CHAPTER III

THE RELIGION OF EGYPT

It is chiefly in sepulchral and religious monuments that the architectural history of Egypt can be traced. There is no nation whose development has been more influenced by supernatural conceptions. Belief in a continued existence after death is common in the most primitive races, but with the Egyptians it led to an elaboration of funerary customs and monumental building unrivalled in any other ancient nation. Of the Egyptian mythology it is impossible to give a connected account, because it took peculiar forms in different localities, and was never reduced by any conspicuous literary effort to a coherent tradition. But it is necessary to say a few words about it in order to account for the various attributions of the temples. 1 Towns remote from one another in the long and narrow valley of the Nile, which to the dwellers in it seemed to be the whole habitable world, had special presiding deities in addition to others of minor importance. From the confused mass of legend and superstition which attached religious significance and symbolism to the phenomena and processes of nature and animal life, and inferred the existence of good and evil spirits in almost

1 A general sketch of the religion of Egypt will be found in Breasted, pp. 54-61, and details as to numerous gods in Dr. Budge’s “Guide to the Egyptian Collections in the B.M.,” ch. vii.
every living thing, the fact emerges that the sun was regarded as the great source, or at least symbol of power, and of the continual renewal of life after death. But even before Ra, the sun-god, came Thoth, the creator of the world, and Ptah, who assisted in the creation, and was regarded as the god who presided over all mechanical work. The chief seat of the worship of Ra was Annu or On, the Greek Heliopolis, in the Delta; but under other names he was worshipped almost universally. Keb, the Earth, and Nut, the Heavens, were his children, and they in turn, according to some legends, gave birth to Osiris and Isis. The slaying and dismemberment of Osiris by Set, another son of Keb and Nut, the sorrows of his sister-wife Isis, and his resuscitation by her efforts in the form of a god, who presided over the destinies of mortals both as a mediator and a judge form the subject of an epic legend. The cult of Osiris became widely recognized, and had its centre at Abydos, where his head was said to have been buried. One of the most important recent discoveries there is his sanctuary, supposed to be coeval with the pyramids, consisting of a hall about 100 by 66 feet in area, divided longitudinally by two rows of massive rectangular piers, with smaller chambers and a sepulchral cavity at the end.¹

Horus, the son of Osiris and Isis, appears as a god in various forms, and is sometimes identified as the sun-god. In many religious centres a triad consisting of a god, goddess, and their son was worshipped. When, under the XIth dynasty, Thebes became a centre of government, the local god Amen was identified with

¹ The date of this remarkable building is still doubtful. See Appendix II.
the sun-god under the name Amen-Ra, and with his female counterpart Mut and their son Khonsu had temples at Karnak and Luxor.

Nut, the sky-goddess, became differentiated, like Horus, in various characters at different places. At Sais she was probably represented by the local goddess Neit,¹ whom the Greeks seem to have identified with Pallas.² In the more primitive mythology the sky was symbolized both as a woman and as a cow, typical of the nourishing qualities of nature, and at an early period Dendera became the centre of the worship of another form of this goddess under the name Hathor, with whom the cow was especially associated. At Bubastis she appears as Bast in the form of a cat. The continued tendency to associate animals with special characteristics of supernatural beings, is a marked feature of the polytheism of the Egyptians. The Bull under the name Apis at Memphis or Mnevis at Heliopolis was probably at first a form of Ptah;³ the hawk was associated with Ra, and the jackal with Anubis, a god of the lower world who presided over sepulchral rites. Many birds and beasts in this way acquired a sacred character, but it was only at a late date, and towards the decline of the nation that the worship of animals as such became a recognized cult.⁴ The number of gods mentioned in various inscriptions and texts is said to amount to more than 2,000 and though there are some indications of a tendency to regard them all as attributive to the sun-god Ra, the only real attempt to restore simplicity to the religious system was made by the philosophic king Amenhetep IVth, who

¹ Breasted, p. 59.
² See Rawlinson's "Herodotus," ii, p. 102 n.
³ Breasted, pp. 46, 575.
⁴ Ibid., p. 60.
changed his name to Akhenaten, and tried, in opposition to the priesthood, to establish a monotheistic worship of a God adored through the medium of the sun’s disk. In this he signally failed, and the old superstitions survived in forms continuously exaggerated down to the Roman period.

The name is also transliterated as Ikhnaten and Khuenaten. It means Spirit of the Sun-god. See Breasted, pp. 360-364.