

The Legend of Isis and the Name of Re

P. Turin 1993

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Few texts illustrate so clearly the ritual significance of the personal name. Felt to be an intrinsic element and source of power, the name did not simply identify but defined an individual.¹ For hostile purposes, the destruction of a name could effect the death or misfortune of its owner, and this belief underlies both the prominent role of naming in execration texts (see below, p. xxx) and the well-attested expunging of royal names in dynastic feuds. Divinities were often said to have secret names guarded from devotees and other deities alike. The inherent power of such divine names is stated directly in the late Papyrus BM 10188, in which Re-Atum declares: “Magic is my name.”² In similar fashion, bodily “relics” are repositories of personal energy and equally subject to manipulation. In this spell, it is the spittle of the creator that serves to animate lifeless clay, in conformity with traditional Egyptian accounts of the creation.

The primary manuscript of the spell, P. Turin 1993 (Nineteenth Dynasty), is the only text that preserves the title. A facsimile of the papyrus appears in Pleyte and Rossi (1869-76, pls. CXXXI: 12-CXXXIII: 14, and LXXVII + XXI: 1-5); excerpted in Möller (1927: 29-32). At least four other contemporary exemplars of the incantation are known: HO 2 and HO 3, 2; O. Deir el-Medineh 1263; and Papyrus Chester Beatty 11. For basic bibliography and translations, see Wilson (1969d), Borghouts (1978: 51-55), and Ritner (1993: 76, n. 337). For methodological commentary, see Ritner (*ibid.*: 76, 83, 95-96, and 164).

SPELL of the divine god, who came into being by himself, who made heaven, earth, water, the breath of life, fire, gods, men, flocks, herds, reptiles, birds, and fish, the kingship of gods and men altogether,³ with limits beyond numerous years, [...] and with numerous names. One did not know that (name); one did not know this (name).

Now, Isis was a wise woman. Her heart was more devious than millions among men; she was more selective than millions among the gods; she was more exacting than millions among the blessed dead. There was nothing that she did not know in heaven or earth, like Re, who made the substance of the earth. The goddess planned in her heart to learn the name of the noble god.

Now, Re entered every day in front of the crew (of the solar bark), being established on the throne of the two horizons. A divine old age had weakened his mouth

so that he cast his spittle to the earth. He spat out, it lying fallen upon the ground. Isis kneaded it for herself with her hand, together with the earth that was on it. She formed it into a noble serpent; she made (it) in the form of a sharp point. It could not move, though it lived before her. She left it at the crossroads by which the great god passed in accordance with his heart's desire through his Two Lands.⁴ The noble god appeared outside, with the gods from the palace in his following, so that he might stroll just like every day. The noble serpent bit him, with a living fire coming forth from his own self.⁵ It raged(?) among the pines. The divine god worked his mouth; the voice of his majesty reached up to heaven. His Ennead said: "What is it? What is it?" His gods said: "What? What?" He could not find his speech to answer concerning it. His lips were quivering, and all his limbs were trembling. The poison seized upon his flesh like the inundation seizes what is behind it. The great god regained his composure⁶ and cried out to his followers: "Come to me, you who have come to be from my body, gods who came forth from me, so that I might let you know its development." Something painful has stabbed me. My heart does not know it. My eyes did not see it. My hand did not make it. I cannot recognize it among any of the things that I have made. I have not tasted a suffering like it. There is nothing more painful than it."

"I am a noble, son of a noble, the fluid of a god come forth from a god. I am a great one, son of a great one. My father thought out my name. I am one who has numerous names and numerous forms. My form exists as every god. I am called Atum and Horus of Praise. My father and mother told me my name. I have hidden it in my body from my children⁷ so as to prevent the power of a male or female magician from coming into existence against me. I went outside to see what I had made, to stroll in the Two Lands that I created, and something stung me. I do not know it. It is not really fire; it is not really water, though my heart is on fire and my body is trembling, all my members giving birth to a chill."

"Let the children of the gods be brought to me, whose words are magically effective, who know their spells, whose wisdom reaches up to heaven!"

The children of the god then came, each man of them bearing his boasting.⁸ Isis came bearing her effective magic, her speech being the breath of life, her utterance dispelling suffering, her words revivifying one whose throat is constricted. She said: "What is it, what is it, my divine father? What, a serpent has inflicted weakness upon you? One of your children has raised his head against you? Then I shall overthrow it by efficacious magic, causing him to retreat at the sight of your rays."

The holy god opened his mouth: "It was the case that I was going on the road, strolling in the Two Lands and the deserts. My heart desired to see what I had created. I

was bitten by a serpent without seeing it. It is not really fire; it is not really water, though I am colder than water and hotter than fire, my entire body with sweat. I am trembling, my eye unstable; I cannot see. Heaven beats down rain upon my face in the time of summer!”⁹

THEN SAID Isis to Re: “Say to me your name, my divine father, for a man lives when one recites in his name.”

(Re said:) “I am¹⁰ the one who made heaven and earth, who knit together the mountains, who created that which exists upon it. I am the one who made the water, so that the Great Swimming One¹¹ came into being. I made the bull for the cow,¹² so that sexual pleasure came into being. I am the one who made heaven and the mysteries¹³ of the horizons; I placed the ba-spirits of the gods inside it. I am the one who opens his two eyes so that brightness comes into being, who closes his two eyes so that darkness comes into being, according to whose command the inundation surges, whose name the gods do not know. I am the one who made the hours so that the days came into being. I am the one who divided the year, who created the river.¹⁴ I am the one who made living fire, in order to create the craft of the palace. I am Khepri in the morning, Re at noon, and Atum who is in the evening.”

The poison was not repelled in its course; the great god was not comforted.

Then Isis said to Re: “Your name is not really among those that you have said to me. Say it to me so that the poison might go out, for a man lives when one pronounces his name.”

The poison burned with a burning; it was more powerful than flame or fire.

Then the majesty of Re said: “May you give to me your two ears, my daughter Isis, so that my name might go forth from my body to your body. The most divine one among the gods had hidden it, so that my status might be broadened within the Bark of Millions.¹⁵ If there occurs a similar occasion when a heart goes out to you, say it to your son Horus after you have bound him by a divine oath, placing god in his eyes.”¹⁶ The great god announced his name to Isis, the Great One of Magic.

“Flow out, scorpions! Come forth from Re, Eye of Horus! Come forth from the god, flame of the mouth.¹⁷ I am the one who made you; I am the one who sent you. Come out upon the ground, powerful poison! Behold, the great god has announced his name. Re lives; the poison is dead. NN, born of NN, lives; the poison is dead, through the speech of Isis the Great, the Mistress of the Gods, who knows Re by his own name.

Words to be recited over an image of Atum and of Horus-of-Praise, a figure of Isis, and an image of Horus,¹⁸ DRAWN (ON) THE HAND OF THE SUFFERER AND LICKED OFF BY THE MAN; DO LIKEWISE ON A STRIP OF FINE LINEN,

PLACED ON THE SUFFERER AT HIS THROAT. THE PLANT IS SCORPION PLANT. OR GROUND UP WITH BEER OR WINE, IT IS DRUNK BY THE MAN WHO HAS A SCORPION STING. IT IS WHAT KILLS THE POISON - TRULY EFFECTIVE, (PROVED) MILLIONS OF TIMES.¹⁹

Cf. Gen. 32: 27, 29; Exodus 20: 7.

Key Words:

Atum , Deir el-Medineh, Ennead, Eye of Horus, Great One of Magic, Horus, Isis, name, Re, poison, relics, serpent/snake, scorpion, spittle

¹ Cf. Genesis 3. 19-20, where the naming of creatures by Adam signifies man's control over them.

² See Ritner 1993: 26.

³ Literally, "as a single thing."

⁴ Egypt.

⁵ The serpent's fiery venom derives ultimately from the god's own fluids.

⁶ Literally, "established his heart."

⁷ Or "at my birth."

⁸ Following P. Chester Beatty XI, 2/8 ($\text{jb}^{\text{TM}} < \text{TMb}^{\text{TM}}$); Turin 1993 has jb "mourning."

⁹ A reference to his fevered sweat, contrasted with the typically cooling water of the Nile.

¹⁰ Cf. Exodus 4. 13-14.

¹¹ A name of the heavens, symbolized by a celestial cow bearing the bark of the sun.

¹² Common Egyptian euphemisms for penis and vagina, see Ritner 1987: col. 645.

¹³ Not a verb, contra Borghouts "(I made) the horizon inaccessible."

¹⁴ The connection is logical in Egypt, where the fluctuation of the Nile determined the seasons.

¹⁵ The solar bark.

¹⁶ A reference to the injured eye of Horus, cured by Isis after an attack by Seth. Cf. above, pp. xxx.

¹⁷ Venom.

¹⁸ Shown in a vignette on the Turin papyrus.

¹⁹ For discussion, see Ritner 1993: p. 95.