Any student of Swedenborg is bound to notice the numerous references to Egypt contained in his writings. In a letter of August 1769, presumably addressed to Messrs. Thomas Hartley and Husband Messiter, he offers to explain the Egyptian hieroglyphics and publish a treatise on the subject “if it is desired.” Unfortunately the offer was never taken up.

These widely scattered references awakened my curiosity to see them combined into a more comprehensive picture, comparing them with an investigation of archeological findings and modern scholarly inquiry. It is claimed that we know more about Egypt than about any other ancient civilization, and all available pieces of Ancient Egyptian writing have been carefully deciphered and catalogued. A number of interesting New Church articles have been published in America and Europe, although in some cases these are of questionable value.

1 In Pott’s Concordance, Vol. II, these references take 19 pages.
3 Among the first ones to be mentioned: C. Th. Odhner, Correspondences of Egypt (Bryn Athyn, 1911), a fascinating work, some parts of which are of value. Other publications seem to fall behind, except E. Madeley, The Science of Correspondences (Philadelphia: Claxton, 1884), pp. 704-720, which contains valuable references. Hector Waylen, “The Great Pyramid” in New Church Review, July 1929, is utterly fantastic; similarly H. Maltzahn, unfortunately reprinted in Gollwitzer’s Swedenborg-Brevier (2nd. ed., Swedenborg-Verlag, Zürich, Switzerland).
In this line of search I was presented with a rare opportunity. For my studies at the University of Vienna, Austria, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, I was required to choose a historical subject besides my major areas of psychology, philosophy and education, so I chose Egyptology. It turned out to be a formidable three-year task, including two new languages, Egyptian and Coptic, with three different writing systems: hieroglyphic, hieratic and Coptic, the first two including over a thousand signs altogether (all this for a minor field!).

Yet, beyond the burden of this work, it turned out to be a discovery of unexpected treasures. The Vienna Institute of Egyptology is leading in the investigation of the Ancient Egyptian religion, and has explored several areas in depth that have a special interest for Swedenborgians, of which some will be mentioned in the present article. The major part of the research made in Vienna before, during, and after World War II has never been translated into English and is almost entirely unknown in the Anglo-American countries, whose research has a very different general orientation.

The Character of the Egyptian Civilization

Swedenborg maintains that one of the main characteristics of the Egyptian religion, and consequently also of the whole civilization throughout that period, was its preference for “Scientifics.” Fortunately, most of the more modern translations of Swedenborg’s Writings use “memory-knowledge” as the translation of this original Latin expression; and this is more appropriate to Swedenborg’s own definition. What is meant is a love for knowledge (scientia) for the sake and enjoyment of this information itself; thus not so much an interest in systematizing, evaluating and integrating this learning, as in accumulating and communicating traditions. The topic itself was hardly “science” as we understand the meaning of that word today, which relates to findings about the material world, but more metaphysical, historical and religious material, even where this was symbolic and not fully understood. (See also AC 5934). Religious sayings and rites were handed along from most ancient times with less emphasis upon personal experience and conviction, than upon the authority of the tradition.

4 “... scientific truth is of knowledge; rational truth is scientific ... confirmed by reason. ...” (AC 1496).
The oldest existing texts are those which have been inscribed in the walls of the pyramids, beginning with king Unas of the 6th dynasty. Often, they are introduced with the remark "to recite," and have been handed on, in various transformations, through the so-called "Coffin texts" into the later "Book of the Dead." They consist of collections of often incoherent quotations, though some are of a great beauty and depth, as will be shown later. One observer calls this a "mania of collecting," emphasizing that rationality and creativity step down as values, to make room for tradition and the knowledge of older times.

Still another peculiarity needs to be pointed out: Abstract concepts were often grasped and represented as entities in themselves, in close analogy to material objects or symbols as correspondences. Greek philosophy later substituted ideas and abstractions instead of a description of these concepts in mythological form. "In Egypt, a thinking in pictures, in wholes, was prevalent, instead of in abstractions as today." The result is that one finds in many concise Egyptian statements a grasp and demonstration of the essential meaning that is almost impossible to parallel in any translation into modern languages.

After these more general observations a number of specific points will be presented to illustrate parallels in Swedenborg and modern findings.

**Monotheistic Traces**

At the first glance, Egypt presents a picture of a most abstruse polytheism with hundreds of local, partially conflicting deities which change into each other and seem to have no general pattern. Most Egyptologists, especially in the Anglo-American realm, believe that this is the primitive and oldest form of religion. This view fits neatly into a picture of evolution, and it seems that clear signs of monotheism appear only much later under the reform of Akhenaten. Other researchers, although still in a minority, have

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5 Spiegel, *Das Totengericht*, p. 5. (Translation of the German text here and in the following by the author.)
6 Wolf, *Kulturgeschichte Agyptens*, p. 44.
7 Among the many appear even excellent minds as J. H. Breasted (*The Dawn of Conscience*).
8 The monotheistic reform or "heresy" was introduced during the 18th dynasty, ca. 1600 years later than the beginning of Egyptian history with the first dynasty.
come to different conclusions. Professor G. Thausing, Vienna, points out that all the different deities were originally only aspects of one supreme God, which later came to be worshipped as individual deities. 9

A noted French scholar declares similarly: “There was monotheism under the appearance of polytheism.” 10 Little known beyond the European Continent, a number of scholars have come to the conclusion (corroborated by anthropological and linguistic evidence) that traces of an old belief in one supreme God are found in many indications. One anthropologist, Prof. W. Schmidt, has been able to accumulate about ten volumes of proofs for this assertion, collected from many civilizations all over the globe. 11 Yet his conclusions were immediately attacked and swept away by scholars who could not free themselves from narrowly understood interpretations of evolutionary theory.

Parallels between the Myth of Osiris and the New Testament

These, like many other details, corroborate Swedenborg’s assertion of the revealed primeval religion that he calls the Most Ancient Church, 12 which degenerated in prehistoric times before any written records were made. It seems that more traces of this have survived in Egypt than in other places, and reverence for these old traditions has characterized the civilization itself.

9 G. Thausing in “Die Religion der Ägypter,” Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, 1953, p. 16: “In the beginning there was a belief in the highest principle—the Great God, ntr a’a, identified with the falcon-totem . . . all the other deities (also in animal shapes) are names, aspects of this highest and absolute (deity). This is why there was so frequent an assimilation of a local god with the highest being.”

Similarly, Prof. Junker in his report on the excavations in Giza II (given to the Academy of Sciences, Vol. II, Wien-Leipzig 1934, p. 47 in the chapter on “The Great God”). “In the beginning this expression must have had quite a specific meaning, and have designated one deity alone . . . , also called ‘Lord of the Universe,’ nb drw, lit. ‘of borders,’ . . . also called ‘Lord of heaven’ nb pt . . . this highest God had no specific name and no specific cult, . . . Because the underlying idea was the same, the name could change . . . .”


11 The Viennese anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt, in Der Ursprung der Gottesidee (Münster, 1926, 12th edition 1955), speaks of a “Uroffenbarung” or primeval revelation—apparently a discovery of his own, without any reference to Swedenborg.

12 TCR 760, “The Most Ancient Church . . . came before the Flood. . . .”
One of the most surprising aspects of this appears in similarities between the Osiris-myth and the life of the Lord. As pointed out by C. Th. Odhner, this was recognized by the early Christians, who used it in their missionary appeal. Osiris was seen as uniting Divine and human qualities. The hieroglyphic combination for Osiris, an eye upon a throne, is written in several traditions with a sign for human flesh, which has not been explained by the Egyptologists. Osiris, of Divine-human origin, was born and reared on earth, and became the king who showed everything good to humans; all civilization was attributed to his teachings. He perished by an intrigue of the evil power, represented by Seth. Osiris passed into the regions of the Underworld, and was resurrected with a glorified body, and became the Lord and Supreme Judge of the dead, and the symbol of life in general, and thus of resurrection.

Another surprise has been the discovery that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19–31) has been found on an ancient demotic papyrus in a very similar form, representing an "ancient Egyptian tale. . . ." Again, one has a choice as to whether to declare this a mild form of a transformed plagiarism, or as proceeding, through several traditions, from a common root.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRINITARIAN CONCEPT

Among the most interesting aspects of the continuation of Egyptian traditions in Christianity is the discovery of their influence upon the origin of the dogma of the Trinity. The Egyptians worshiped in their pantheon a number of triune deities which

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18 C. Th. Odhner, op. cit., pp 108–120, points out that the early Christian Fathers, esp. Clemens and Origen had recognized the messianic character of the Osiris legend, and used it in their preaching. Since this topic has already been explored, it is not rendered in detail here.

14 The sign for human flesh, apparently a muscle, or the sign for an egg often accompanies the combination for Osiris, and at times also Isis and other deities.

15 The sign for Seth is an unreal composition of parts of other animals' attributes.

16 Every deceased person was identified with Osiris, Osiris rising in him.

17 The Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), Vol. VIII (Luke), p. 289 "In 1918 Hugo Gressman of the Univ. of Berlin discovered . . . a Jewish version of an ancient Egyptian tale, still extant in a demotic papyrus of the first century A.D." Demotic is the latest and more current transformation of the hieroglyphic form of writing.
were understood to be tripersonal, and in some instances also to be modes of one deity. This position has been common in Christian thought and has been called modalism, meaning that the three are modes of appearance of the One. An example of this interpretation of triads is preserved in the Leiden hymns to Amun: “Three are all gods, Amun, Re, Ptah. There is none like them, who hides his name like Amun. He is Re in face, his body is Ptah.”  

An Egyptian amulet shows the inscription: “One is Bajt, one is Hathor, one Akori—to these belongs one power. Hail to thee, Father of the World, Hail to the threefold God.” One investigator has demonstrated that the elements of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity came from the New Testament, but that their combination and interpretation follows in part the lines of Egyptian thinking. He points out further that a number of the theologians of early Christianity came from an Egyptian background. Philo of Alexandria was one who had a wide influence, though he was not himself a Christian; Athanasius, the formulator of the creed that was named after him, is another example. It was the Egyptian Basilides, who introduced the idea of “homiousios,” the combining overarching idea, at the Council of Nicea.

For thousands of subsequent years the influence of Egyptian thinking has left its trace in various branches and interpretations of Christianity. This is manifest in another area: ideas about the life after death.

**Ideas about Life after Death**

While our grasp of the Egyptians’ underlying ideas about their gods is still fragmentary in many areas, the situation is different in relation to their interpretation of life after death. A good many treatises have been preserved, which are concerned with different aspects of these beliefs in all phases of Egyptian history. It was later believed that the writing of these documents on scrolls


19 Brit. Museum, amulet from ca. 100 B.C., written in Greek, calling it “trimorphos theos.” Spiegelberg, ARW 21, 1922, p. 225.


21 A modern paperback reprint of the Papyrus of Ani, transl. by E. A. Wallis Budge has been issued by Dover, New York, 1967 (original 1895).
or on the coffins was thought to have magical effects and to help the deceased in the afterlife.

If we accept the hypothesis that originally there might have been more consistent and purer ideas about the possibility of survival, one is tempted to assume that these texts could have been formulated originally by the priests to be repeated in order to comfort the bereaved, and to bring the assurance of continuing life convincingly close to those involved. This might be the reason why these convictions were represented in verbal descriptions, in rites and ceremonies that brought anticipated events to life.

A belief in the continuing life has been strong throughout all Egyptian history. Upon closer scrutiny, one recognizes different and partially conflicting ideas about the mode of this survival. One aspect, which has become most widely known, the embalming of the dead, or mummification, can be interpreted in a number of different aspects of meaning. Some texts speak of the embalming process as representing a purification. Was it originally intended to demonstrate that death was not real? We do not know, but it is certain that magical and superstitious ideas in a very materialistic vein became intimately united with this practice.

"A very important rite in the mortuary service was the symbolic ‘opening of the mouth’ of the deceased person, that he might retain his powers of speech and his ability to partake food and drink offerings. . . ." 22

This was done on the third day after death, representing the resurrection and revivification in another world, which reminds us of Swedenborg’s descriptions that on the third day the soul is awakened to life in the other world. 28 Death is thus only a transition “. . . the beginning of a new life; you die, in order that you live,” as expressed in a Pyramid text. 24 In later times, this became interspersed with expressions of a belief in material survival, enhanced by gifts in the tomb of “magic power.”

Common in all descriptions, also in later ones, is the idea of a judgment of the dead, depicted as a commanding and impressive

28 HH 452.
scene in the judgment hall of Osiris. Many papyri in museums depict this familiar scene: A big scale is shown, on which the heart of the deceased is weighed, apparently immediately after his death. The heart itself appears as a vessel, or instead of it a substituting symbol. The mummy, which is also called “The glorified body,” may be one of these substitutes. On the other side of the scale appears the feather, symbol of the goddess Ma’at, the goddess of truth and justice. The god Thoth holds a record of the life of the newcomer, while a hell-animal, a composition of crocodile and hippopotamus, is ready to devour with gaping mouth the soul that does not pass the test. It is evident that all these details can be traced back to original interpretations that were rendered in a mythological way, and which have later come to be interpreted more materialistically.

The quality of life in the heavenly quarters again finds different descriptions. Some call it the “Place of rebirth,” others mention the absence of evil. Still other descriptions call it a riding over the heavens with Ra, the sun-god. Some again emphasize the communication with Osiris,

“. . . the beatified live forever in the kingdom of Osiris, and feed daily upon the heavenly wheat of righteousness that springs from the body of Osiris, which is eternal; he is righteousness himself . . .”

The possibility of a second death, the “real death,” or a disintegration in the other world is seen as a greater danger.

We have adduced here a number of quotations from Egyptian texts, so that the question may be raised: How are these texts to be interpreted? How sure are we of our translations? This leads to a further section, which contains the most surprising discoveries for students of Swedenborg.

**Egyptian Language**

Throughout antiquity, the Egyptian writing was thought of as being holy, as is expressed in the name hieroglyphics, meaning “holy carvings.” It was intricately penetrated by religious symbols. This was one of the reasons why this form of writing was abolished with the acceptance of Christianity. Instead an

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26 E. Wallis Budge, *The Egyptian Heaven and Hell*, p. XI.
expanded Greek alphabet was adopted with some Egyptian supplements, the Coptic script and language. The hieroglyphic writing, as we know today, is a combination of phonetic script and ideographic writing. Most modern languages are written phonetically, each letter corresponding to a sound, while Chinese is written in images or ideographs, each sign corresponding to an idea. Egyptian was written as a combination of these elements. It was possible to write not only entirely phonetically, for the hieroglyphics contained a full phonetic alphabet, but also through the use of symbols alone. The general usage was that the word was written partially phonetically, and that the identifying symbol was added at the end, thus removing any doubt. The result is in most cases a combination of these basic elements in various ways, sometimes adding several of the symbols (called "determinatives" by the Egyptologists) at the end of the word.

This poses several problems for translators today, for it is possible to recognize in a number of places that no one meaning alone is intended, but various levels, according to how the different symbols are interpreted. A modern scholar writes in a history of Egyptian literature:

"In the teaching of Ptahotep it has been proved—for the time being only in a few places, but there beyond doubt—that the clear and simple surface-meaning has underlying it a deeper, hidden meaning, which results, if the words are read a little differently, . . . it does not have to be a secret teaching, which is hidden in the 5th maxim of the teaching of Ptahotep, when he refers to the judgment of the dead, which the foreground text does not mention . . . the underlying meaning though speaks of a retributive justice in the other world. Such amphibolies have probably played a much greater role in Egyptian literature than we have been able to discover up to now." 28

One has to be aware that the Egyptologists are divided on this point; some would reject these notions completely, while a minority accepts them emphatically. The most outspoken representative of those who recognize deeper levels of interpretation was the late Prof. Czermak of Vienna, who wrote several articles in professional journals about this observation. The most outstanding one is his analysis of the first chapter of the "Book of the Dead," expressing the conviction that an intellectual elite has

included here a deeper internal sense, even in a number of different levels of implication.

"... this esoteric sense, maintained in the secret knowledge of the priesthood... was for the masses... a concrete meaning, which seemed illogical, full of contradictions and phantasy... but for the initiated, who had passed the introductory steps, the secret sense behind the letters was open with its esoteric content, which summarized from the internal to the external, and made it into a unity, independent of time, and opened the view to the Cosmos." 29

Too rapidly the Egyptian writing has been called primitive. This is only an external appearance. Our modern language has the opposite tendency, to affix more and more precisely defined limited meanings to a word. This is opposed to Egyptian thinking, and contributes to making it very difficult to translate the full implications of the ancient texts. An example is given by Prof. Thausing:

"If a myth is told of the birth of light after the big Flood, so this would not only have to be interpreted cosmologically, but also historically in the sense of the history of mankind, as well as psychologically (for the individual), and it is also to be seen from a view-point of life and death. In this myth is to be understood the awakening of the Egyptian civilization from prehistoric conditions, as the awakening of the kingdom after the coronation, and the enlightenment of the initiation in religious rites, or the resurrection after death... The myth of myths is the birth of light—the dawn of insight." 30

Egyptologists have found up to seven levels of internal meaning, which could be summarized into three main layers. The French scholar Drioton came independently to a similar conclusion by recognizing that the story on a stela in the Louvre in Paris told the life of the deceased in one level, and described the funeral rites in another degree of meaning. Drioton expanded his observations and came to similar conclusions as the Austrian scholars.

Swedenborg's interpretation of three levels of meaning in the Bible, especially in large parts of the Old Testament—long rejected as impossible by Biblical scholarship—gains an unexpected corroboration by these findings of the Egyptologists, who had never heard of Swedenborg. It reminds one of the Egyptian, Origen, who wrote in the 2nd and 3rd century about deeper levels of mean-

ing in the Word. He believed in a threefold internal meaning of the Bible. If the principles of correspondences were applied, they offer in many cases a surprising explanation of hieroglyphic symbols. For example, a very common hieroglyph is an oval with a cross on it, which is sometimes doubled. It is known from detailed drawings that this designates the heart with a part of the larynx. Quoting the leading Egyptian grammar, it is said that this means "good," "because of unknown reasons. . . ." Swedenborgians will be familiar with the fact that heart, the source of energy in the body, is a correspondence to good. In other hieroglyphics the heart is shown as a container, a vessel with two handles. Could it be that originally the heart was understood as a vessel of life, " . . . this organ unites man with the deity, by opening access to a supersensory world . . . through the heart man knows the will of God." This is the interpretation of another Egyptologist. A great many further examples of recognizable correspondences could be mentioned here, but for this article it would be too specialized. Maybe they can be explored in a later, more specialized essay. In keeping the whole picture of the Egyptian history before us, we will have to turn to the decline of the Egyptian religion and civilization, as it appears in an important facet of life in those times, the element of magic.

**EGYPTIAN MAGIC**

As already mentioned, the English scholar, E. Wallis Budge, wrote a detailed treatise on the topic of magic in Egypt, which has been recently reprinted. In it he explores a number of different facets of this development in Egyptian history. Several investigators have noticed that with advancing time there is an increase in the number and use of magical practices in Egypt. Swedenborg writes that

". . . they began to misuse the interior memory-knowledges of the church, and to turn them into magic . . . many were in communication with spirits,

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31 Origen, *On First Principles* ed. H. de Lubac (New York: Harper, 1966), p. 275: "Each one must therefore portray the meaning of the divine writings in a threefold way upon his own soul. . . ." P. 276: "just as man, therefore, is said to consist of body, soul and spirit, so also does the holy scripture. . . ."


33 Gardiner, op. cit, No. 34, phonetically *ib*.
and this way learned deceptive arts, by which they performed magic miracles. . . ." It was "... a perversion, and a perverted application. . . ." Beliefs in magical effects, even maintained today in churches, attributing magical powers to the sacraments, seem to have their roots in Egypt. Since this topic is apparently well explored, this short reference may be sufficient, demonstrating again a corroboration of Swedenborg and recent investigations of the topic.

For the final section, a very little known observation may be included here.

**The Development of Mariolatry**

In a doctoral thesis of R. Unger, accepted by the University of Leipzig in 1960 under the title "The Mother and the Child" it has been pointed out that the countless pictures of Isis with her son Horus on her lap show strong parallels with early pictures of the Madonna with the Christchild. The early development of Christianity, which was mediated in essential parts through Egypt, has included these familiar features in the Christian tradition, and these were maintained and expanded, until the Reformation changed the image of Mary. Swedenborg is here in agreement with the reformers. He does not mention the origins of mariolatry, but points out that Mary was only the mother of Jesus' exterior or human nature.

**Summary**

It appears that many findings of modern research have substantiated Swedenborg's scattered allusions to Egypt, at times in a different way from what had been anticipated. Many more parallels could be enumerated and are to be incorporated in subsequent articles. There is also much more work to be done in various areas of investigation. A number of Protestant theologians have made Greek thinkers responsible for certain corruptions of the Christian doctrine that appeared in their view. Upon our investigations it appears that we have to look further back. Christianity owes to Egyptian religion and civilization a valuable legacy, but increasingly we are enabled through Swedenborg's contributions to separate the corrupted elements from those of lasting value.

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84 AC 5223.
85 AC 1460; TCR 92, 94, 102.