

# The Seven Years' Famine

## The Preface

This narrative is from the famous inscription which was discovered on the rock pictured at left on the Island of Sahal in 1890 by Charles Wilbour.

In the eighteenth year of the king Tcheser (the third king of the third dynasty), the whole region of the South, the Island of Elephantine, and the district of Nubia were ruled by the high official Mater. The king sent a dispatch to Mater informing him that he was in great grief by reason of the reports which were brought to him into the palace as he sat upon his throne, and because for seven years there had been no satisfactory inundation of the Nile. As the result of this grain of every kind was very scarce, vegetables and garden produce of every kind could not be found, and in fact the people had very little food to eat, and they were in such need that men were robbing their neighbors. Men wished to walk out, but could not do so for want of strength; children were crying for food, young men collapsed through lack of food, and the spirits of the aged were crushed to the earth, and they laid themselves down on the ground to die.

In this terrible trouble king Tcheser remembered the god Imhotep, the son of Ptah of the South Wall, who, it would seem, had once delivered Egypt from a similar calamity, but as his help was no longer forthcoming Tcheser asked his governor Mater to tell him where the Nile rose, and what god or goddess was its tutelary duty.

In answer to this dispatch Mater made his way immediately to the king and gave him information on the matters about which he had asked questions. He told him that the Nile flood came forth from the Island of Elephantine whereon stood the first city that ever existed; out of it rose the Sun when he went forth to bestow life upon man, and therefore it is also called, "Doubly Sweet Life." The spot on the island out of which the river rose was the double cavern Qerti, which was likened to two breasts, from which all good things poured forth; this

double cavern was, in fact, the "couch of the Nile," and from it the Nile-god watched until the season of inundation drew nigh, and then he rushed forth like a vigorous young man and filled the whole country. At Elephantine he rose to a height of twenty-eight cubits, but at Diopolis Parva in the Delta he only rose seven cubits. The guardian of this flood was Khnemu, and it was he who kept the doors that held it in, and who drew back the bolts at the proper time.

Mater next went on to describe the temple of Khnemu at Elephantine and told his royal master that the other gods in were Sopdet (Sothis), Anqet, Hapi, Shu, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Horus , Isis and Nephthys, and after this he enumerated the various products that were found in the neighborhood, and from which offerings ought to be made to Khnemu. When the king heard these words he offered up sacrifices to the god, and in due course went into his temple to make supplication before him.

"I am Khnemu, the Creator"

Finally Khnemu appeared before him, and said, "I am Khnemu the Creator. My hands rest upon thee to protect thy person, and to make sound thy body. I gave thee thine heart... I am he who created himself. I am the primeval watery abyss, and I am the Nile who riseth at his will to give health for me to those who toil. I am the guide and director of all men, the Almighty, the father of the gods, Shu, the mighty possessor of the earth."

Finally the god promised that the Nile should rise every year, as in olden time, and described the good which should come upon the land when he had made an end of the famine. When Khnemu ceased to speak king Tcheser remembered that the god had complained that no one took the trouble to repair his shrine, even though stone lay near in abundance, and he immediately issued a decree in which it was ordered that certain lands on each side of the Nile near Elephantine should be set apart for the endowment of the temple of Khnemu, and that a certain tax should be levied upon every product of the neighborhood, and devoted to the maintenance of the priesthood of the god; the original text of the decree was written upon wood, and as this was not lasting, the king ordered that a copy of it should be cut upon a stone stele which should be set in a prominent place.

The Afterward

It is not said whether Khnemu kept his promise to Tschur, but we may assume he did. The form of the narrative of the Seven Years' Famine summarized above is not older than the Ptolemaic period, but the subject matter belongs to a much older time, and very probably represents a tradition which dates from the Early Empire.

Editor's Note: this myth was taken more or less directly from *The Gods of the Egyptians* by E.A. Wallis Budge