

THE DESTRUCTION OF MANKIND

This mythological tale forms the first part of a longer text known as "The Book of the Cow of Heaven," which is inscribed in five royal tombs of the New Kingdom (the tombs of Tutankhamun, Seti I, Ramses II, Ramses III, and Ramses VI). The first part relates how the sun-god Re set out to destroy the human race because mankind was plotting rebel-

lion against him. But after an initial slaughter, carried out by the "Eye of Re," the sun-god relented and devised a ruse to stop the goddess from further killing. The interest of the tale lies, of course, in the theme of human wickedness arousing the divine wrath and resulting in a partial destruction of mankind, a theme that received its classic treatment in the Mesopotamian and Biblical stories of the Flood.

The second part of the text (not translated here) tells how the sun-god, weary of government, withdrew into the sky and charged the other great gods with the rule of heaven and earth.

Though recorded in the New Kingdom, the text is written in Middle Egyptian, and it probably originated in the Middle Kingdom. The tale thus stands apart from the other stories in this section, all of which are written in Late Egyptian, the vernacular of the New Kingdom.

Publication: Ch. Maystre, "Le livre de la vache du ciel," *BIFAO*, 40 (1941), 53-115: the whole text; 58-73: The Destruction of Mankind.

Translation: Erman, *Literature*, pp. 47-49. Wilson in *ANET*, pp. 10-11. A. Piankoff, *The Shrines of Tut-Ankh-Amon* (New York, 1955; Harper Torchbook, 1962), pp. 27-29. Brunner-Traut, *Märchen*, pp. 69-72.

(1) It happened [in the time of the majesty of ʾ] Re, the self-created, after he had become king of men and gods together: Mankind plotted against him, while his majesty had grown old, his bones being silver, his flesh gold, his hair true lapis lazuli. When his majesty perceived the plotting of mankind against him, his majesty said to his followers: "Summon to me my Eye,¹ and Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, and the fathers and mothers who were with me when I was in Nun,² and also the god Nun; and he shall bring his courtiers (5) with him. But bring them stealthily, lest mankind see, lest they lose heart.³ Come with them (the gods) to the Palace, that they may give their counsel. In the end I may return to Nun, to the place where I came into being."

The gods were brought, the gods were lined up on his two sides, bowing to the ground before his majesty, that he might make his speech before the eldest father, the maker of mankind, the king of people.⁴ They said to his majesty: "Speak to us, that we may hear it." Then Re said to Nun: "O eldest god in whom I came into being, and ancestor gods, look, mankind, which issued from my Eye,⁵ is plotting against me. Tell me what you would do about it, for I am searching. I would not slay them until I have heard what you might (10) say about it."

Then spoke the majesty of Nun: "My son Re, god greater than his maker, more august than his creators, stay on your throne! Great is fear of you when your Eye is on those who scheme against you." Said the majesty of Re: "Look, they are fleeing to the desert, their hearts fearful that I might speak to them." They said to his majesty: "Let your Eye go and smite them for you, those schemers of evil!" No Eye is more able to smite them for you. May it go down as Hathor!"

The goddess returned after slaying mankind in the desert, and the majesty of this god said: "Welcome in peace, Hathor, Eye who did what I came for!" Said the goddess: "As you live for me, I have overpowered mankind, and it was balm to my heart." Said the majesty of Re: "I shall have power over them as king (15) by diminishing them." Thus the Powerful One (Sakhmet) came into being.⁶

The beer-mash of the night for her who would wade in their blood as far as Hnes.⁷ Re said: "Summon to me swift, nimble messengers that they may run like a body's shadow!" The messengers were brought immediately, and the majesty of this god said: "Go to Yebu and bring me red ochre⁸ in great quantity!" The red ochre was brought to him, and the majesty of this god ordered the Side-Lock Wearer in On⁹ to grind the ochre, while maidservants crushed barley for beer. Then the red ochre was put into the beer-mash, and it became like human blood; and seven thousand jars of beer were made. Then the majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Re came together with the gods to see the beer.

Now when the day dawned (20) on which the goddess would slay mankind in their time of traveling south,¹⁰ the majesty of Re said: "It is good;¹¹ I shall save mankind by it!" And Re said: "Carry it to the place where she plans to slay mankind!" The majesty of King Re rose early before dawn, to have this sleeping draught poured out. Then the fields were flooded three palms high with the liquid by the might of the majesty of this god. When the goddess came in the morning she found them flooded, and her gaze was pleased by it.¹² She drank and it pleased her heart. She returned drunk without having perceived mankind. The majesty of Re said to the goddess: "Welcome in peace, O gracious one!" Thus beautiful women came into being in the town of Imu.¹³

NOTES

1. The eye of the sun-god is viewed as a being distinct from him.
2. The primordial water in which creation began.
3. Literally, "lest their heart flee."
4. The god Nun.
5. An allusion to the idea that mankind (*rmf*) issued from a tear (*rmyt*) of the sun-god.
6. A word play on *shm*, "power," and *shmt*, the lion-goddess Sakhmet.
7. This sentence serves as introduction to what follows.
8. Or hematite.
9. The high priest of Re in Heliopolis.
10. Emend to "her time of traveling south"?
11. I.e., "the beer is good."
12. Or, "her face was beautiful in it"?
13. A word play on *im3*, "gracious."