

## HYMN TO THE NILE

TRANSLATED BY PAUL GUIEYSSE

THE Hymn to the Nile is, properly speaking, not a religious document like those, for example, of the Funerary Ritual, whose history can be followed from century to century, but a religious poem in the same sense as that in which the Poem of Pentaur is a historical poem. It is the work of the scribe Ennana, the author of the Story of the Two Brothers and of several other fragments contained in the papyri of the British Museum. We possess two copies of it in the papyri Sallier II and Anastasi VII; both texts, however, are extremely poor. Prof. Maspero was the first to translate them in 1868,<sup>1</sup> and to show from an examination of the variant readings that they must have been transcribed from dictation by pupils in the schools of the scribes, though not from the same original text. The translation of Prof. Maspero has often been reproduced in works on Egypt, and Canon Cook has given a translation which differs from it but little.<sup>2</sup> In the present

<sup>1</sup> *Hymne au Nil*. Franck, Paris 1868.

<sup>2</sup> *Records of the Past*, IV. Bagster & Sons, London 1875.

translation notice has been taken, as far as possible, of the recent progress of Egyptological knowledge ; it will appear with a complete transcription of the two texts in the *Recueil des Travaux relatifs à l'Égyptologie*.<sup>1</sup>

The text of the Hymn is divided into fourteen verses, introduced by red letters, and each, with two exceptions, containing the same number of complete phrases, separated from one another by red points. Unfortunately we are still ignorant of the rules of Egyptian poetry ; but as the variant readings show that the number of syllables in one and the same sentence is not the same in the different texts, it is probable that the tonic accent played a chief part in it. We find, however that the order of the words is clearly not the same as in ordinary prose.<sup>2</sup>

The author has developed the idea, well-known even to classical antiquity, that the Nile is the source of all life in Egypt, that it is the supreme god, mysterious, uncreated, the father of the gods and all things else, into whose secrets none can penetrate. He describes in a lofty style the benefits conferred by the Nile when it spreads its waters over the country at its annual return, and the miseries of the land when the inundation has not exercised its fertilising influence, as well as the joy of the inhabitants of Egypt and their gratitude when the Nile has answered their prayers.

<sup>1</sup> Vol. xiii. Bouillon, Paris 1890.

<sup>2</sup> Notably in verse 2, phrases 7 and 8, and in verse 14, phrase 1.

## HYMN TO THE NILE

### I

ADORATION to the NILE !

Hail to thee, O NILE !

who manifesteth thyself over this land,  
and comest to give life to EGYPT !

Mysterious is thy issuing forth from the darkness,  
on this day whereon it is celebrated !

Watering the orchards created by RA<sup>1</sup>

to cause all the cattle to live,

thou givest the earth to drink, inexhaustible one !

Path that descendest from the sky,<sup>2</sup>

loving the bread of SEB and the firstfruits of NEPERA,

thou causest the workshops of PTAH<sup>3</sup> to prosper !

### II

Lord of the fish, during the inundation,

no bird alights on the crops.

Thou createst the corn, thou bringest forth the barley,  
assuring perpetuity to the temples.<sup>4</sup>

If thou ceasest thy toil and thy work,

then all that exists is in anguish.

<sup>1</sup> The orchards of Ra are mentioned in the Book of the Dead, ch. 81.

<sup>2</sup> This belief in the celestial origin of the Nile survived in Egypt, at all events as late as the time of Joinville (*Histoire de Saint-Louis*, ch. xl.).

<sup>3</sup> Ptah is associated with the Nile in a list of divinities represented on a wall of the age of Ramses II at Karnak (Champollion : *Not. Manuscrites* II. p. 255, where Ptah is called *Ptah, ꜥa Hapi aā*).

<sup>4</sup> In the Anastasi text : "Causing the temples to keep holiday."

If the gods suffer in heaven<sup>1</sup>  
then the faces of men waste away.

## III

Then he torments the flocks of EGYPT,  
and great and small are in agony.  
But all is changed for mankind when he comes ;  
he is endowed with the qualities of NUM.<sup>2</sup>  
If he shines, the earth is joyous,  
every stomach is full of rejoicing,  
every spine is happy,  
every jaw-bone crushes (its food).

## IV

He brings the offerings,<sup>3</sup> as chief of provisioning ;  
he is the creator of all good things,  
as master of energy, full of sweetness in his choice.  
If offerings are made it is thanks to him.  
He brings forth the herbage for the flocks,<sup>4</sup>  
and sees that each god receives his sacrifices.  
All that depends on him is a precious incense.  
He spreads himself over EGYPT,  
filling the granaries, renewing the marts,  
watching over the goods of the unhappy.

## V

He is prosperous to the height of all desires,  
without fatiguing himself therefor.  
He brings again his lordly bark ;  
he is not sculptured in stone, in the statues crowned with  
the uræus serpent,

<sup>1</sup> The Nile is not only the dispenser of life to mankind, but also to the gods (see verses 4, 10, 13). In the Hymn it absorbs as it were all the gods, and even takes the place of Ra in verse 14.

<sup>2</sup> Num, the divine creator, like Ptah, is similar to Ptah in his relation to the Nile. The two verses point out that all life is dependent on the Nile, an idea which is developed to excess in the verses following.

<sup>3</sup> Funerary offerings made to the *ka* or "double."

<sup>4</sup> See verse 14.

he cannot be contemplated.  
 No servitors has he, no bearers of offerings !  
 He is not enticed by incantations !  
 None knows the place where he dwells,  
 None discovers his retreat by the power of a written spell.<sup>1</sup>

## VI

No dwelling (is there) which may contain thee !  
 None penetrates within thy heart !  
 Thy young men, thy children applaud thee  
 and render unto thee royal homage.  
 Stable are thy decrees for EGYPT<sup>2</sup>  
 before thy servants of the North !<sup>3</sup>  
 He stanches the water from all eyes  
 and watches over the increase of his good things.

## VII

Where misery existed, joy manifests itself ;  
 all beasts rejoice.  
 The children of SEBEK, the sons of NEIT,<sup>4</sup>  
 the cycle of the gods which dwells in him, are prosperous.  
 No more reservoirs for watering the fields !  
 He makes mankind valiant,  
 enriching some, bestowing his love on others.  
 None commands at the same time as himself.

<sup>1</sup> The gods had to submit to the power of incantations and magic formulæ (compare the legend of Ra bitten by a serpent, the romance of Setnau, and numerous passages in the Book of the Dead). The Nile alone was excepted from this law ; it remained enshrouded in mystery in its retreat near the two whirlpools often mentioned in the texts and even alluded to by Herodotus.

<sup>2</sup> So in the Anastasi text. The fixity of the periodic return of the Nile is probably referred to.

<sup>3</sup> Verse 5 has, however, stated that the Nile had no servants ; perhaps the secondary gods are meant here who directed the spread of the waters over Egypt, that is to the north of the whirlpools from whence the Nile rose.

<sup>4</sup> Neit is often represented with two crocodiles on the breast ; her relation to Sebek, the crocodile-god, is difficult to define.

He creates the offerings without the aid of NEIT,<sup>1</sup>  
making mankind for himself with multiform care.

## VIII

He shines when he issues forth from the darkness,  
to cause his flocks to prosper.  
It is his force that gives existence to all things ;  
nothing remains hidden for him.  
Let men clothe themselves to fill his gardens.  
He watches over his works,  
producing the inundation during the night.<sup>2</sup>  
It is a god ПТАН . . .<sup>3</sup>  
He causes all his servants to exist,  
all writings and divine words,<sup>4</sup>  
and that which he needs in the North.

## IX

It is with the words that he penetrates into his dwelling ;  
he issues forth at his pleasure through the magic spells.<sup>5</sup>  
Thy unkindness brings destruction to the fish ;  
it is then that prayer is made for the (annual) water of the  
season ;  
Southern EGYPT is seen in the same state as the North.  
Each one is with his instruments of labour,

<sup>1</sup> Neit appears here as the goddess of production ; the Nile has no need of Neit (or perhaps the rain) in order to generate the crops ; it makes its way throughout the country by means of canals and trenches.

<sup>2</sup> This seems to be an allusion to the festival of the "Night of the Drop" (*Lêlet en-Nuqta*), still observed in Egypt on the 5th of June, when the rise of the Nile is supposed to commence. The name is due to the old tradition recorded by Plutarch, according to which the rise of the Nile was caused by a tear which dropped into it from the eye of Isis. In M. Amélineau's *Contes et Romans de l'Égypte Chrétienne*, i. p. 17, the rise of the Nile is attributed to the intercession of St. Michael, whose festival is celebrated on the 6th of June ; three days before, the archangel prays that the water may rise, since it is "the life of men and animals."

<sup>3</sup> Unknown word, conjectured by Cook to represent the name of a new god *Kahes*.

<sup>4</sup> The Nile inspires Thoth the scribe of the divine utterances.

<sup>5</sup> The Nile is unaffected by incantations, but serves himself with them at his pleasure in order to manifest himself.

none remains behind his companions.  
 None clothes himself with garments,  
 the children of the noble put aside their ornaments.  
 The night remains silent,  
 but all is changed by the inundation ;  
 it is a healing-balm for all mankind.

## X

Establisher of justice ! mankind desires thee,  
 supplicating thee to answer their prayers ;  
 thou answerest them by the inundation !  
 Men offer the first-fruits of corn ;  
 all the gods adore thee !  
 The birds descend not on the soil.  
 It is believed that with thy hand of gold  
 thou makest bricks of silver !  
 But we are not nourished on lapis-lazuli ;  
 corn alone gives vigour.<sup>1</sup>

## XI

A festal song is raised for thee on the harp,  
 with the accompaniment of the hand.<sup>2</sup>  
 Thy young men and thy children acclaim thee  
 and prepare their (long) exercises.  
 Thou art the august ornament of the earth,  
 letting thy bark advance before men,  
 lifting up the heart of women in labour,  
 and loving the multitude of the flocks.

<sup>1</sup> The Nile is indeed the dispenser of all wealth, but true wealth does not consist in gold or silver, but of the products of agriculture which enable men to live.

<sup>2</sup> Women are represented on the monuments accompanying the singers by clapping the hands ; this custom still survives throughout the East. It is possible that we still possess the festal songs of the Nile, of which Lane has preserved for us some fragments in his work on *The Modern Egyptians*.

# END OF SAMPLE TEXT



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