

THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE SCENE OF NUT, GEB, AND SHU

Joost Kramer University of Leiden

ABSTRACT

A well-known Egyptian religious scene is that of the separation of heaven and earth. With some exceptions dating to later periods, all scenes belong to the Third Intermediate Period (TIP). But what is its symbolic meaning?

In this article it is argued that the scene is not cosmogonical, i.e. it does not reflect the mythological episode in which Atum separates the sky from the earth, thus making possible the solar cycle and life in general. In the TIP-scene this separation has already taken place and is now a passive, fixed situation. Another important aspect in the TIP-scene is the solar cycle which may present the stage in solar theology in which the sun sets and commences its journey through the Netherworld in order to be resurrected in the morning. The aim of the deceased is to travel along with the solar barge and become regenerated, and this may be the reason why the scene is attested in a funerary context.

RESUME

Une des scènes religieuses égyptiennes la plus connue est la scène de la séparation du ciel et de la terre. Elle est datée de la troisième période intermédiaire, mais il y a quelques exceptions, qui sont postérieures. Mais quelle est la signification symbolique de cette scène?

Dans cet article, on discute que la scène n'est pas cosmogonique, ça veut dire, elle ne reflète pas l'épisode mythologique dans lequel Atoum sépara le ciel de la terre et, grâce à ça, le cycle solaire et donc toute la vie ont pu venir à l'existence. Dans cette scène de la troisième période intermédiaire, la séparation s'est déjà produite, c'est une situation passive. Un autre élément essentiel, mis en relief dans la scène de la séparation, est le thème du cycle solaire, qui peut illustrer un passage de la théologie solaire dans laquelle le soleil se couche le soir et entre dans la Douat pour se régénérer et pour ensuite réapparaître au matin. Le but du défunt est de voyager dans la barque solaire et obtenir la régénération pour lui-même. C'est pourquoi cette scène est bien attestée en contexte funéraire.

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INTRODUCTION

A well-known scene in Egyptian mythology is the so-called scene of the separation of heaven and earth. In this scene we can see the sky-goddess Nut positioned in a vault, her finger and toe tips touching the ground. Underneath her, the earth-god Geb is lying. Between the two, Shu is standing. His arms are raised, thus supporting Nut (see fig. 1). Although research on this topic is not quite ample – for example, no systematic catalogue has been published – the general consensus has arisen that the scene is a representation of a cosmogonical stage in which Shu separates Nut from Geb herewith creating the cosmos and the preconditions of life. But does this scene really express the cosmogonical conceptions put forward in the Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts predating it by thousand years? In this article I would like to point out that scene and text do not always coincide. I will try to give an alternative view of the symbolic meaning of the scene of the separation of heaven and earth.

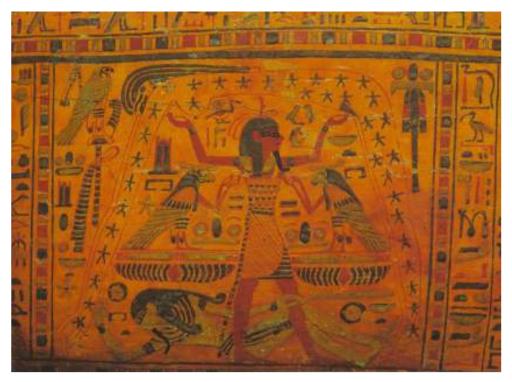


Fig. 1 – Coffin of Amenhotep (Leiden, Museum of Antiquities AMM 16).

For my M.A. thesis, I collected 75 scenes. The present article is based on this corpus. A peculiarity of this scene is that it is predominantly restricted to the Third Intermediate Period. By my knowledge there are two scenes dated to the 25th dynasty and one scene to the 30th. It is mostly

depicted on the abundantly decorated coffins from priests of Amun-Ra in Thebes. It is also to be found on the mythological papyri and one scene is carved in the walls of the burial chamber of Sheshonq D, son of Osorkon II.

GEB AND NUT IN THE COSMOGONIES

As mentioned above, the scene of Nut, Geb and Shu is often viewed as a representation of a cosmogony. The scene will be compared to the texts relating of Geb and Nut being separated, which is most relevant here. Comparison will mostly be made on textual grounds since all TIP-scenes contain inscriptions if even a few.

The bulk of the passages concerning the three deities come from the Coffin Texts. However, predecessors are to be found in the Pyramid Texts. The theme reappears in the late 18th early 19th dynasty, where a solar hymn contains some similar phrases. So why then is the TIP-scene connected to these texts? First of all, the texts deal with three deities, Geb, Nut and Shu. They are said to be positioned in the exact same pose as we can see them in the scenes. For example:

Passage 1 (CT 76 II 2b-b, B1C9):



 $iw=i wr\underline{d}.kw \ hr \ s\underline{t}s.w \ Sw$ $dr \ f3=i \ s3.t=i \ Nw.t \ tp=i \ di=i \ s(y) \ n \ it=i \ Tm \ m \ dr=f \ rd(i).n=i \ Gb \ hr$ rd.w.y=i

"Now, I grew tired under the supportings¹ of Shu Since I carry my daughter Nut above me, I give her to my father Atum in his domain, I placed Geb underneath my feet."

¹ I.e. Shu himself grows tired of supporting the weight of Nut.

Passage 2 (CT 78 II 19 a-c, 20 b-d):



N b3 Šw rdy n=f Nw.t tp.t Gb hr rd.w.y=f N im.y.tw=sny

"N is the *ba* of Shu, Nut was placed for him on top and Geb beneath his feet N is in between them"

And finally passage 3 (Tura hymn to Amun):

$$h(i).n=k p.t dr (.n)=k s_3 Tw r swsh t_3 pn n tit=k$$

"You have elevated the sky, you have lowered the soil in order to widen this land for your image"

According to these three passages Shu is positioned in the middle. He is raising or supporting Nut on top of him while Geb is at his feet. This corresponds minutely to the TIP-scene.

Now let us look in more detail to the character of the cosmogonical passages, what do they really express? Except maybe for passage 1, all texts deal with an act of movement, of separation, shifting from a former situation to a new situation. In passage (2) Nut and Geb are actively put on top and underneath Shu thus making a distinction with the situation of Nut and Geb not being placed on top and underneath Shu. Likewise in the Tura Hymn, the sky is elevated (h(i)) and the earth is lowered (dr). Apparently, they were not elevated or lowered before. Two more examples maybe:

Passage 4 (PT 627, pyr. 1778b):

'I<u>t(i)</u> hrt Tm n <u>d</u>sr p.t ir t3 nww

"The one who took the nature of Atum as the separation of the sky from the earth and the Nun"

Passage 5 (CT 80 II 39d-g):



<m> wn=f woy m hpr=f m hmt m wp(i).t=f Gb r Nw.t

"As he was one and became three as he separated Geb from Nut."

Again there is an active separation expressed either by the noun \underline{dsr} or the verb wp(i). It is clear that in the cosmogonical texts the separation functions as a division between different stages – or might be regarded as a stage in itself – developing from the primordial Nun to a cosmos inhabited even by the human race.

Does the TIP-scene communicate this same concept? This appears not to be so. Among all the inscriptions present in 75 scenes, there is only one mentioning a separation:

Passage 6 (papyrus Cairo museum, number unknown):

P.t ts(i).t Nw.t wr.t

"The sky, the raising of Nut, the great"

If we would assume that an active separation like in the cosmogonies would have been the essential theme, much more attention should be paid to this phenomenon. Instead the scene seems to express a fixed state, a steady cosmos created in the past and maintained by Shu for an indefinite period of time to come. So we should look elsewhere for the quintessential idea behind the TIP-scene. A start might be to ask why the sky got separated from the earth instead of how.

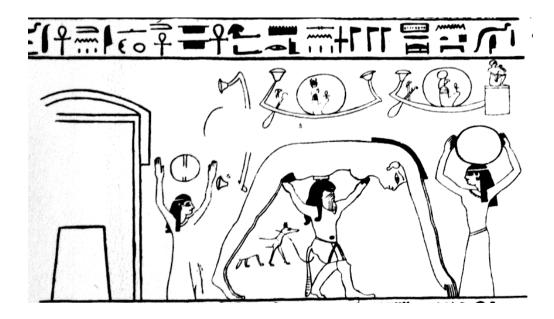


Fig. 2 - Cairo, Egyptian Museum, Coffin of Ankhrui (Petrie 1889, pl. 2).

The idea of Shu as a supporter of the sky rather than a separator can be backed up by the identification of Shu with other deities.

In two scenes Shu appears as Bes (fig. 2): one in a scene on the coffin of Nesi-per-Nebu currently in Vienna dated to the middle or late 21st dynasty; the other on a coffin dated to the 30th dynasty, found in Hawara of which the current whereabouts are unknown. The Vienna-coffin provides us with an inscription enabling us to identify the deity as Shu despite of his physical nature. Bes and Shu are not known to forge a syncretistic deity. There is one aspect they have in common: supporter of the sky. Bes can be found in the mammisi of Nectanebo (contemporary to the Hawara-coffin) where the abaci contain his image (Daumas 1959: pl. 36a). Bes can also be depicted on headrests thus supporting the head of the sleeper (Konrad 2007: 135).

The TIP-scene is often directly connected to the god Thoth. This deity appears at the shoulders of the anthropomorphic coffins of this period. The scene of Geb and Shu is mostly placed right next to Thoth at the arms and the god is incorporated into the scene. Thoth is holding a staff with a symbol of the West on top of it. A formula taken from BD 161 can accompany him. In this spell four figures of Thoth support the sky on their staffs. This iconographic feature is copied to the coffin as early as the 18th dynasty on shoulders and feet.

So the notion of supporting the sky is present in the TIP-scene. Still, this does not give us an answer to the question of the symbolic meaning of the scene. We have to leave the cosmogonies for cosmological views.

SOLAR SYMBOLISM

An aspect clearly present in the scenes of Geb and Nut is the solar symbolism. Iconographic elements such as sun discs, emblems of the Netherworld and sun barges allude to the cycle of the sun. Also there are textual references such as a description on the Cairo coffin JE 29706:

Dw3(i).t R' m htp=f m dw3.t štš.t "The praising of Ra in his setting in the secret Netherworld"

Basically, the solar cycle is the journey daily made by the sun (Assmann 1975: 1087). There are two main motives discernable in the solar cycle:

- 1. The motive of movement in which the sun god makes his daily journey. As means of transport, the sun god travels on a barge. There is a barge used during the day, the *manD.t*-barge, and there is a night-barge, the *mskt.t*-barge.
- 2. Secondly, there is the motive of regeneration and resurrection.

These two motives of the solar cycle, especially the nocturnal journey, can be represented differently. The arched body of Nut can be seen as a circuit upon which the sun and the stars traverse (first motive). Nut is at the same time the mother who regenerates the sun god by giving birth to him (second motive). The journey could also be seen as the sun god travelling through the sky during the day and through the Netherworld during the night.

NUT AND THE MOTIVES OF MOVEMENT AND MYTHOLOGY

Mainly, Nut plays a cosmographical or even astronomical role in different books, for instance the "Book of Nut" and the "Book of Night and Day". Although the idea of Nut giving birth to the sun god every morning is much older (Assmann 1969: 120-122), the iconographical position of Nut is first represented in the 19th dynasty. Nut appears in the exact same position in the "Book of Nut".

THE "BOOK OF NUT"

In its complete form, this corpus comprises a "Nut-image", texts about the circuits of planets and the moon, and the "dramatical text". It can be found on monuments and on papyri (Von Lieven 2007: 15-19). In case of the latter, the "Nut-image" is omitted with the exception of pOxford 79/105, which has a monumental layout (Von Lieven 2007: 16).² The texts accompanying the "Nut-image", however, are attested on the papyri as well.

In contrast to books of the Netherworld, the "Book of Nut" does not primarily focus on the solar cycle (Von Lieven 2007: 293). This has been reserved for the "Nut-image". The book as a whole is by no means a funerary text, but it is rather a handbook for religious astronomy (Von Lieven 2007, 295).

The "Nut-image" consists of a female figure bent in an arch. Her head is in the west and her back part, which is the place of birth, is in the east. Underneath the womb of Nut a description reads "eastern horizon". Here, the sun god comes out of the vulva of the goddess and ascends the sky in the form of a scarab. He proceeds across the sky and takes the form of a disc. In the west the sun god meets his father Osiris and enters the Netherworld, about which descriptions are given.

THE "BOOK OF DAY AND NIGHT"

In layout, the "Book of Day and Night" consists of the arched body of Nut, bent over a text and images divided over twelve scenes. In the upper

 $^{^2}$ The 'Nut-image' is attested in the cenotaph of Seti I, the tombs of Ramesses IV and Mutardis and on pOxford 79/105.

part the "Book of Day" is depicted (Roulin 1998, 226). It starts with the birth of the sun at sunrise and ends with sunset when Nut eats the sun. In the lower part the Book of Night is placed, divided over three registers, thus resembling the *Amduat* (Roulin 1996: 356). It gives a description of the path to take by the deceased and of the resurrection of Osiris but the sun god does not unite with Osiris (Roulin 1996: 359).

THE SOLAR CYCLE THROUGH THE DAY SKY AND THE NETHERWORLD

When the solar cycle is not imagined as a journey through the body of Nut, it is perceived as the day sky and the Netherworld through which the sun god travels. It can be rendered to the figure below:

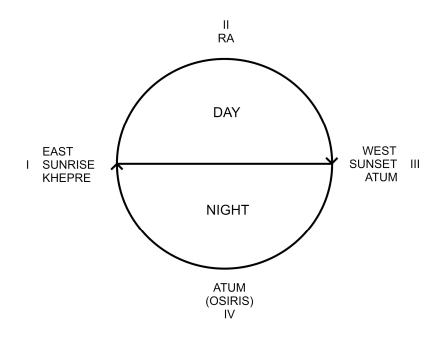


Fig. 3 – The solar cycle as viewed by the Egyptians (after Assmann 1975, 1088).

The cycle starts with the sunrise (designated "I" in the figure), when the sun enters the day sky or rather when it exits the Netherworld (Hornung 1991: 185f). The sun god has the guise of a scarab. Every morning that the sunrises can be seen as a repetition of the "first time" that the sun rose out of the Nun. It rises from the eastern horizon called Bakhu. Every morning the sunrise can be seen as a repetition of the "first time" that the sun rose out of the Nun. It rises from the eastern horizon called Bakhu. Every morning the sunrise can be seen as a repetition of the "first time" that the sun rose out of the Nun. It rises from the eastern horizon called Bakhu. Iconographically, it is represented as \square .

The journey through the sky of the midday can be seen as the dominion of the sun god over his enemies (Assmann 1983: 73). The sun appears here as Ra.

The day-journey ends at the western horizon called Manu and the evening-night cycle starts ("III" and "IV" in the figure). Here the sun is welcomed in the Netherworld as if the journey through the day sky was not the aim but just a passing-through (Assmann 1983: 85). The sun god takes the appearance of the ram-headed Atum.

MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIVE OF THE JOURNEY OF THE NIGHT THROUGH THE NETHERWORLD

We have seen that the sun as Ra celebrates life and his victory over evil in the day sky, while during the night the sun travels through the Netherworld, the realm of Osiris and of death. But Ra is always travelling towards death while the sun in the realm of Osiris travels to life. In this way life and death become interchangeable (Piankoff 1964: 10). This explains why scenes of both the solar cycle as well as the Osirian cycle are depicted on coffins, papyri and in the tomb of Shoshenq D. Life implies death, while death means resurrection to new life (Piankoff 1964: 10). This notion brings Ra and Osiris together and is conceptualized in the unification of the *bas* of Ra and Osiris which become an entity. This is described already in the NK in the tomb of Nefertari and in BD 17. In the Book of Caverns and in the Litany of Ra it can be seen as the main theme. In the tomb of Nefertari the unified Ra and Osiris are depicted in the form of a mummy with the head of a ram. The inscriptions reads:

R' pw ḥtp m Wsir Wsir ḥtp m R'

"This is Ra who has come to rest in Osiris Osiris has come to rest in Ra"

The exact relation between the two gods is hence left undetermined. It is not clear which god has come to rest in which one. Every day Ra in the form of his body descends into the Netherworld where he has to become Osiris, similar to the human dead, but contrary to the human dead, Ra and Osiris incorporate themselves in their own beings so that they have one body (Hornung 2005: 96). The image of this body remains in the Netherworld while the *ba*-spirit ascends to the sky (Hornung 1963: 193).

In the Ramesside period the notion of a transcendent pantheistic deity develops.³ According to Assmann, this transcendent deity has two aspects. In one aspect, a life god gives three elements of life: light, water and air (Assmann 1983: 261). Stanzas of solar-hymns are based upon this division. In the second aspect a creator god occupies the cosmos created as a space for his threefold personification of *ba*, image and corpse (Assmann 1983: 261). This corresponds to the body remaining in the Netherworld and the *ba* ascending to the sky.

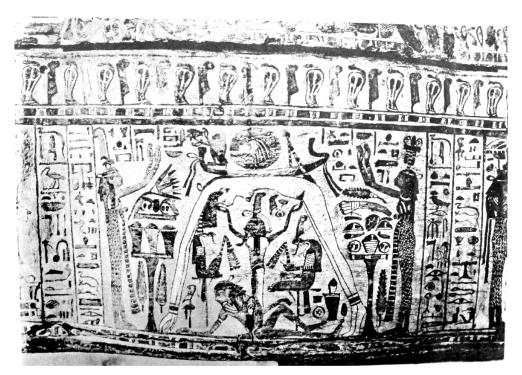


Fig. 4 - Coffin of Khonsu-mes, Uppsala, Victoria Museum nº 228 (Starck 1977).

³ Whether or not pantheism existed in Egypt remains a discussion. In Hornungs opinion there is no true pantheism, since this involves a transcendent deity manifesting himself in every element in the cosmos. Although some deities have a myriad of manifestations perceivable through their ba's, not everything was deified (Hornung 2005: 131-132). Assmann does not take the sense too strictly that everything has a divine manifestation. In his view, one may speak of pantheism in Egypt since Amun-Ra could only be perceived through his ba's in the form of other gods, flora and fauna (Assmann 1984, 279-280). In pantheism the appearance and nature of the transcendent god remains unknown. However Egyptian deities are often represented iconographically and textually. For instance in a magical papyrus in the Brooklyn Museum a detailed, textual description is given of Bes Pantheos while he is depicted in the vignettes (Sauneron 1970: 23, figs. 2-3). This does not support the theory of pantheism in Egypt.



Fig. 5 - Coffin of Tanakhtnettahat (Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum 1999.1.17).

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND COMPARISON TO THE TIP-SCENE

In appearance, Nut is depicted in the same position in the separationscenes as in the "Book of Nut" and in the "Book of the Night". Likewise, the body of Nut can be covered with stars in the separation-scenes. Furthermore, the west-east direction is given special importance. In many scenes symbols of the West and of the East are placed next to Nut. Most of the time it concerns two symbols of the West. However, in some cases a symbol of the West is placed next to the head of Nut while there is a symbol of the East next to her vulva.⁴ Nephtys can be depicted standing behind Nut while Isis is standing in front of Nut. Nephtys is always associated with the East, e.g. the eastern wind, or with the left, which in fact designated the East as well (LGG IV: 97). Likewise, Isis was affiliated with the West.

Therefore, one can state in the separation-scene, that the head of Nut is in the west while her legs are in the east. Winged sun discs can be placed near the mouth or the head and the vulva of Nut. Often, barges, always with a different crew, sail on the back, arms and legs of Nut or are raised by Shu. Although the crew is different, a figure representing the sun god is always present. This can be the sun god in the form of Khepri or Atum. It can also be a sun disc shining down on a throne (see fig. 6). In the "Dramatical Text" we read that the stars sail over the body of Nut. So does the sun god in the separation-scenes.

⁴ For example Cairo coffin JE 29660 and Victoria Museum n° 228 (see fig. 3) (as goddesses), Leiden AMM 16 (see fig. 1), Michael C. Carlos Museum, 1999.1.17 (see fig. 4), and New York, MMA, 25.3.8 (only indicated by a standard).



Fig. 6 - Coffin of Imen-m-per-Mut, Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 29706 (Niwiński 1989).



Fig. 7 - Coffin of Taiuheret, Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 26196 (Daressy 1909).

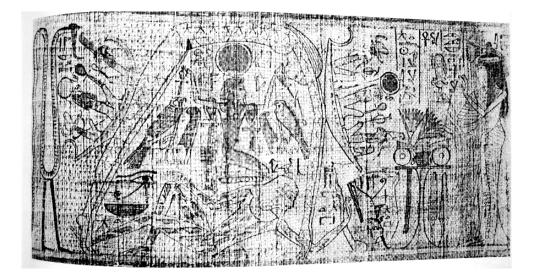


Fig. 8 – Papyrus of Tentamun, Paris, BnF n° 172 (Te Velde 1970, pl. 30).

Here again, the west-east direction is emphasized by the symbols of the West and the East. Moreover, in one scene the horizon of Manu (West) is mentioned at the side of Nut's head and the horizon of Bakhu (East) at her back part (see fig. 7). In some scenes the sun disc is received in the Netherworld or is raised out of it. Iconographically, a pair of arms or a male torso can perform these acts (see fig. 8, just in front of the arms of Nut and Geb).

In the mythological motive, the body of Osiris remains in the Netherworld while the *ba* of the sun god ascends to the sky. The recumbent god is called twice Osiris instead of Geb. Furthermore, Geb has often Osirian elements in the separation-scenes. He is almost always designated as nb dwA.t, lord of the Netherworld, a function traditionally belonging to Osiris. In other scenes he has Osirian attributes such as a flagellum and a HqA-sceptre. But on the other hand, Geb is the father of Osiris and he was also the first mythological king, which can be a reason why he has these attributes. One can not state that Geb can be identified as Osiris, that they are equal. But Geb does incorporate a strong Osirian notion. In *concreto*, Geb may incorporate the earth, but symbolically he denotes the Netherworld.

The separation-scene seems to bring the two ways of representing the solar-cycle together: the body of Nut is seen as the sky over which the sun barges sail; she eats the sun god in the west and gives birth to him in the east. But at the same time, the sun can be raised out of the Netherworld or lowered into it by arms embracing it. Due to its funerary context, the scene can also be seen as the sun god/deceased entering the Netherworld where he unites with Osiris/the deceased. The body of Osiris/the deceased is in these scenes depicted by Geb. Geb has often a greenish skin colour which can in connection with Osiris signify regeneration. This is what happens; the sun god/deceased is regenerated or resurrected and ascends to the day sky.

CONCLUSIONS

The main question of this article concerns the meaning of the scene of the separation.

As we have seen this is twofold. It can be seen as the depiction of a cosmogonical concept dating back to the time of the PTs. It suggests the creation of the cosmos. Out of unity came diversity, existence. However, the evidence that the separation-scene is a depiction of this cosmogonical stage is not ample. Geb, Nut and Shu are formed in the exact position as is described in the cosmogonical spells of the PTs and the CTs and Shu is always designated as the son of Ra accordingly to the cosmogony where he is the son of Atum-Ra. But the essence of the cosmogony is the separation of heaven and earth, the act of Geb and Nut being separated. This seems not to be the essence in the separation-scenes. Virtually no textual comments are made indicating that it is the separation that is of importance. Iconographically, movement is hardly rendered in Egyptian two-dimensional representations so it is hard to take the iconography into account.

That the sky is supported and not separated from the earth becomes clear because of two different appearances of Shu. In scenes on the Hawara and Vienna coffins, Shu is depicted as Bes. This deity was seen as a supporting power but by no means as a separating power. Another deity is Thoth, who is often incorporated into the TIP-scene. He holds a staff supporting the sky. In the papyrus of Nisti-ta-Nebet-Taui (Cairo JE 40017), Shu is cynocephalic, the baboon being an appearance of Thoth.

The solar cycle plays a more important role. Here, Nut as the sky is already separated from Geb, the earth. There are two motives distinguishable in the cycle: one of movement and one of mythology. They can both be traced back in the body of Nut. The sun god travels through her body and solar barges sail on top of it. Meanwhile, Nut eats the sun god in the evening in the west as a mythical death and gives birth to him every morning in the east by which he is resurrected. The motives of movement and mythology can also be discerned in a journey through the day sky and the Netherworld. In the evening the sun god dies in the west. He enters the Netherworld where he unites with Osiris. This is only temporarily, because the sun god as a regenerated *ba* exits the Netherworld to ascend the day sky, while his body, identified with Osiris, remains in the Netherworld. The deceased can be associated with both Osiris and the sun god. In this sense the body of the deceased stays in the Netherworld, while his *ba* joins the sun god in his solar barge traveling across the day sky. Geb can allude to Osiris in some separation-scenes; he is designated with the title lord of the Netherworld and has Osirian attributes. Thus, the separation-scene can be seen as a depiction of the deceased merging with the sun god and Osiris in the Netherworld, leaving his body behind and ascending the day sky in triumph together with the sun god.

In a funerary context both themes fit well. The main theme of the cosmogony is of course creation. The themes of the solar cycle as put forward here are resurrection and regeneration, which are in fact no more than the re-enactment of creation.

These conclusions are preliminary. A thorough analysis placing the scene of Geb and Nut in context with the surrounding scenes would be very useful.

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