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RETELLING

The Book of Overthrowing Apep

Also called the Book of Overthrowing Apophis

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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The Book of Overthrowing Apep is a daily temple ritual from Karnak, retold here in modern English. It is a script for destroying Apep, the serpent of chaos, so that Ra can complete the night journey. The violence is ritual violence. It is written for readers aged 15 and up.

Chapter 1: The Serpent of Chaos

The Book of Overthrowing Apep is one of the most dramatic and visceral texts to survive from ancient Egypt. It is not a story in the modern sense, but a ritual script - a collection of spells, curses, and ceremonial instructions designed to be performed daily in the temple of Amen-Ra at Karnak. Its purpose was singular: to destroy Apep, the great serpent of chaos, and thereby protect the sun god Ra on his eternal journey through the heavens.

Apep - also called Apophis - was no ordinary foe. He was the embodiment of isfet, the force of disorder that threatened to swallow the cosmos each night. As Ra sailed his solar bark through the underworld, Apep lay in wait, seeking to devour the sun and plunge the world into eternal darkness. The priests of Karnak therefore enacted this book every single day, turning words into weapons and ritual into reality.

Chapter 2: The Spell of Spitting

The ceremony began with the spell of spitting. The priest would recite:

"Be thou spat upon, O Apep - four times - this is done for Ra and his ka, this is done for Pharaoh and his ka. Ra has come in power, Ra has come in victory, Ra has come exalted, Ra has come prepared, Ra has come in joy, Ra has come in happiness, Ra has come as King of Upper Egypt, Ra has come as King of Lower Egypt, Ra has come in rejoicing, Ra has come in triumph."

The repetition of "four times" was no mere flourish. In Egyptian magic, repetition multiplied power. To spit upon Apep was to defile him, to reduce him from a cosmic threat to something base and contemptible. The priest acted not merely for himself, but as proxy for Pharaoh and for the god Ra himself.

Chapter 3: The Spell of Trampling

Next came the spell of trampling. The priest would stamp upon Apep with his left foot - the foot associated with malignity and destruction - while declaring:

"Raise thee up, O Ra, and crush thy foes. Shine thou out, O Ra, for thy foes are fallen. Behold, Pharaoh crushes all thy foes for thee; O Ra, crush thou all his foes, dead or alive. Behold, Ra has power over thee, O Apep; his flame rages against thee, it has power over thee, its fiery blast is sharp against thee, and its fire falls on all the foes of Ra - four times - may its fire fall on all the foes of Pharaoh."

Chapter 4: The Binding

The binding followed. Apep was to be fettered, immobilised, rendered impotent:

"They who should be bound are bound, Apep that foe of Ra is bound; mayest thou not know what is done to thee, O Apep. Turn thee back, there being testimony against thee. Ye are bound by Horus, ye are fettered by Ra, ye shall not become erect, ye shall not copulate, ye shall not be removed from under his fingers; ye are condemned by Ra, ye are fettered by Horus Mekhantenirti."

The language is strikingly physical. Apep is not merely defeated; he is emasculated, prevented from reproducing, stripped of all generative power. This was how the Egyptians conceptualised chaos - not as an abstract force, but as a biological threat that must be sterilised and contained.

Chapter 5: The Knife

Then came the knife. The priest would take a blade and enact the smiting:

"Seize, seize, O butcher, fell the foe of Ra with thy knife. Seize, seize, O butcher, fell the foe of Pharaoh with thy knife. These are your heads, ye rebels, this is that head of thine, O Apep, which are cut off by the warrior priest with his knife. Be sharp, O Sothis, O flame of Asbyt who has authority over fire, fell ye the ill-disposed one with your knives, cut ye up Wenty with your knives. Be ye cut to pieces because of your evil, be ye cut up because of what ye have done."

The violence is graphic and deliberate. Decapitation, dismemberment, the severing of vertebrae - these were not metaphors but precise magical operations. Each act of destruction upon Apep's symbolic body resonated in the cosmic realm, weakening the actual serpent in the underworld.

Chapter 6: The Fire

Fire came next. The priest would set flame to a wax figure of Apep, or to his name written upon papyrus:

"Fire be in thee, O Apep, thou foe of Ra. May the Eye of Horus have power over the soul and the shade of Apep; may the flame of the Eye of Horus devour that foe of Ra; may the flame of the Eye of Horus devour all the foes of Pharaoh, dead or alive."

The Eye of Horus - the wedjat - was one of the most potent protective symbols in Egypt. Here it becomes a weapon of active destruction, a burning gaze that consumes chaos at the spiritual level. The fire was not merely physical; it was a spiritual furnace that destroyed Apep's ka, his ba, his very name.

Chapter 7: The First Felling

The first book of felling expanded upon this destruction with devastating thoroughness:

"Fall on thy face, O Apep thou foe of Ra; get thee back, thou enemy, thou rebel who hast neither arms nor legs, or thy snout shall be cut off from the rest of thy face. Thou art fallen and felled, for Ra-Harakhti has felled thee, he has crushed thee, he has condemned thee, the Eye of his body chastises thee, and thou art fallen into the fire which issues from it. Thy raging is dispelled by Isis through the spells of her utterance, thy soul is cut up, thy vertebrae are severed; Horus has made thee impotent, the Children of Horus break thee up, for thou art destroyed in their moment."

Isis and Nephthys, the divine sisters, join the assault. Seth, paradoxically the god often associated with chaos himself, stabs at Apep's neck. The Children of Horus set their spears in him. The Great Ennead of Heliopolis drives him off. Even the doorkeepers of the mysterious portals repel him with fiery blasts from their mouths. No divine ally is absent from this cosmic battle.

Chapter 8: Be Ye Annihilated

The second chapter intensifies the annihilation:

"Fall upon your faces, ye foes of Ra, all ye rebels, foes and children of revolt, ye froward ones and nameless rebels, doomed ones whose hell is prepared. Fall ye, fall ye at the moment of Ra; he will annihilate you, fell you, make fall your heads. On your faces! He will destroy you, making a slaughter of you. O ye who ought to be annihilated, be ye annihilated, be ye destroyed!"

The text grows almost ecstatic in its repetition. "Be ye annihilated" becomes a drumbeat, a mantra of total destruction. The foes of Ra are not merely defeated; they are denied existence itself. "Ye shall not be, ye shall not be" - the negation becomes absolute.

"Your heads shall be removed, your necks shall be hewn asunder, your vertebrae shall be severed, ye shall be made impotent, ye shall be slaughtered, ye shall fall to the Eye of Horus, for its flame is sharp against you, its fiery blast shall have power over you; the Eye of Ra shall appear against you, his might shall have power over you, his Eye shall have power over you, it shall consume you and chastise you in this its name of 'Devouring Flame'."

The text names the Eye of Ra as Sakhmet, the lioness goddess whose fiery blast was said to have nearly destroyed humanity in myth. Here that same destructive power is turned solely against Apep and his minions. The fire "cooks" them, "bakes" them, "burns" them. Wepes the Great divides them and devours their souls.

Chapter 9: The Lord of All

Perhaps the most remarkable section of the book is the creation narrative embedded within it - a hymn that reveals why Apep must be destroyed by establishing the absolute primacy of Ra:

"Thus spake the Lord of All: When I came into being, 'Being' came into being. I came into being in the form of Khopri who came into being on the First Occasion; I came into being in the form of Khopri when I came into being, and that is how 'Being' came into being, because I was more primeval than the primeval ones whom I had made; I was the most primeval of the primeval ones, and my name was more primeval than theirs, for I made primeval time and the primeval ones."

This is Ra speaking as the self-created creator, the god who brought himself into existence before existence itself. He continues:

"I did all that I desired in this land, and I was all pervading in it. I knit mine hand, being alone, ere they had been born, ere I had spat out Shu or expectorated Tefenet. I used mine own mouth, and 'Magic' was my name. It was I who came into being in my form, having come into being in the form of Khopri. I came into being among the primeval ones, and there came into being a multitude of beings in the beginning, ere any being had come into being in this land; I alone achieved all that was made, ere there had come into being any other who could act with me in this place."

The theology is profound. Ra creates through his own word, his own magic, his own saliva. Shu and Tefnut - the first divine pair, embodiments of air and moisture - are literally spat and expectorated into being. The creator is utterly alone before creation, self-sufficient and self-generated.

"I made the beings therein with this my soul; I created some of them in Nun as an Inert One, when I could as yet find no place where I could stand. I considered in mine heart, I surveyed with my sight, and I alone achieved all that was made; I planned in mine heart, I created another being, and manifold were the forms of Khopri; their children came into being in the forms of their children. It was I who spat out Shu and expectorated Tefenet. When I had come into being as sole god, there were three gods in addition to myself, and two gods came into being in this land; Shu and Tefenet rejoiced in the Nun, in which they were. It was mine Eye which brought them to me after a long age when they were far from me; I united my members, and they issued from me myself."

The Eye of Ra - here the solar eye that later becomes Sakhmet - goes forth and returns, bringing the separated children back to their father. This myth of the wandering eye is one of the most important in Egyptian theology, and its inclusion here underscores that Apep threatens not merely the sun's daily journey, but the very structure of divine order established at creation.

Chapter 10: Imprisoned in the Arms of Aker

The book then returns to its primary purpose with renewed ferocity:

"They made conjuration in my name that they might fell their foes; they created the magic spells for felling Apep. He is imprisoned in the arms of Aker, he has neither arms nor legs, and is confined in one place, according as Ra obstructs him, for he has commanded that he be felled on account of this his evil character. His face is cut away because of what he has done, and he suffers for his evil character. Children fell him and sunder his soul from his body and his shade."

Aker, the double lion god who guarded the eastern and western horizons, imprisons Apep. The serpent is dismembered, his soul separated from his body and his shade - a total spiritual disintegration that goes beyond mere physical death.

The text continues with a litany of destruction so comprehensive it becomes almost poetic in its thoroughness:

"I have cut away his flesh from his bones, I have broken his legs, I have cut off his arms, I have closed his mouth and his lips, I have drawn his teeth, cut away his tongue from his gullet, taken away his speech, blinded his eyes, taken away his hearing, and cut out his heart in his place, his seat, and his tomb; I have made him as one non-existent, and his name shall not be, his children shall not be."

Every faculty is destroyed. Apep cannot see, cannot hear, cannot speak, cannot bite, cannot reproduce. His name is erased - and in Egyptian belief, to destroy the name was to destroy the essence, for the name was inseparable from the being.

Chapter 11: The Wax Figures

The book provides explicit instructions for the physical ritual that accompanied these words. The priest was to be "pure and clean." He was to depict every foe of Ra and every foe of Pharaoh, "whether dead or alive, and every accused one whom he has in mind, also the names of their fathers, their mothers and their children, every one of them, they having been drawn in green ink on a new sheet of papyrus, their names written on their breasts, these having been made of wax, and also bound with bonds of black thread."

These wax figures were then subjected to the full ritual: spat upon, trampled with the left foot, felled with spear and knife, and cast into "the fire in the melting-furnace of the coppersmiths." The name of Apep was to be burnt in "a fire of bryony" at specific times: when Ra manifested himself, at noontide, at sunset, in the first, second, and third hours of day and night, at dawn, at the festival of the New Moon, at the sixth-day festival, at the fifteenth-day festival, and at every monthly festival.

Chapter 12: Tested a Million Times

The book concludes with a powerful assurance:

"This book is to be employed in this manner which is in writing, when the sacred bark ferries over to fell the foe of Ra and every foe of Hor-merti in Yat-Pega. It will be well with the man who makes conjuration for himself from this book in the presence of this august god - a true matter, tested a million times."

The phrase "tested a million times" speaks to the ancient Egyptians' empirical approach to magic. This was not mere superstition but a technology, refined through countless repetitions, proven effective through the continued existence of the cosmos itself. Every sunrise was testimony that the book worked, that Apep had been defeated once more, that Ra's bark sailed on in peace.

The Book of Overthrowing Apep thus stands as one of the most complete records of Egyptian temple ritual to survive. It reveals a civilisation that took no chances with chaos, that fought the serpent not merely with armies but with words, with fire, with the accumulated magical power of the gods themselves. In its pages we see the eternal struggle between order and disorder, light and darkness, played out in the most visceral and dramatic terms imaginable - a daily battle for the survival of the cosmos, won anew each dawn by the power of the word.

Source note

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