



# Breathing Divine Breath: on the Greco-Egyptian Sources of Hesychasm

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## Abstract

The genesis of Hesychasm is still quite unresolved. In this article, the assumption that its origins lie in late Greco-Egyptian Antiquity, in the eastern Mediterranean, and that Yoga contributed to it, remain in the background. The normative form of Hesychasm, referred to here, is that described briefly by St. Gregory Palamas. In this article, two constituents, presented by him as essential, are investigated for their likely roots in the Greco-Egyptian syncretism of Antiquity. It emerges, that meditative 'breathing' – which Palamas connects to the drawing inward of the mind and awareness of the meditator – also serves as a 'vehicle' for drawing in the divine spirit, and the power of God, into the centre of a person, the 'heart' – that comprises the body, the soul, and the mind. This latter is important in testimonies of Greco-Egyptian syncretism, especially the *Magic Papyrus*. 'Magic' is framed here religiously. This indicates that it is believed to be effective and theologically legitimate. The inclusion of Biblical elements in these texts suggest, that boundaries to Judaism and later to Christianity, were fluid. Therefore, the concepts and practices presented here, are to be regarded as important to a profound understanding of Hesychasm. Palamas' instruction, 'to send the spirit (nou=j) inwardly by means of breathing, should therefore not be understood as limited to the persons mind and consciousness, but also, as signifying the divine spirit (nou=j), with its power, inwardly, and thus, to participate in it, for divinisation and for acting by this power.

**Keywords:** Hesychasm, Orthodox spirituality, Greco-Egyptian syncretism, Pneumatology, Embodiment

## Introduction

### **Egyptian roots of Hesychast motifs - breathing Divine Breath and invoking the Holy Name in practices of power**

A core element of the Christian Orthodox Hesychast meditation is to draw in the Holy Spirit by means of inhaling with spiritual intent. St. Gregory Palamas, the master theologian of Hesychasm - who attained the formal endorsement of Hesychast theology by the Orthodox Church as binding creed - described this aspect of the method in his *Triads in Defence of the Holy Hesychasts*, in 1338, as follows:

... it is absolutely necessary to send back, or to maintain, the spirit inside the body, if one decides to belong truly to oneself, and to become a monk worthy of the name. Besides that, it is not misplaced, as to method, to teach the initiates in particular, to look at themselves, and to send their spirit into themselves by means of breathing. (Palamas, *Triads* 1.2.7) [my translation]



Interestingly, Palamas does not mention the invocation of Jesus Christ as part of this method. While he does mention prayer to Christ elsewhere, he does not treat it as essential here. Instead, he connects it to the introduction of the 'nous' – which denotes 'intellect' both in its personal and its transcendent (divine) aspect. (This differs from later developments in Hesychasm, that regard meditative breathing merely as a method to 'embody' the prayer formula to Jesus: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" (Anonymous, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, 1884: 8). This indicates that the method of meditative breathing may have elder, and pre-Christian roots. The motif of self-reflection, and, more precisely, of intuitive self-awareness, as of a self-observant inwardness, reflects the Delphic motto of 'know thyself', essential to Neoplatonic mysticism and philosophy of self-consciousness as pathway to the divine. The method of breathing, however, is not derived from here, but appears to have other roots. Its connection with the Platonic tradition, remains significant. Considering, that Hesychasm first emerged in the wider environment of Alexandria – the hub of Greco-Egyptian syncretism – in the Sinai peninsula's monasteries.

The thesis, presented here, is that there are reasons to assume that Hesychasm has roots in Ancient Egyptian theology. This is not only relevant as to the genesis of Hesychasm, but it provides a key to the understanding of its method, concepts, ontological and theological significance. The Greco-Egyptian syncretistic milieu and spirituality, that also included Jewish elements, was a fertile soil for the emergence of these motifs in Hesychasm. The importance of the 'heart' in the *New Testament*, is one motif, that can be derived from Ancient Egyptian theology. It certainly influenced the anthropology of the *Old Testament*. It is reinforced in the *Septuaginta* (LXX), that was created in the cultural environment of Greco-Egyptian culture - as explained in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Kittel & Friedrich [eds]. 1985: 415). The fact that the authors of the *New Testament* quoted from the *Septuaginta* indicates its influence on the formation of concepts here. This may apply to the understanding of the 'heart' as:

central organ ... the seat of feelings, desires and passions, [...] of thought and understanding [...] of the will [...] and ... the religious center to which God turns, which is the root of religious life, and which determines moral conduct..." (Kittel, G. & Friedrich, G., (eds.), 1985: 416)

These connotations have to be borne in mind for Hesychasm. They correspond to view of Ancient Egyptian thought. The 'heart' denotes 'interiority', that includes the body. Although not mentioned by Palamas in the quote above, it 'embodies' the locus of interiority, in his view too. The ancient Egyptian understanding of the 'heart' as centre of the person, means that this is not to be understood merely as intellectual self-consciousness, but that this is 'embodied'. It also means that the participation in the divine spirit does not only comprise the mind and soul, including feelings, but also the body. It does not imply a materialistic anthropology of 'mind' and 'emotions' as being mere functions of the body (the brain and the metabolism). It implies that 'mind', 'soul' and 'body' all participate in the divine, interrelatedly.

The central figure of Hesychasm, of drawing in the divine spirit into the 'heart', has corresponding features in ancient Egypt in the idea of 'divine breath'. It was invoked ritually. This does not comprise the whole complex of Hesychast meditation. The features of regulated breathing, while sitting still, looking downward, focussing inward, shutting off all external stimuli and all impulses of the mind, of the emotions and the body, to pursue perfect stillness, accompanied by repeated, mantra-like invocations of Christ in concordance with the



movement of controlled breathing, cannot be derived from ancient Egyptian sources nor from Neo-Platonic or other Hellenistic sources, and neither from Biblical traditions. However, the motifs of 'divine breath', its ritual (or magic) inhalation as 'means of power' and the role of the 'heart' are major contributions for which Ancient Egyptian origins are to be considered. Their integration into the emerging complex of Hesychasm was certainly facilitated by their correspondence to similar motifs in Christianity, Neoplatonism, and Yoga.

The presence of Yogis in the realm of Alexandria indicate that essential elements of Yogic meditation could be understood in terms of ancient Egyptian and Greco-Egyptian spiritual anthropologies and thus become adopted and joined to them. The reports on the early Egyptian monks and deserts hermits – by comparison - describe intensive and lasting prayer but give no description of a meditation practice with mindfully controlled breathing (Palladius of Helenopolis (Galatia), *Historia Lausiaca*, 2.9). This means, that the form of meditation of Hesychasm, with its Yogic features, probably derives from Yoga - but, important for our interest here, this complex apparently became connected with Ancient Egyptian religious practices and beliefs regarding the 'heart' and the notion of 'divine breath' and its ritual inhalation, with religious or magic intent.

It is reasonable to assume that meditative breathing became connected with Hesychast prayer on account of the symbolic significance attached to it. We can assume that the development of prayer, attached to breathing as a psycho-physical mnemotechnical device to ensure continued awareness of such prayer, is secondary. This trance-like prayer, with deep psychological effect, has certainly reinforced its development. However, it does not explain its origins.

### **Inhaling Christ as 'power and wisdom of God': Hesychasm's links to Ancient Egyptian theology and spiritual practice**

Kallistos Ware discusses the connection between the meditative inhalation of 'divine breath' and the invocation of the holy and powerful name of Jesus, with reference to an early Hesychast author: St. Hesychius the Priest (Luibheid, 1982,52). In his treatise *On Watchfulness and Holiness* the following instruction is given: "let the Jesus Prayer cleave to your breath" (St. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, § 182). K. Ware proposes to interpret it in "a metaphorical sense" (Luibheid, 1982: 50), without saying how. Five paragraphs onwards however, St. Hesychius states unambiguously that this breath and breathing are not to be understood in any metaphorical sense at all: "Let us live every moment in 'applying our hearts to wisdom' as the Psalmist says, continually breathing Jesus Christ, the power of God the Father and the wisdom of God." (Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, § 187). This statement depicts an extraordinary image: in it breathing becomes a symbolic act: "to breathe Jesus Christ", who is associated with the divine attributes of power and wisdom – the latter either understood as Trinitarian hypostases or as elements which convey Jesus Christ. Based on a formula of St. Paul: "Christ, God's power and God's wisdom" (1. Corinthians 1:24). St. Hesychius combines this complex with breathing. The equation itself is interesting, as it combines traditions of the younger Wisdom literature with the understanding of Christ. This formula is a direct reference to *Sapientia Salomonis* 7:25, where these properties are attributed to the hypostatic feminine Sophia: "For she is the breath and the power of God" (*Sap. Sal.* 7:25). This integration of younger Wisdom literature, on the concept of a personalised 'Wisdom', as well as patterns of thought, into Christian theology owes much to Egyptian traditions (Baring, 2001, *Seminar* 13).

In particular, we have the equation between breath and energy: "Breath is one of God's energies." (Baring, 2001, *Seminar* 13). *Dynamis* is not opposed conceptually to *energeia* as



'potentiality' versus 'action' but is rather synonymous with it. The relation between breathing and energy is fundamental for Palamas' explication of Hesychast practise. This suggests that this combination likely stems from pre-Christian sources that were integrated in a milieu familiar with the younger Wisdom traditions. This is the case for early Christianity in Egypt (Berger, 1994: 274). These sources may comprise Ancient Egyptian contributions too. Interesting about St. Hesychius' quote is the link of the two concepts in St. Paul's expression, designating Christ as 'power and wisdom of God'. This is a common idea of early Christology; likewise, the idea of a personal representation of the 'power of God' is familiar to St. Luke, as in his designation of Simon Magus as "du/namij tou= Qeou=" (Acts 8:10). However, this alone does not yet explain why the formula should become connected to a practice, in which the Hesychast would be able to breathe the 'power and wisdom of God'.

For Hesychasm the hypostatic manifestations of both the 'power' and the 'wisdom' of God are important, that evolved before Christianity in Judaism (Berger, 1994: 160). The attributes of 'wisdom and power' in combination are mentioned in Job 9:4 and 12:13.16, and in Daniel 2:23. Their hypostases are perceived as sharing properties, i.e., wisdom assumes an energetic quality, and the energy of God the quality of wisdom. Thus, the Holy Spirit assumes the property of divine energy, conveying the energy of God. This combination characterises Palamas' concept of divine energies as inseparable from the aspect of wisdom. Thus, a representation of God by 'hypostatic' manifestations of His wisdom and power is introduced. In Hellenistic Jewish literature it was applied to Moses (Berger, 1994:160), likewise to Simon Magus, by St. Luke. Berger argues, that even if a critical note is sounded in St. Luke's depiction of Simon Magus, his quality as representing the wisdom and power of God as a Christian is not disputed as such but is related to Christ as the superior bearer. The apostles may share in Christ's powers too, of administering the power and wisdom of God (Berger, 1994:161). Due to this tradition Klaus Berger declares that Pneumatology and Christology are inseparable (Berger, 1994: 161).

St. Hesychius' statement is particularly interesting, since both properties – the power and wisdom of God – that are attached to the spiritual body of Christ, are to be inhaled spiritually and bodily. Although St. Hesychius quotes a formula from the *New Testament*, both elements unfold a particular significance on the background of Egyptian religion. The 'power of God' is the life-giving and life-sustaining power that is related to the breath-of-life that God gives, as described in Psalms 103/4. It is equivalent to the divine breath-of-life according to ancient Egyptian theology too. Ancient Egyptian theology held the idea that the divine power, 'heka', could be participated in, and even taken possession of, in an appropriate ritual, by which breathing would become the medium of participation in this power. The understanding that the divine name conveys this power explains the link between the name of Christ and the power of God in this formula.

This notion is combined with another: The wisdom of God is understood both in the *Old Testament* and in Ancient Egyptian Egypt to be a spiritual entity, which is comprises to the notion of 'righteousness', of divine law. It is represented as an idea, but also hypostasised. Given that the *Old Testament* Wisdom-Literature is derived to a large extent from Egyptian sources, from 1000 B.C. on, continuing through the history of the *Old Testament* and beyond (Eissfeld, 1956: 583f.), one may assume Egyptian notions and images have also found their way into Egyptian monasticism and Hesychasm. A quote may illustrate the point: There is a close association between (ritual) breathing and 'ma'at' (divine righteousness, and order), presented by a comparison in the ancient treatise *The Plaint of the Oasis-Man*, dating back to the early Middle Empire, at least 1800 BCE. Here the author quotes an Egyptian saying: "The practise of 'ma'at' is air for the nose" (Assmann, 2006: 84). The point of comparison rests on a deeply entrenched understanding in ancient Egypt that the physical aspects of life, such as



breathing, form a continuum with its spiritual aspects. Thus, this statement does not contain a mere comparison, but expresses a link believed to exist ontologically. In Ancient Egypt the spiritual and the vital sphere were regarded as connected. This does not imply a determination by either sphere through the other, but mutual influence. Therefore, the body forms an integral part of the Egyptian concept of prayer. It pertains to the practice of prayer as well as to its effects.

### **Participating in divine power by breathing and by prayer, according to Ancient Egyptian religion**

The relation between breathing, the will of God, prayer, and the image of divine light, is expressed in a passage from the *Amduat*, the book on the 'underworld passage' of the sun-god Re and his company, through the night and the underworld, the realm of the dead. It dates from the New Empire (1550–1070 B.C.), with origins in the Middle Empire. Re – also addressed as Osiris - is greeted, after his passage through the underworld:

(204) Live, you, Living One, in his darkness!  
Live, you Great One in his darkness.  
Lord of Life and Ruler of the West, Osiris-Chontamenti,  
And live, you Living One, in the Duat [realm of the  
underworld]  
The Breath-of Life of Re belongs into your nose, the  
breath of Khepri [the reborn form of the Sun-God Re, at  
dawn, as 'Rising Sun'] is with you,  
So that you may live and stay alive! Hail to Osiris, the  
Lord of Life  
There are Gods in the entourage of Osiris,  
Who arise together with Him at Creation.  
They surround the arcane image in this cave,  
They live from that by which this image lives,  
They breathe by the words of this God  
And by their own prayers. (*The Book of Am-Tuat*, the  
12<sup>th</sup> Hour, Scene 8).

This combination of motifs is most interesting, as they are essential elements in Hesychasm. The divine breath-of-life is also shared by the gods. It is attributed to the Re, the sun-god. Breathing it (ritually) is understood as giving renewal, symbolised by the divine light of the rising sun at dawn. The motif of rebirth is represented by Osiris, god of the underworld, judge of souls after death and god of life. The motif of 'spiritual rebirth' is likewise connected to him, in an ethical and an eschatological perspective. Prayer appears as means of sustenance of life, enabling to breathe. This configuration is also present in St. Hesychius' statement of 'breathing Jesus Christ, the power and wisdom of God'. In early Christian times these Egyptian concepts and myths were still very much alive – and they were received into Greco-Roman religion and culture. The treatise of Plutarch (46-119 C. E.), priest at the Apollo temple in Delphi, philosopher of Middle Platonism (Dillon, 1996:184), and historian, entitled *On Isis and Osiris* (Plutarch, [Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus], *De Iside et Osiride*), became one of the main sources of knowledge on Egyptian religion, which he interpreted in a religious-philosophical perspective. The visit of Plotinus to the temple of Isis in Rome may also be recalled here. Egyptian religion established a powerful presence in the Greco-Roman realms up to late Antiquity. To assume that its concepts and images may have influenced early Christian spirituality, is well founded. It has been shown in detail for Christian iconography.



The *Bible* has related ideas about the relation between the 'breath of God' as gift of 'life' to mankind (Genesis 2:7) and to the individual (Job 33: 4): as means of sustenance by God (Job 10: 12 and Ecclesiastes 3:21), as a property ultimately belonging to God and returning to him (Job 34, 14), of renewal of life and resurrection (Ezekiel 37:5f.) and as source of life for all living beings (Psalms 103/4:30). Prayer and the sustenance of 'breath-of-life' (Psalms 150:6) are thus connected. The *New Testament* teaches the relation between 'life' and 'breath-of-life' as universal gift by God (Acts 17:25). This persistence of understanding from ancient Egypt through the *Old Testament* into the *New Testament* supports the adoption of these concepts in Egyptian monasticism.

St. Hesychius proposes that Jesus Christ should be breathed continuously. To do so by means of physical breathing with spiritual intent implies that breathing can be medium of a spiritual intake of divine power and wisdom and the spiritual nature of Christ. This is perfectly possible in the framework of the Egyptian thought. Thus, this expression is not to be taken as a metaphor. In theory of theurgy it was designated as 'vehicle'. St. Hesychius' prescription describes a way of participating physically in the power and wisdom of God that is comparable to the partaking of Christ in the Eucharist, by means of the host and the wine, where body, soul and intellect of the communicant are all involved.

With Hesychasm originating most probably in the realm of Alexandria, a contribution of Ancient Egyptian concepts and practices is likely, since such were adopted in Greco-Egyptian syncretism, which flourished in Roman times. The inclusion of Jewish elements of religion further supports this. The encounter and exchange with Indian Yogis which happened here over centuries further contributed to this fruitful melange. Thus, specific concepts and practices of Ancient Egyptian religion may be further considered.

Prayer and 'breath' are firmly associated in Ancient Egyptian religion. 'Spiritual breathing' and the 'heart' are likewise connected in Ancient Egyptian sources. For the genesis of Hesychasm this implies, that the comparable links in Yoga will have facilitated its adoption. The Ancient Egyptian and the Yogic concepts, and even practices, found to be similar - may have mutually reinforced their respective reception into late Neoplatonic and emergent Christian Hesychast meditation.

Before turning to ancient Egyptian sources, it is necessary to look at testimonies of Hesychasm-like prayers in Greco-Egyptian syncretism. This continuity of concepts and practices is one more reason to assume the origins of Hesychasm in this milieu. The Hesychast tradition itself is clear on its Sinaitic roots, which are none other than Egyptian. The name and history of Gregorios Sinaites (+ 1337) testify to this tradition ("St. Gregory of Sinai – Introductory Note", 1995: 207). Being initiated into monasticism here, he received further instructions on the method of 'stillness' (*hesychia*) by a spiritual father, Arsenios, in Crete (Podskalsky, 1993: 207). The proximity to Egypt, and the path the young monk followed, suggest that a living connection existed between Mt. Sinai and the spiritual father whom he was to find on the Greek island. Consensus exists, as has been declared by I. Hausherr in an early study on Hesychast method, that the origins of Hesychasm are to be found in the monastic milieu of Egypt and Sinai in particular (Hausherr, 1927: 144).

The motif of taking in divine power by means of ritual inhalation is present in the *Greco-Egyptian Magical Papyri* and in the *Hermetica* (Copenhaver, 1992). We find this motif in a syncretistic Hellenistic culture here, in which Judaism was integrated (Copenhaver, 1992: XII). In this milieu early Christianity too participated, and adopted models of spiritual practice (Baring, 2001: seminar 13). This applies to Christian iconography e.g., which drew models from Greco-Egyptian art, as models for the development of icon painting and in particular for



the images of the Mother of God. The similarity between practices of spiritual breathing in Hesychasm and those described in Greco-Egyptian magical texts thus indicate transference from the one religious milieu to the other. These concepts related to spiritual practices, some of a more magic, other of a more religious nature, with fluid boundaries. An example may be a rite of 'in-spiration', described in the *Stobaic Fragments* - a 5<sup>th</sup> century anthology of Hermetica - (Darby & Festugière, 1945, 1954) Brian Copenhaver quotes fragment 26:

“that breath (*atmos*) ... intermixed with soul forces them together in a common nature, whether favourable or not. The soul watches over its good order by remaining from the beginning in a relation of community and intimacy with this breath. In the light of the hermetic recipe of *enpneumatos* cited above, one may suppose that this account of the breath in the soul could be meaningful for someone who wanted the god's inspiration.”  
(Copenhaver, 1992: XXXVIII)

The connection between soul and pneuma, with breath as its vehicle, has been described above for Neoplatonism. Here it appears to motivate the idea of a fusion of breath with soul that includes the divine. An association with divine power that is to be attained intuitively, by withdrawal from sensory distractions and by purification from material concerns is described in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This is a voluminous collection of late Ancient Egyptian religious and mystagogic literature, conceptualised by Middle and Neo-Platonic philosophy (Fowden, 1993: 31). In *Corpus Hermeticum*, XIII: “A secret dialogue of Hermes Trismegistus on the mountain to his son Tat: on being born again, and on the promise to be silent” is presented:

“(6) [Tat:] ‘What is the true then, Trismegistus?’ [...] [Hermes:] ‘... something understood only through its power and energy yet requiring one empowered to understand the birth in god?’  
(7) [Tat:] ‘Am I without the power, then. father?’ [Hermes:] May it not be so, my child. Draw it to you, and it will come. Wish it, and it happens. Leave the senses of the body idle, and the birth of divinity will begin. Cleanse yourself of the irrational torments of matter.” (*Corpus Hermeticum*, XIII, 6f.)

Discussing the mode of this 'drawing in of divine power' C. H. Dodds, explained, with reference to other hermetic texts, that this may have been enacted by means of theurgic breathing: “the candidate for divinization has to 'draw in' ... the divine breath.” (Copenhaver, 1992: 187) Although it does not appear as necessarily implied here, Dodd's contextual reading certainly informs about the customary spiritual practice connected with the desire for divinisation which is discussed here. This motif complex is certainly reminiscent of Hesychasm. The extent to which these ideas and practices, presented in the *Hermetica*, originate in Ancient Egyptian theology has been intensely debated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Consensus emerged, that these roots are indeed sound and strong (Copenhaver, 1992: LVII). Concepts of Ancient Egyptian theology can thus certainly be considered for the genesis of Hesychasm.

The core motif of breathing as a bodily technique serving as a material medium for the ritual drawing in of 'divine power' fits the Egyptian model of the Greco-Egyptian testimonies. The concept is essentially not Greek, because there is no notion of a 'sacred pneuma' – apart from the Stoic's identification of 'pneuma' with 'ether', in Pagan Greek thought (Kleinknecht, 1959: 356), before Middle and Neoplatonic philosophers and theorists of theurgy began to apply the



Platonic notion of a 'vehicle' to material and bodily means to higher spiritual processes and their ritual enactment.

The link between breath and divine power thus must be traced to Greco-Egyptian and Ancient Egyptian sources. The evidence of the Greco-Egyptian *Magical Papyri* supports it. They are essentially of Ancient Egyptian origin, but framed in Greco-Egyptian syncretism (Fowden, 1993: 79). Hellenistic and Jewish elements are contained in them. (Compare the Jewish awareness of Ancient Egyptian Magic, as depicted, by the Deuteronomists, in the 'magic contest' of Moses and Aaron with the Egyptian priests, in Exodus 7:19-22.). In Stoicism the notion of 'pneuma' has undergone a development which brought it close to the Ancient Egyptian and Jewish concept of divine 'breath-of-life', being understood as an ethereal substance which is located in the soul and which mediates divine intellect to man and which represent God in man's interior (Kleinknecht, 1959: 353). This however does not account for any link between the practice of breathing and the intention of drawing in divine spirit, since no such correspondence is claimed in Stoicism. The notion of the divine spirit itself can show elements of the Stoic notion of 'pneuma', mediated by the Jewish-Hellenistic interaction, which introduced this Greek term for the Hebrew concept of 'breath-of-life', which in turn was received into the New Testament thought and language. However, these notions do not fully explain Hesychast practice, since they are not connected to ritual, spiritual or theurgic enactments.

The Egyptian concept of divine power, that is linked to ritual breathing, is not identical with the Stoic concept of 'pneuma' as a fine-mattered connective substance (Kleinknecht, 1959: 351). It lacks the aspect of divine and 'life-giving breath', despite the etymological connection of pneuma to 'wind' and to 'breathing'. Accordingly, the association of spiritual breathing with the acquisition of divine power is not Stoic, but Egyptian. Nevertheless, the two notions will have interacted in the milieu of Alexandria and Lower Egypt – and with the Jewish here too.

### **Concepts of Divine Presence in Greco-Egyptian and Jewish-Egyptian Syncretism**

Panentheism, or Cosmotheism, is a defining feature of Ancient Egyptian theology and world view that has influenced Neoplatonism (Bilolo, 2004: 1ff.), which had a formative influence on the conceptualisation of Hesychasm. It has a philosophical character, that influenced later spiritual epistemics and practices. Greco-Egyptian philosophic exchange goes back to Plato, who studied in Egypt. Middle Platonism – strong here - shaped theological concepts of patristic literature. was strong here. The founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus, born in Egypt. The Plotinian vision of a divinely permeated world – in spite of the fallen status of 'matter' – derives from here. This vision is influential for Hesychasm, through the *Book of Wisdom*, and through Neoplatonic doctrine of theurgy, developed in this realm. Palamas' doctrine of the uncreated energies of God, pervading the world, can be attributed to this influence.

The Greco-Egyptian *Magical Papyri* are the product of the interaction between Hellenism, Judaism and Ancient Egyptian religion. Although the papyri of the present prayers date from late Antiquity, the prayers themselves are in substance quite old, going back to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. *Papyrus XIII* of Merkelbach's and Totti's collection dates from the 3<sup>rd</sup>/ 4<sup>th</sup> century C. E. Its prayer has a partially identical wording with those elder sources. It contains a remarkably conservative conception of the Sun-God, of Egyptian inspiration, as the God of Life, the Creator, and the Lord of the World. This cosmo-theistic concept of God originated in the times of the Ramesside pharaohs (19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty, 1306 – 1070 B.C.) (Merkelbach & Totti, 1990: 127). This theology understands Amun to be the Creator-God, before all world and time, that this god created the world and is yet one with it, so that the elements of the world, heaven, earth, air, etc., are also parts of his body which extends through the cosmos. This is to be shown from the following:



[Text no. 1:] *Greco-Egyptian prayer of Jewish inspiration:*

1169Thou, the One and Blissful of eons, father of the cosmos, I  
invoke you with a prayer which encompasses the cosmos. [...]  
1171 To me, who hast breathed into the whole cosmos (i.e. the  
breath-of-life)  
1172 who hast suspended the fire from the water (enveloping the  
world) and hast separated the earth from the water [...]  
1174hearken, (thou) Form and Spirit (pneuma), Earth and Sea,  
1175unto the word of the Wise in divine necessity,  
1176and receive my words like arrows of fire  
1177for I am Man, the most sublime creation of God in heaven,  
made of Spirit (pneuma) and dew and earth [...]  
1180open Thyself, heaven, receive my words,  
1181hear, Helios (Sun-God), Father of the Cosmos:  
1182I invoke Thee by Thy name ... (vowels and secret names) ...  
Jahwe, [...]  
1189(a) who Thou alone containest that in which everything is  
rooted  
1190(b)Thou art the holy and strong Name, which is hallowed by  
all of the angels [...] 1192(j) protect me... [...]  
1217 I invoke Thee... [...]  
1220 Thou great God who appearest in the whole cosmos,  
1221 (who) shinest forth from Jerusalem  
1222 Lord lao (Jahve)... (*Grosser Pariser Zauberpapyrus (Bibl.  
Nat. suppl. gr. 574); P.G.M. IV 1169–1227*). In: *Merkelbach, R. &  
Totti, M. (eds. comm.), Abrasax – Ausgewählte Papyri religiösen  
und magischen Inhalts, vol. 4: Exorzismen und jüdisch-christlich  
beeinflusste Texte, 1996, p. 96-98*)

This text is probably of Alexandrian origin (Merkelbach & Totti, 1996: 89), where over half of the population was Jewish, assimilated largely to Greco-Egyptian culture as it had evolved in a process of mutual influence and religious syncretism since the Macedonian conquest. This prayer, for all its Jewish content is perceptibly not Israelite in any orthodox sense. It reflects a milieu in which Israelite, Egyptian and Hellenistic religious and theological ideas and practices were amalgamated, in about equal proportions. It is reflective of a milieu in which also Gnosticism arose. The inclusion of 'Jahve', his address as "shining forth from Jerusalem", as well as the theological statement in his invocation as "great God who appearest in the whole cosmos" are all significant. They indicate that Jewish religious beliefs were integrated into Alexandrian syncretism. It is unlikely that this was a one-way reception of Jewish thought by the Greco-Egyptian population. Reception of ideas and practices probably worked in both directions, especially, since much of this was framed as 'magical' and not as 'religious', which facilitated reception. Gershom Sholem states that roots of Jewish mysticism are to be sought in this Jewish-Greco-Egyptian milieu (Scholem, 1967: 43).

This prayer is entitled *The Saving Prayer*. It must have been held in some esteem. Important in this text is the link between the cosmological and the individual process, expressed in the invocation: "I invoke you with a prayer which encompasses the cosmos. To me, who hast *breathed* into the whole cosmos..." (lines 1169 – 1171). The assertion that this invocation has cosmic relevance is an element of ancient Egyptian theology, as will be shown, which relies on the idea that the divine cosmogonic power and spirit of God (line 1220) can be participated in, to the degree that a person can share in its power. The prayer suggests that the person invoking this process also shares in it (line 1169). The goal of this petition is quite private, but the conviction is expressed that a person, 'made of spirit': "I am Man, the most sublime creation of God in heaven, made of spirit ..." (line 1177), is endowed with the possibility to share in the



divine spirit's powers. The cosmic presence and manifestation of God, as in Jewish wisdom theology, is related to the cosmic presence or power claimed for this prayer. The prayer is understood as a divine, theurgic, event that enables as person to share in the divine power of creation and thus of influencing the course of the world.

The effectiveness of the prayer seems to rely on invoking the deity by the proper revealed and secret names. In the syncretistic spirit of this text, *Jahve* is invoked after *Helios* (Amun-Re), either as a different deity or as by a synonym. The latter is probably intended: "I invoke thee, thou great God who appearest in the whole cosmos, who shinest forth from Jerusalem, Lord lao (*Jahve*)" (lines 1217 – 1222). The Jewish elements are fused with notions from ancient Egyptian theology. This suggests an author familiar with the Jewish tradition and theology. This too points at a syncretistic milieu, in which these elements that also occur in Hesychasm originate.

### **Spiritual breathing and wielding the power of the All-Creator**

Text no. 2 is an extract of *Papyrus XIII, 761ff.* on the link between spiritual breathing with the concept of the all-creator. In this text, the combination of Egyptian solar theology of a creator god with the Biblical notion of the *breath-of-life* inspired by God the creator, as of the priestly Genesis account and the younger Wisdom theology, is related to the act of ritual breathing with spiritual or magic intent.

The understanding of deliberate breathing in Hesychasm as vehicle of divinisation, that is accompanied by the invocation of the Holy Name, corresponds to earliest associations of prayer and breathing that are to be found in Egypt. There are several Greco-Egyptian religious texts in which the religious significance and association of breath and prayer, with special invocation of the divine name are expressed. In the religious magical-religious *Papyrus XIII* we find this idea expressed in prayer and framed theologically:

(761) Come to me, You from the four winds, the All-Creator,  
(762) who has breathed the 'pneuma for life' [to be translated as 'breath of life' according to the editors] into men,  
(763) whose name is hidden and unspeakable ...  
(790) Your name and your breath (pneuma) (may be called) for the good  
(791) come into my mind and into my thoughts for all the time of my life  
(793) and fulfil all of my soul's desires  
(795) For you are I and I are You  
(796) for I have your name as a means of protection in my heart."  
(800) by your name, which I have in my heart and to which I call, become for me the good one towards the good in all things...  
(845) Breathe into me forcefully, o Lord of the Universe, into the one who is beneath you.  
(*Abrasax, Papyrus XIII, P.M.G. XIII 732 – 1056. Ed. Merkelbach, R. & Toti, M., 1990: 186ff.*)

The breath of life, divine pneuma (762), is being regarded as a means of personal empowerment, true to the attitude of magic. God is drawn almost completely into the person who wishes to merge with the deity, seeking renewal of divine life-giving inspiration. The



phrase 795 about the identification of the person with the deity invoked implies the motif of 'divinisation'. These formulae are quite significant. This may be looked at in detail:

- line 762: The God of Life represents the air both in its pneumatic aspect as breath of life and in its cosmic aspect, the "wind from four directions". Compare examples from the Egyptian hymns: nr. 196, 20, 23: "Your breath is the fire-of-life... one inhales, in order to live" (Assmann, 1999: 410) nr. 141, 12: "His breath-of-life is air for every nose" (Assmann, 1999: 320); Nr. 144, A 61: "Who created the breath-of-life" (Assmann, 1999: 321);
- line 791: The supplicant desires the union with God. For a similar idea see St. Paul *1.Cor.* 6:17: "But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit." (Merkelbach & Toti, 1990: 213)
- line 795: The author identifies with God: we might find a notion similar to the idea of 'theosis' here, (- apparently without the difference implied in assimilation to God in Christianity).
- line 796: Here we find the *invocation of the name of God* as a means to have God present with oneself combined with the attention to the *heart* as the place for keeping God or His name in oneself. The Hesychast combination of the continuously repeated invocation of the name of Jesus with the focus on the heart as the centre of man and the receptacle of the divine *breath-of-life* is present also here.
- line 800: Here the name of the Lord, preserved in the *heart*, is linked with the active presence of God in all things, as presence of the good in creation. This is based on the cosmo-theistic belief in Ancient Egypt. A degree of transcendental difference is also perceptible.

Text no. 3: The prayer in *Papyrus XIII*, lines 841 – 847. It contains similar motifs:

“(841) I call to you, eternal and uncreated One,  
(842) who are the One, who holds together the whole creation,  
(847) Breathe into me by breathing out, Ruler of the Universe,  
into me who is under you.” (*Abrasax, Papyrus XIII*, P.M.G. XIII 732  
– 1056. Ed. Merkelbach, R. & Toti, M., 1990: 191).

Here the motif, that God is invoked to breathe the breath of life into the person praying, is important for Hesychasm, since it is connotated with the idea of divine pneuma sustaining the world.

In these prayers there is also a strong link to be found between the motifs of divine breath-of-life and fire as well as light, which are likewise constitutive for Hesychast experience and theory. This is mediated by the figure of Amun, the Creator-God in identification with Re, the Sun-God who came to be considered the supreme God. In the Bible we have this image in *Psalms* 103/4. Here God is 'clothed' by light. Still, it is close enough. This fusion is characteristic of the to-and-fro-exchange occurring in syncretism, as observable in Alexandria.

Konrad Sethe described this for the exchange between ancient Egyptian and Stoic views on pneuma and the breath of life, in which mutual influence is discernible:

“The Stoics taught that pneu=ma was the divine substance of the cosmos. Probably this doctrine was merged with the Egyptian idea about their God of the air and the cosmos, Amun, “the breeze which is in all things and by which one lives forever” (Sethe, 1929: 102). Assman confirms this for the notions about Amun (Assmann, 1999: 320).

Text no. 4: *Prayer of a Congregation to the Pneuma of God*, (IV 115 – 1165):

“1115: be greeted, all-encompassing union of the 'pneuma' in the air ...



1117 be greeted, Pneuma which extends from heaven to earth ... and from earth which is in the central hollow of the cosmos, up to the limits of the abyss ...

1121 be greeted, Pneuma which enters me and which expands me and which leaves me again according to the will of God in goodness...”

(*Abrasax, Prayer of a Congregation to the Pneuma of God, (IV 115 – 1165)*. Ed. Merkelbach, R. & Toti, M., 1991: 34ff.)

In this prayer the cosmic pervasiveness of divine pneuma is hailed, comparable to what is said of it in *Sapientia Salomonis*, written in Alexandria. The divine pneuma is described here not only as force of life quickening all things, but is invoked to enter the person praying, emphasising its character as hypostasis. Comparable to the prayer to the Holy Spirit in the entrance prayers of the Hours, the divine pneuma is asked to enter the person praying to it directly. Its indwelling is expected according to divine dispensation. It is linked with personal piety. The prayer asking for inspiration of this pneuma, and for it to enter the ‘inner person’, as essential in Hesychasm too.

This is not to be interpreted in the sense of pantheistic integration of man into divinised nature. The prayer for inspiration implies a difference between the divine and man. This prayer also shows an acute awareness of ‘inner space’ that surpasses the outer cosmos by the degree of its participation in divine pneuma. This is akin to Hesychast understanding.

## Conclusion

This article explores elements of Hesychasm that can be traced to Ancient Egyptian and Greco-Egyptian sources in Antiquity. Hesychasm combines a variety of sources, among which the Yogic – for its practice –, and the Neoplatonic – for its conceptualisation, are the most important. The Egyptian contributions appear as integrated with these, yet as discernibly distinct. They appear to have entered Hesychasm partly by pathway of the exchange with Judaism in the realm of Alexandria, but also through Greco-Egyptian syncretism, that influenced the milieu from which Hesychasm arose at the end of Greco-Roman Antiquity. The description of the method by the St. Gregory Palamas – as the master theologian of Hesychasm provided the point of departure. For him the introspection and drawing in of intellect and awareness into itself, and the breathing method of thus drawing it – and the Holy Spirit - into the heart are essential.

The misconception of Hesychasm as mere prayer supported by breathing is dismissed as distortion. The role of the ‘heart’ in Ancient Egyptian and Hesychast thought is described as – as the psychophysical centre of the human being. The role of stillness is noted, as linked to that of divine ‘breath’ by the movement of introduction of human and divine spirit into the ‘heart’ by means of breathing. The invocation of Jesus Christ, as embodied Spirit of God, is placed in this context of spiritual breathing. The ancient Egyptian connections between the ‘breath of God’ – that permeates the world – the divine ‘power’ and ‘wisdom’, including righteousness, are shown, as essential for the understanding of Hesychast concepts and practice. The energetic aspect of this process and method is explained on its Ancient Egyptian and Greco-Egyptian background. Sources of Magic literature are referred to, because of the continuum between ‘magic’ and ‘spirituality’ in Ancient Egypt – as handling the ‘power of God’, as noted in the Old Testament too. In the Greco-Egyptian sources, quoted here, ‘prayer’ and ritual breathing, are presented as way of participating in the ‘power of God’. This covers spiritual, energetic, and vital aspects. As shown here, this is important for the understanding of



Hesychast practice and experience. (The widespread understanding of Hesychast breathing method as mere psychophysical support for uninterrupted prayer is thus dismissed.)

The Greco-Egyptian understanding of the presence and pervasiveness of the divine spirit, provides the basis to understand Hesychast 'pneumatology' – and its method of breathing - in its theological, ontological, anthropological, spiritual, and vital, aspects. In conclusion the Hesychast method, as described by Palamas, is to be understood as participation in the Holy Spirit, by intellect, soul, and body, as participation in the Divine energetically too. Further research on the Ancient Egyptian and Greco-Egyptian sources of Hesychasm is necessary: as on the role of the 'heart', on ritual and meditative practices, and on their transformative powers. The mutual influence of the Egyptian and Neoplatonic elements, their fusion of concepts, and their pathways into Christian Orthodox monasticism and spirituality at the end of Antiquity, need more extensive investigation. This essay is part of this research.

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