ancient time and were so commonly known that there was no need to make them explicit. In these, Atum is described as surging forth from the cosmic waters in the form of a "hill" (Pyramid Texts 1587). He spits forth Shu (the principle of air and of space) and Tefnut, who "most probably represents the element of fire," according to Lucie Lamy in *Egyptian*

Mysteries.[4] Does this not bear marked resemblance to Thales' idea, cited by Plutarch, that "at the beginning of this world something productive of heat and cold from the eternal was separated therefrom" (*Strom.* 2. *Dox.* 579)?

When one reads that Thales thought that the first principle of things was water, one is reminded of the Old Testament's opening lines:

> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. (Gen. 1:1-2 [RSV])

The parallels with the emergence of Atum from Nun are striking. Like Nun, the formless void and the darkness upon the deep are described as water in the Hebrew story. Of course, this is what one would expect, for the first five books are attributed to Moses, who was raised and educated in Egypt and who would have been familiar with the Egyptians' mythological cosmogony.

Explaining the symbolism of water, J. E. Cirlot, in *Dictionary of Symbols*, writes:

> In Egyptian hieroglyphs, the symbol for water is a wavy line with small crests, representing the water's surface. The same sign, when tripled, symbolizes a volume of water, that is, the primaeval ocean and prime matter.[5]

It is "water" that is Nu, or Nun, from which all emerges. Other traditions employ the same symbolism. Again Cirlot explains:

> In the Vedas, water is referred to as *matritamah* (the most maternal) because, in the beginning, everything was like a sea without light. In India, this element is generally regarded as the preserver of life, circulating throughout the whole of nature, in the form of rain, sap, milk and blood. Although water is, in appearance, formless, ancient cultures made a distinction between 'upper waters' and 'lower waters'. The former

> correspond to the potential or what is still possible, the later to what is actual or already created. . . . Moreover, the primaeval waters, the image of prime matter, also contained all solid bodies before they acquired form and rigidity.[6]

This distinction between upper and lower waters is preserved in Genesis:

> And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And God made the firmament and separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day. (Gen. 1:6-8 [RSV])

But in Genesis only the waters under the firmament are called the seas (Gen. 1:9-10).

What I would like to suggest is that, when Thales says that water is the first principle of things and that the earth rests on water, he is speaking symbolically, or metaphysically, not, as Aristotle indicates, in the natural mode of describing a material cause. Thales is more subtle than this.

After all, this is Thales, one of the seven sages of Greece. This Thales was a statesman and engineer. He allegedly diverted the Halys River for Croesus' army, he could compute the height of the pyramids by measuring their shadows, and could determine the distance of ships at sea by triangular measurement. He was an astronomer who predicted the eclipse of May 28, 585 B.C., and an entrepreneur who, according to Aristotle (*Politics* A11, 1259a 9), having predicted a large olive crop, put deposits on all the olive presses in Miletus and Chios, thereby making a fortune by hiring them out when the predicted large crop came to pass.

But to assert that Thales was not doing what Aristotle takes him to be doing, or to deny that Thales may not have been the first philosopher in the sense that most histories of philosophy have so assumed, is not to deny Thales' importance. Rather it is to judge him in light of a different perspective on

mythology.

According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, things originate from two sources, *Ge* (or *Geia*), Earth, and *Ouranos*, Sky. In their union (or out of their union) are produced the twelve Titans, the two most important of which are Rhea and Kronos. From these are born gods and goddesses, among whom are Demeter, Hera, Hades, Poseidon, and Zeus. What is Hesiod saying mythologically (that is, in an account [*logos*] in story form [*muthos*])?

Ge and Ouranos cannot produce anything so long as they are in union. For anything to be produced, something must flow forth from this union. This is Rhea, whose Greek name means "flowing" and "outpouring." But flowing is a process, and all processes take place in time. This is expressed mythologically by saying that Rhea has a husband, Kronos (virtually identical to the Greek word for "time," *Chronos*.) Thus, what the myths of Rhea and Kronos are revealing is that, at the beginning of Time, there was an outpouring of Divine energy from which source will manifest all that is, form/spirit/consciousness, on the one hand, and matter, on the other.

How does this differ significantly from the theology of Plato or Plotinus? Is it not that those whom we call the "philosophers" have demythologized the insights and intuitions expressed in mythological cosmology? The priests of the temples and the initiates of the mystery schools would have known the philosophical significance of the stories. Perhaps the time was not appropriate, before the emergence of philosophy, for the crowds, the many, to be given the cosmological understanding in other than story form. But to suggest, as many do, that those who wrote mythology were simply ignorant, or that the first philosphers were clumsily feeling their way toward an adequate scientific/philosophical account of the world, seems to me to be mistaken. There is deep philosophical wisdom in mythology for those with the keys to demythologize it.

Clement of Alexandria, in the Fifth Book of his *Stromateis*, warned that the most ancient philosophers and cosmologists veiled their teachings in symbol and fable, and Plutarch asserted "that ancient natural science both among the Greeks and foreigners was for the most part hidden in myths" (*De Daedal.* Frag. IX, i. 754). G. R. S. Mead in his book,

Orpheus, cites Clement.

> All, then, in a word, who have spoken of divine things, both Barbarians and Greeks, have veiled the first principles of things, and delivered the truth in enigmas, and symbols, and allegories, and metaphors, and such like tropes.[7]

In this connection, Clement specifically mentions the Pythagoreans and Plato; Julian mentions Orpheus (*Oration* vii. 215 b, 217); and Plutarch cites Orpheus, Hesiod, and Parmenides (*De Pyth. Orac.* xviii).

Rather than the Presocratic philosophers aiming at an explanation of reality in terms of material principles, as Aristotle would have us believe, may it not be that they were instead merely demythologizing the ancient myths and stating the truth in metaphorical, though hardly literal, form? The water of Thales is not a material principle but rather symbol for the primeval matter from which emanates all becoming. The "indefinite" or "infinite" of Anaximander is, likewise, not a material substance but another symbol of primeval chaos, ocean, or waters from which all emerges.

Numerous passages from the Presocratics indicate their continuance of the mythological/metaphorical mode. "Everything is full of the divine presence," says Thales (Arist. *de anima* 411a 7-8). "And from what source things arise, to that they return of necessity when they are destroyed; for they suffer punishment and make reparation to one another for their injustice according to the order of time," wrote Anaximander, in what Simplicius himself calls "poetical language" (*Phys.* 6r). The Pythagoreans spoke of male and female numbers (Hippolytus *Phil.* 2. *Dox.* 555); and, Heraclitus wrote that "God is day, he is night; winter and summer, war and peace" (Fr. 67).

Where does mythology or metaphor end and philosophy begin? Is Plato doing mythology or philosophy in the *Phaedo* (86 B-C) when he says that "we are in a sort of prison"? Plato is famous for his analogies of the Sun and Line, allegories of the Cave and Chariot, myths of Metals and of Er. Are these mythology, or do they express profound philosophical insights?

It seems to me that there is much of what is called philosophy that is hardly distinguishable from the mythological. And rather than disparage this material, I would hold it in the highest esteem. What can we say, in truth, about the origins of all things? Or about the one thing that they are? Is "energy" better than "water"? Or are we not, even in our most contemporary science, still resorting to the language of metaphor and myth? Stephen Pepper in *World Hypotheses* suggests that metaphor lies at the basis of virtually every philosophical system.[8] "Everything is full of the divine presence"[9] (Arist. *de anima* 411a 7). "As to the quantity and form of the first principle, there is a difference of opinion; but Thales, the founder of this sort of philosophy, says that it is water" (Arist. *Meta.* A3, 983b 6).

NOTES

[1]G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 88.

[2]Ibid., 91.

[3]Robert A. Armour, *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1986), 19-20.

[4]Lucie Lamy, *Egyptian Mysteries* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), 9.

[5]J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), 345.

[6]Ibid.

[7]G. R. S. Mead, *Orpheus* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), 44.

[8]Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

[9]Giovanni Reale usually translated the passage as "All things are full of gods."