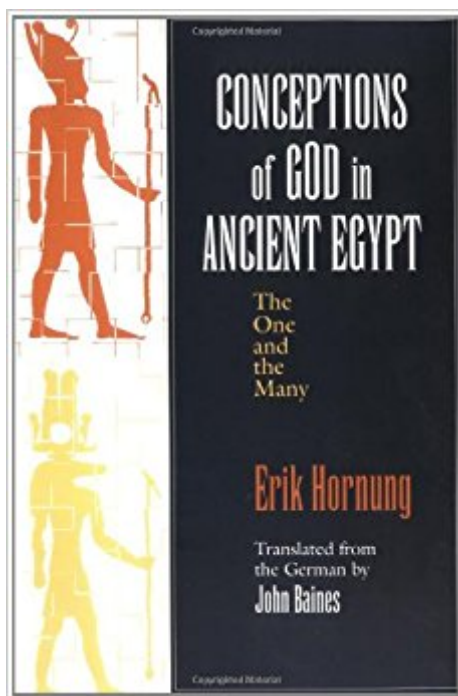


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# Conceptions Of God In Ancient Egypt: The One And The Many



## Synopsis

Osiris, Horus, Isis, Thoth, Anubis - the many strange and compelling figures of the Egyptian gods and goddesses seem to possess endless fascination. The renowned Egyptologist Erik Hornung here studies the ancient Egyptians' conceptions of god, basing his account on a thorough reappraisal of the primary sources. His book, now available in English for the first time, is the most extensive exploration yet undertaken of the nature of Egyptian religion. Hornung examines the characteristics, spheres of action, and significance of Egyptian gods and goddesses, analyzing the complex and changing iconography used to represent them, and disentangling the many seemingly contradictory aspects of the religion of which they are a part. He seeks to answer two basic questions: How did the Egyptians themselves see their gods? Did they believe there was an impersonal, anonymous force behind the multiplicity of their deities? Throughout, he attempts to evoke the complexity and richness of the religion of the ancient Egyptians and of their worldview, which differs so greatly from our own. A work of extraordinary distinction, Hornung's book will appeal to anyone interested in ancient Egypt, in ancient religion, and in the history of religion, as well as students and scholars of ancient history, anthropology, and archaeology. Sensitively translated by John Baines and with a new preface by the author, this edition has been amplified and updated with an English-language audience in mind.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"An excellent historical overview of the gods. . . It is a recommended necessary reading for those studying Ancient Egyptian religion." •Frankie's Reviews in Egyptology" After surveying the

approaches to Egyptian religion from antiquity through twentieth-century scholarship, Hornung . . . considers aspects of divinity, the iconography and characteristics of the gods, and the relationship between gods and believers. . . . A masterly, scrupulously documented work that combines close attention to textual and artifactual evidence with penetrating theological insights."â •Library Journal"Hornung asks usually neglected questions concerning what the Egyptians themselves thought about their gods, thus meeting these people on their own terms. Along the way he carefully examines evidence that has been marshaled in favor of monotheism or monotheistic tendencies within what appears to be a vast Egyptian pantheon. Adding to the pleasure and usefulness of this work is the fine translation by John Baines. . . . Containing a full index, a glossary of gods, and appropriate illustrations, this is a significant volume."â •Choice"It is not often that an introduction to the thorny topic of ancient Egyptian religion can be recommended unreservedly. . . . Over the past thirty-five years the acceptable introductions to Egyptian religion can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and all are from the pens of scholars trained in a Germanic tradition! The present work by Erik Hornung maintains this excellent, though rare, standard."â •American Historical Review

'After surveying the approaches to Egyptian religion from antiquity through twentieth-century scholarship, Hornung...considers aspects of divinity, the iconography and characteristics of the gods, and the relationship between gods and believers....A masterly, scrupulously documented work that combines close attention to textual and artifactual evidence with penetrating theological insights.'--Library Journal

Great writing. I learned things I didn't know about syncretism of the Egyptian gods. The section on Akhenaten was well worth the price of the book.

Hornung gives a thorough review of the vast and disparate literature interpreting the ancient Egyptian religion as polytheistic or henotheistic, monotheistic or syncretic, or some combination or evolution of those labels. He meticulously examines the primary sources for evidence supporting one or another theory. For anyone trying to understand the curious and often bizarre representations of the gods in ancient Egypt and their seemingly endless reconfiguration and re-presentation, Hornung offers a solid foundation for intelligent observation and reflection.

This work dealing with the nature of Egyptian religion is a watershed book in its field, which is ironically one of the reasons why I avoided reading it for so long. I had encountered so many other

writings--both scholarly and not--that refer to Professor Hornung's book that I had gotten something of a preconception about what he actually said. That, and I had already read his work on Egyptian Books of the Afterlife and found it to be a bit dry. Now, however, I can say that Afterlife is simply not as compellingly written, or controversial, as Conceptions of God. I'm going to split this review into two parts: the academic merits of the book, and then how it relates to Kemeticism. Academically, this book is sound. Hornung starts by taking you through the history of Egyptology as a discipline and examining the biases with which scholars have tackled the subject of ancient religion. He then breaks down by parts what the aspects of deities were for the ancient Egyptians, and what they observed about deities in their own literature. He ends by offering some modern interpretations based on the factual evidence submitted. He always refers to archaeological record and frequently refers to publications by other scholars (most of whom are German, since Hornung himself is a German scholar; I used a German-English dictionary to decipher the titles of some of the works he cited). This might be a little daunting for the average reader, though. Don't read this book half-asleep or distracted, it's a university-level scholarly work and should be treated as such. If you're paying attention, though, he crafts some very excellent arguments and offers new ways of looking at archaeological record. I can see where his work has influenced other Egyptologists such as Dr. Rosalie David (who wrote Religion and Magic in Ancient Egypt) and Dr. Gay Robins (Art of Ancient Egypt). I can also see where his work might be sometimes at odds with other scholars such as James Allen and Jan Assman. But, Hornung is above all a fair scholar. He does cite from dissenting authors where they have a point of agreeance. My only criticism is that he seems to 'drift' just a little in his last chapter, having two 'Excursus' sections--'excursus' being an academic way of saying "digression". He manages to bring the point back around, though it takes longer in the one about "The Problem of Logic". I felt that his point could have been made more concisely, but that might have been difficult given his writing style. When you work in doctoral-level academia for any real length of time, brevity seems to grow scarce. Now to the issue of this book's influence on Kemeticism. This book is on the Kemetic Orthodoxy's 'recommended reading' list, and I can easily rattle off certain concepts from the book that are directly copied by them: for example, their statement that the number four is a 'Kemetic number of completion' makes an assertion out of Hornung's observation that the "number four does occur elsewhere in the Egyptian pantheon as a classificatory schema, evidently as a symbol of completeness or totality" (pp.220-221). The chapter on "Egyptian Terms for God" includes on pp. 45-46 a list of personal names from the Old Kingdom that incorporate the word ntr or a deity's name; I easily recognized four names right off the bat which are also the 'ordained' or 'divined' names of Kemetic Orthodox members. A search through their

boards would probably yield several more from this same list. Less directly 'borrowed' but still highly evident are the Orthodoxy's use of references by Hornung in their own concepts of a divinely-ordained 'nisut' and the channelling of deities. Hornung cites twice in his book an instance recorded in Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahari of "a solemn and exalted moment when her divine-ness is manifest to the whole world, when her vow to the King of the Gods, Amun...is about to be fulfilled" (p.64), in which she "enters the role of a god" (p.134). The problem is that Hornung does not discuss the nature of Egyptian kings' divinity in depth due to space constraints, neither does he have the room to detail the possibility of divinity manifesting or "channeling" into an individual. The Kemetic Orthodoxy's assertions about these two topics are purely weak, unsupported extrapolations, as far as their citations of this book are concerned. Their biggest problem, however, is that Hornung has completely negated one of their key concepts in the first two chapters of his book! The Kemetic Orthodoxy presents Egyptian religion as a 'monolatry', which is a term that was originated by German scholars and has been used in conjunction with Egyptology. Hornung discusses this in Chapter Seven of his book, "Classification and Articulation of the Pantheon". But the Orthodoxy's application of monolatry is fundamentally flawed; as Hornung explains in Chapters One and Two, early Egyptologists who were determined to prove that the ancient religion was actually a monotheism falsely interpreted the word ntr to mean not just any god, but The One God. Careful study of the language, which includes the examples of personal names mentioned above, proves that this interpretation of ntr is inaccurate. Furthermore, Hornung cites earlier scholars who also interpreted the Egyptian pantheon as simply various forms of an original godhead; compare his citation of Eberhard Otto, who said that Late-Period Egyptians "'experienced the multiple manifestations of deities as possible realizations of an anonymous divine power that lay behind them'" (p.29), with this statement from the House of Netjer FAQ: "a practitioner...when working with one particular Name of Netjer understands that Name to be one reflection of Netjer's abstract totality, sometimes referred to as the Self-Created One." Now read what Erik Hornung himself writes about such assertions: "This is a grandiose, western-style perspective--but it has little in common with Egyptian ways of looking and thinking...It is fascinating to arrange the Egyptian pantheon in three dimensions and to make the One the vanishing point--but does there not lie behind such an exercise the old apologist's endeavor to render the Egyptian gods more credible to us?" My advice to anyone interested in practicing Kemeticism is that yes, by all means, you should read this book. But read the book carefully, in its entirety, and set aside any preconceived ideas about the topic that you either held yourself, or had been given by others. I had to set aside my own reservations and biases because I knew this book was too important to avoid reading any longer; and once I had,

honestly analyzing everything Hornung says in it, my understanding of the Egyptian gods and their worship was richer for having done so.

If you want a thorough exposition on all of the issues you will need to consider when thinking about Egyptian Gods, or God in general, this is an excellent work. Hornung is admirable in discussing and critiquing many perspectives, and the last sections of summary are worth it alone. However I sense at times he is a bit sneaky in how he presents evidence so as to favor his views. For example, he excludes pantheism, and never links ntr and nature, both of which are strongly implied by the characteristics of the Egyptian Gods and Goddesses. Nonetheless the points he does make are strong and refreshingly critical- it is clear he has thought more extensively than average.

Hornung is a genius author about ancient Egyptian spirituality and religion. Offering his expert insight backed up by mountains of well indexed and cited data, this is a necessary guide for those who have gone beyond the superficial new age musings based on Budge and want to really get into the religious and spiritual heads of the ancient Egyptian

The original German edition was one of the seminal books in the study of Egyptian religion. Hornung examined how the Egyptian gods were depicted, what they were named, their ties to particular places, how they were born and died, how they were combined with each other, and how their characteristics contrasted with Akhenaten's sole god, the Aten. Building on Henri Frankfort's views of the "multiplicity of approaches" in Egyptian religious belief, Hornung said that the surreal complexity of Egyptian theology makes sense as an illustration of a subject humans cannot fully grasp. Along the way he made the final break with the school of thought that dominated studies of Egyptian religion in the mid-20th century, where contradictory beliefs were treated as the product of political conflicts. He also pointed out that many scholars' desire to find monotheism in Egyptian religion was based on their unspoken assumption that monotheism is superior. Scholars have disagreed with some of Hornung's assertions (most notably Jan Assmann, who reopened the monotheism debate in *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*), but to a large extent they all build on his work. It's not exactly easy reading, but the style is fairly straightforward, and I actually find the concluding chapter rather stirring.

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