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Embryology and Biology of Creation: Symbolic Parallels between the Temple of Esna Theology and the Contemporary Scientific Reflection

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علم الأجنة وبيولوجيا الخلق: أوجه التشابه الرمزية بين لاهوت معبد إسنا والتأمل العلمي المعاصر
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ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to investigate, discuss and study The concept and significance of embryology and creation biology through the symbolic parallel between the theology of the Esna temple and contemporary scientific contemplation. This study examines Khnum's role as a divine craftsman in the Esna Temple texts, focusing on his involvement in the full cycle of human reproduction. It highlights Khnum's endowment of vitality, his modeling of the fetus, and his oversight of childbirth, framing him as both creator and cosmic midwife. By analyzing these theological motifs, the research explores how ancient Egyptians conceptualized conception, gestation, and birth. The study further investigates possible parallels between mythological representations and modern biological concepts such as fertilization, morphogenesis, and genetic determinism. Through this interdisciplinary lens, the research offers a culturally grounded reinterpretation of ancient Egyptian creation theology and its enduring relevance to human understanding of life's origins. The methodology of this study becomes clear through the content and context of the symbolic parallels between the temple of Esna theology and the contemporary scientific reflection, which is done through discussion, investigation and analysis in order to clarify and highlight the elements and structure of the study content.

ملخص

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى دراسة ومناقشة مفهوم وأهمية علم الأجنة وخلق الإنسان من خلال التوازي الرمزي بين لاهوت معبد إسنا والتأمل العلمي المعاصر من منظور دراسة تحليلية لدور خنوم كمعبود صانع له القدرة على خلق وتشكيل الإنسان في ضوء الأدلة النصية المنتشرة في ثنايا نصوص معبد إسنا، والتي تتناول دورة التكاثر البشري ومراحل تشكيل الجنين التي يتغنى فيها الكاتب بقدرة المعبود خنوم الخالق على تعزيز القدرة الجنسية لدى الرجال وتشكيل النطف في الأرحام والإشراف الكامل على مراحل الحمل والولادة كمعبود خالق يرفع المواليد طوال فترة الحمل، وتبرز النصوص المتفرقة المفاهيم العميقة والمتطورة لدى كتبة المعبد حول مفاهيم الإخصاب والحمل والولادة، والتي تتشابه بدقة متناهية ببعض الحقائق العلمية الحديثة مثل تلقيح البويضة وتعزيز القدرة الحيوية لدى الرجال من خلال زيادة أعداد الحيوانات المنوية ومراحل نمو وتطور الجنين في الرحم والبصمة الجينية التي يتشابه فيها الأبناء مع والديهم من خلال حمل ذات الصفات الوراثية، كما تقدم الدراسة نظرة ورؤية جديدة حول الإشارات النصية التي تتناول مفاهيم الخلق بمعبود إسنا من منظور علمي حديث يجمع بين تخصصات شتى في محاولة لفهم الفكر المصري القديم حول التخليق البشري وكيفية نشأة الحياة والكائنات. تتضح منهجية هذه الدراسة من خلال محتوى وسياق التوازي الرمزي بين لاهوت معبد إسنا والتأمل العلمي المعاصر، وذلك من خلال المناقشة والتحقيق والتحليل من أجل توضيح وإبراز عناصر وبنية محتوى الدراسة.

KEYWORDS

Embryology and Biology; Creation Theology; Esna Temple and Khnum; Ancient Egypt; Greco-Roman Periods.

كلمات دلالية (مفتاحية)

علم الأجنة والأحياء؛ لاهوت الخلق؛ معبد إسنا وخنوم؛ مصر القديمة؛ العصرين اليوناني الروماني.

INTRODUCTION

Among the most prominent visual representations of the creator god Khnum is the image of a ram-headed figure seated at a potter's wheel, fashioning the divine child¹. This motif, deeply embedded in the religious imagination of ancient Egypt, is supported by a series of epithets that emphasize Khnum's generative power: *nb nḥp "Lord of the Potter's Wheel"*, *nḥp nḥpw "Creator of Creators"*², *nb nḥp ikr dbꜣw "The Creator, Excellent of Fingers"*³, and *nḥp ḥr-nbw ḥr nḥpw.f "He who created the people upon his potter's wheel"*⁴.

This study explores Khnum's role as a divine craftsman through the lens of creation theology in the Esna Temple texts, tracing his involvement across the stages of human generation. The process begins with his endowment of vital potency a divine force said to enhance the sexual vigor and fertility of the couple. It then proceeds to Khnum's careful modeling of the fetus within the womb, ensuring a flawless, defect free formation. Finally, the texts allude to his connection with the mechanics of labor, including the dilation of the cervix and the delivery of both child and placenta. More than a creator, Khnum is depicted as a cosmic midwife and protector, presiding over both the biological construction and the metaphysical destiny of the newborn. As such, his image bridges the symbolic and physiological dimensions of life's origins, offering a profound theological framework for understanding conception, gestation, and birth in ancient Esna thought.

These ancient representations invite a set of compelling research questions: How did the ancient Egyptians conceptualize the stages of human reproduction, from conception to childbirth, through the figure of Khnum? To what extent do these symbolic portrayals reflect a philosophical understanding of embryological development? Can Khnum's bestowal of vitality and his oversight of the fetus's formation be seen as metaphorical parallels to modern biological principles such as fertilization and fetal morphogenesis? Furthermore, how might the divine regulation of birth timing and destiny reflect early attempts to grapple with ideas of heredity or determinism? By bridging the mythological language of the Esna texts with the frameworks of contemporary biology, this research seeks to

1) See: Naville, E., *The Temple of Deir El Bahari*, London, UK: Egypt Exploration Fund 1896, PLs. XLVI-LV; Sauneron, S., & Yoyotte, J., *La naissance du monde selon l'Égypte ancienne*. In *La naissance du monde*, Sources Orientales I, 1959 p.73; Shaw, I., & Paul, N., *The British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, London, 2002, p. 151; Wilkinson, R., H., *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, London, 2003, 194.

2) Esna VI, 512, 10

3) Esna III, 254, 1.

4) Esna VI, 489, 9.

uncover the intersections between religious narrative and scientific insight. Ultimately, it aims to offer a culturally sensitive reinterpretation of ancient Egyptian cosmogony that acknowledges its relevance to broader human questions about the origins, structure, and mystery of life.

1. *Enhancing Sexual Performance and Divine Fertilization: A Theological-Biological Perspective*

The Esna Temple texts offer a remarkably detailed theological framework for human reproduction, beginning with the enhancement of male sexual potency. These inscriptions describe Khnum's role not only as a creator but as a divine enabler of fertility.

By metaphorically "*infusing semen into the bones of men,*" Khnum grants them both the physical vigor and reproductive capacity necessary for intercourse¹. This symbolic act reflects an intuitive understanding of internal physiological readiness for procreation an ancient anticipation of the biological processes involving hormonal balance, sperm production, and virility. The use of "bones" as a locus of divine implantation may correspond to their symbolic strength and endurance, essential for the continuity of life. In a more mythopoeic dimension, Khnum is portrayed in the zoomorphic form of a bull an age old symbol of fertility, virility, and cosmic strength. In this interpretation, Khnum transcends his role as a mere facilitator and assumes that of the divine progenitor.

The bull, equipped with a powerful phallus, becomes the agent of impregnation, directly inseminating the wombs of women with divine semen. This bold imagery, while mythological, parallels a deeper theological assertion: life itself is sustained and renewed through divine intervention, and human reproduction is not merely biological but sacramental. Such representations may have served to sacralize the act of conception, framing it as a holy event overseen and initiated by divine will.

These dual interpretations, Khnum as enhancer of human fertility and he as divine inseminator reveal a multilayered understanding of creation that blends the physiological with the spiritual. On one level, they suggest an early philosophical attempt to rationalize sexual function and fertility. On another, they elevate these functions into the domain of divine orchestration, implying that all generative acts are extensions of divine creativity.

1) About the sexual life in Ancient Egypt, see: Manniche L. *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt*. KPI Ltd: London and New York, 1987; Ebbell B., *The Ebers Papyrus, the Greatest Egyptian Medical Document*. Levin and Munksgaard: Copenhagen, 1937.

Theologically, they frame the male reproductive act not only as a physical necessity but as a sacred channel for divine continuity. These two ideas can be asserted by the following texts:

- 1- *ts t3i srd swht ir mw m ks nfr nb mtwt sty hy*. “Who furnishes the man and causes the egg to grow, who creates the semen in the bones¹, the beautiful one, lord of semen, who causes the husband to impregnate”².
- 2- *I p3 k3 sty ir mw m ks*. “O, the impregnate bull, who creates the semen in the bones”³.
- 3- *Nfr.wy hr.k iw.k sty k3 ihwt ir mw hr shpr ksw*. “How beauty is your face, you are the bull who impregnates the cows, who creates the semen to create the bones”⁴.

The corpus of texts discussed above consistently links Khnum’s divine intervention to enhanced male fertility, particularly during ejaculation. These sources suggest that his influence was believed to stimulate the production of healthy sperm and increase semen level both of which are critical factors in successful conception. Such theological imagery appears to metaphorically parallel modern understandings of reproductive biology, wherein hormonal regulation and testicular function play central roles in male fertility.

This conceptual alignment is vividly illustrated in a specific passage that states *sty.f mtwt.f db3 m hmt.f* “who impregnated his semen to fill up his wife”⁵.

Additionally, the divine role may also encompass the enhancement of male sexual function, particularly through facilitating stronger and more sustained erections. This aspect of Khnum’s intervention is implied in one of the texts from the Temple of Edfu, where the god is depicted as directly contributing to the rigidity of the phallus, thereby reinforcing his connection to reproductive potency and virility. This notion is exemplified in the following passage: *di.i n.k dt.k rwd snk* “I cause your phallus strong to copulate”⁶.

The depiction of a deity enhancing penile rigidity, as found in inscriptions from the Edfu Temple, can be interpreted as an early theological attempt to articulate male sexual potency within a sacred cosmological framework. In contemporary biomedical science, erectile function is governed by a complex

1) For more about this expression see: Sauneron, S., *Le germe dans les Os*, BIFAO 60, 1960, pp.19-27.

2) Esna, III, 388, 9; Esna, V, 223.

3) Esna, 356, 13; Esna, V, 176.

4) Esna, 276, 12.; Esna, V, 159

5) Urk, VIII, 119, 6. DbA ‘to fill up’, see Wb, V, 55 (9-15).

6) Edfou, IV, 270, 17.

interaction of vascular dynamics, neurophysiological signals, and hormonal regulation.

Nitric oxide plays a central role in facilitating vasodilation of the penile arteries, while testosterone and other endocrine factors modulate libido and the maintenance of erection. By attributing these physiological mechanisms to divine intervention, the Edfu and Esna texts elevate human reproduction from a mere biological necessity to a sacrosanct act integral to the perpetuation of cosmic order.

This theological symbolism suggests that ancient Egyptians possessed an intuitive, if not empirical, understanding of reproductive health, which they encoded in religious narratives that emphasized fertility as a divine imperative. Such mythological representations reveal striking parallels with modern scientific concepts, demonstrating how ancient cultures embedded proto-scientific knowledge within ritualistic and symbolic expressions.

In the theological corpus of the Esna Temple, Khnum is not merely a divine artisan molding human life on the potter's wheel; he is also portrayed as a generative force embodied in the powerful symbolism of a bull a form charged with deep biological and cultural resonance.

This zoomorphic image of Khnum mounting women to initiate pregnancy is far more than a mythological flourish; it reflects a sophisticated religious attempt to conceptualize the invisible yet vital process of conception through tangible, familiar iconography.

In many ancient societies, the bull functioned as a universal symbol of virility, strength, and reproductive power qualities that were projected onto divine figures to explain natural phenomena such as fertility, sexual drive, and the generational continuation of life. By casting the moment of conception as a divine act, where Khnum himself directly facilitates impregnation, the Esna texts elevate sexual reproduction into a sacred mechanism of cosmic renewal and order. The biological act is thus sacralized, bridging human physiology with metaphysical causality.

This framework suggests an intuitive, proto-scientific awareness of reproduction's centrality to life's continuity, encoded in symbolic language. Moreover, Khnum's bull-form underscores not only masculine creative power but also the necessary aggression, vitality, and force believed to lie behind successful fertilization—concepts echoed in modern endocrinology and reproductive biology through the emphasis on hormonal balance, libido, and sperm viability.

This duality—Khnum as both sculptor of form and transmitter of life—reveals an ancient Egyptian worldview in which divine agency does not merely oversee human biology but is inherently embedded within it. The myth thus becomes a lens through which physiological truths are not only narrated but revered.

- 1- *snḏ n Hnm tḥw ḥmwṯ nt mr sty prt.sn ntf k3 sty ḥry idwt n s3k-ḥt¹ g3yt m k3t.f* “Fear from Khnum, males² and females as he loves, who creates their seeds, he is the ejaculating bull who rises women and no pregnancy free from his act”³.
- 2- *twt Hnm k3 sty srd ḥmwṯ* “You are Khnum, the ejaculating bull, who causes women pregnant”⁴.
- 3- *k3 sty sty idwt wḏi prt m [...] ḏi.i ʿš3t ḏ3mw.k m t3 r-ḥ dt* “the ejaculating bull, who impregnates females, who places seeds in [...], I make your numerous children on the Earth to the limit of eternity”⁵.
- 4- *k3 sty nḥp m 3wt nt 3wt-ib* “the ejaculating bull, the creator at the moment of joy”⁶.

2. Khnum of Esna Listens to All Prayers⁷ and Grants Children

This section highlights the deep spiritual connection between the creator god and ordinary people who longed to have children. Prayer was seen as one of the most powerful ways to cope with infertility and delayed conception. By turning to Khnum in sincere devotion, worshippers hoped to receive his divine favor, trusting in his role as a compassionate creator who could shape life and bring about the gift of offspring. We also have many texts that reflect the depth of supplication to the creator god for the blessing of children, as demonstrated in the following examples:

1)For this reading see: Esna, V, 170; Compare: Esna, III, 250, 8.; III, 377, 4.

2)Another translation can be suggested as: *sty idwt nt mrt* ‘who impregnates women as he loves’.

3) Esna, 366, 2.; Esna, V, 164.

4) Esna, III, 377, 3.; Esna, V, 209.

5) Esna. II, 7, 9-11.

6) Esna, III, 15, 7. See also 225, 5.; 319, 16.; 346, 17.; 356, 13.; 366, 12.

7) *sdm sprw*, ʿš3 *nḥwy*; *wr nḥwy* ‘Who Hears Petitioners’, LGG, IV, 741 ‘numerous of ears’ LGG, II, 215 and ‘great of ears’, LGG, II, 429 have a connection with this title. All of These have the sense of hearing all petitions of the common populace, see: Esna, VI, 500, 11; Esna, III, 259, 4; Esna, III, 200, 9; Esna, III, 225, 20. There were small locations within the larger temples during the New Kingdom onward for all spiritual petitions of the populace, See Sadek, A., Popular Religion in Egypt during the New Kingdom, Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1987, p. 46; Mostafa, D., Lieux Saints Populaires dans L’Egypte Ancienne, Discussions in Egyptology 29,1994, pp.87-98; Nims, Ch., Popular Religion in Ancient Egyptian Temples, in: Proceedings of 23rd Congress of Orientalists, London, 1956, pp.79-80. Teeter, E., Popular Worship in Ancient Egypt, KMT, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp.28-37.

- 1- *twt nhp rdi s3 n n dbh sw hmt n nhs sw sšm.sn m w3t kkw. "You are the creator, who gives son to whom he asks and women (daughter) to whom he requests, who lead them in the way of darkness"*¹.
- 2- *di s3 n dw3 sw s3t n dbh sw. "Who gives son to whom he adores him and daughter to whom he asks him"*².
- 3- *di s3 s3t n dbh sw. "Who gives son and daughter to whom he asks him"*³.

3. Khnum Shapes the Fetus in the Womb Without Defect

The following texts emphasize Khnum's role as a precise divine craftsman, using his skilled fingers to form the limbs of the fetus within the womb. His divine artistry ensures that the child is created free from any congenital deformities, reflecting his meticulous care and divine perfection. This act is not merely a biological function, it carries profound symbolic meaning of the divine order (*m3t*), while physical imperfection could be interpreted as a sign of chaos or divine disfavor. In this context, Khnum's potter's wheel becomes a powerful theological metaphor for the womb a sacred space where divine creativity and preordained design converge⁴.

- 1- *nhp b3h.f wy.f hr nhp dbw.f hr wp h'w.f. "the potter's wheel is before him, his two hands create and his fingers separate the limbs"*⁵.
- 2- *Hnm wp n.i h'w.k m dbw.i is iwty n t im g3. "Khnum, I separate your limbs by my fingers, indeed there is no limb deficiency"*⁶.
- 3- *Ntk hrd ikr tm m h'wt. "You are excellent child, complete of limbs"*⁷.
- 4- *nhp ikr dbw m twt wr. "The creator, excellent of fingers in a great image"*⁸.
- 5- *Tkr dbw nhp hmw m ib.f. "Excellent of fingers, who created the people as his desire"*⁹.
- 6- *Ir irtw sš nhwy. "Who creates the ears and opens the two eyes"*¹⁰.
- 7- *ms s3 m sni it. "Who [makes] the son born in the resemble of the father"*¹¹.

1) Esna, III, 387, 6.

2) Esna, II, 63,4.

3) Esna, III, 387, 5.; 225, B.

4) See: Gordon, C. H., "Khnum and El." Scripta Hierosolymitana 28, 203–14. 1982, p. 206.

5) Esna, III, 378, 13.

6) Esna, III, 301, 1.

7) Esna, III, 300, 6.

8) Esna, III, 254, 1.

9) Esna, III, 390, 17.

10) Esna, VI, 497, 8.

11) Esna, III, 378, 14.

4. Khnum as Sustainer of Life in the Womb

Esna texts portray Khnum as the divine provider who nourishes and sustains the fetus throughout pregnancy. He is described as supplying the "breath of life", a symbolic reference to oxygen¹, as well as food and water, all delivered through the mother's bloodstream over the course of nine months. These references suggest a remarkably intuitive understanding of fetal development, attributing the biological processes of gestation to Khnum's continuous divine intervention², as demonstrated in the following examples:

- 1- *I p3 ir s'nh t3w m nf.f "O, the creator, who causes children to live with his breath"*³.
- 2- *I p3 ir šd ir.f m št3 nbw "O, the creator, who nourishes whom he creates in all womb"*⁴.
- 3- *I p3 nbi t3w ir.tw 'nh n km3.f "O, who creates the breath and creates the life to whom he created"*⁵.
- 4- *It n t3w mwt nt swht g3 htyt n imyw ht iwr "Father of the children, mother of the egg, who makes the narrow throat [to breath] in the womb of the pregnancy"*⁶.
- 5- *k3 ndmndm sti n.tw im ht nt mwt.k phr n.tw m.s t3w šd n. tw št3 m rn.i pfy n šw ir hrt m 3pd 10 "The impregnate bull, I made you inside the belly of your mother, I made the breath of air go round for you, I nourished you in the womb by this name of me of Shu, I made the food for ten months"*⁷.
- 6- *Ir hrt n d3m m 3pd 10 "I made the food for the children for ten months"*⁸.
- 7- *Ir.i n.k t3w hn' mwt.k m hpr.i pfy n Imn "I made for you the breath together with your mother in this form of me of Amun"*⁹.
- 8- *s'nh nhnw m ht n mwwt.sn "Who causes children to live in the belly of their mothers"*¹⁰.

1) See: Lichtheim, M., Ancient Egyptian Literature. Volume III: The Late Period. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980, p.115; Sauneron & Yoyotte, La naissance du monde, p. 74.

2) There were a midwife provided the pregnant woman and her pregnancy with a special car to prevent miscarriage, see: Haimov-Kochman, R., Sciaky-Tamir, Y., & Hurwitz, A., Reproduction concepts and practices in ancient Egypt mirrored by modern medicine, European Journal of Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Reproductive Biology, 123(1), 2005, pp. 3–8.

3) Esna, III, 356, 21.

4) Esna, III, 356, 23.

5) Esna, III, 356, 12.

6) Esna, III, 356, 12.

7) Esna, III, 300. 2.

8) Esna, III, 302, 14.

9) Esna, III, 300. 2-3.

10) Esna, III, 377.

In addition to providing nourishment, one of the texts affirms that babies in the womb are under the divine protection of Khnum, as evidenced by the following sentence: *s^cnd swd3 hy hnt ht.s hnt hwt-nmyt*. “*he protects and makes what is in the belly health in his name of Amun in the mansion of the bed*”¹.

5- Khnum and the Onset of Labor: Divine Regulation of Childbirth Timing

Esna texts attribute to Khnum not only the formation of the fetus but also the regulation of childbirth, particularly the moment labor begins². His role extends to the final phase of pregnancy, overseeing the transition from gestation to delivery. Two specific expressions preserved in the Esna temple inscriptions reflect this divine oversight. The first, *sd krht*, literally “breaking the womb” corresponds to the onset of cervical dilation and effacement, marking the body’s readiness for delivery³. The second, *di t3w*, or “giving the breath,” likely symbolizes the uterine contractions that actively expel the fetus, aligning with the physical effort of childbirth. These expressions reveal not only theological depth but also a symbolic understanding of the physiological thresholds that mark the end of pregnancy. Khnum’s intervention at this critical juncture suggests that the Egyptians perceived the initiation of labor as a moment divinely appointed and controlled, not merely a natural consequence of gestational time. This mirrors, in symbolic terms, the modern recognition of labor onset as a complex interaction between fetal readiness, hormonal signaling, and uterine activation, as demonstrated in the following examples:

- 1- *I p3 ir sd krht r sw.s* “*O, the creator who breaks the womb at its time*”⁴.
- 2- *snd n Hnm iwr thi.sn dmdyt.sn ntf Šw hnt Pr-mswt sš k3t tsi mshnt m irw.f n Imn*. “*Fear from Khnum, the pregnant women who reached their fixed time, he is Shu in the place of birth who opens the vagina and assures the place of birth in his name of Amun*”⁵.

1) Esna, III, 377, 4.

2) The gestational period from the first record of pregnancy to delivery was at approximately 271 days. See: Haimov-Kochman, R., Sciaky-Tamir, Y., & Hurwitz, A. Reproduction concepts and practices in ancient Egypt mirrored by modern medicine, *European Journal of Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Reproductive Biology*, 123, 2005, pp. 3–8.

3) In the other side, some remedies are taken to make woman to begin contraction, see Nunn, J. F. *Ancient Egyptian medicine*, Norman, OK :University of Oklahoma Press, 1996, p.194; Chamberlain, G. Historical perspectives on health: Childbirth in ancient Egypt, *the Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 124(6), 2004, pp.284–286.; Nelson, G. S., & Szekrenyes, J. *Ancient Egyptian obstetrics and gynecology*, the Proceedings of the 10th Annual History of Medicine Days. Calgary, Alberta:University of Calgary Faculty of Medicine, 2001.

4) Esna, 356, 22.

5) Esna, III, 366, 1.

3- *Wn.k pr h3 hnt ht nbw r spr km3.n.k m ht dr t3* “Because you make what are in all belly [womb] pass to make what you are created to come forth into the earth”¹.

4- *di hnm r ht ms s3* “Who gives the breath to the belly (womb) to borne the son”².

5- *di t3w n iwrt r sfh 3tp.s* “Who gives the breath to the pregnant woman to loosen her load”³.

6- Khnum and the Determination of the Child's Destiny

In the final stage of the birth cycle, Khnum assumes two critical roles in the Mammisi (birth house) with regard to the newborn child. First, he is portrayed as determining the length of the child's life, an act that merges his creative function with that of the deity Shai, the personification of fate⁴.

This role reflects a theological framework in which lifespan and destiny are not arbitrary but divinely measured, inscribed into the very fabric of one's being at birth. Second, Khnum continues to provide essential sustenance and care even after birth, supplying the newborn with water, food, and the breath of life⁵.

This imagery not only reinforces his nurturing aspect but also symbolically mirrors modern scientific understanding of neonatal care.

In contemporary biology, a newborn's survival depends on the immediate activation of physiological systems, respiratory function, hydration, and nutrient intake, all of which are represented in the mythic language of Khnum's divine provisions. Taken together, these dual functions of Khnum reflect an integrated vision of creation and continuity: life is not only crafted and delivered by divine hands but also sustained and directed by a sacred force that bridges cosmology with the biological realities of infancy and survival, as demonstrated in the following examples:

1- *tni.i š3i.k hr mshnt m rn.i pfy T3-tnn* “I distinguish your destiny in the Place of birth in this name of me of Tatenen”⁶.

2- *šw hsb h3w rnpwt m rn.f* “Shu who reckons the lifetime and years by his name”⁷.

1) Esna, III, 377, 6.

2) Esna, III, 378, 14.

3) Esna, III, 377, 4.

4) Grumach-Shirun, I., Schai, LÄ, V, Cols.524-525.; Quaegebeur, J., Le dieu égyptien Shai dans la religion et l'onomastique, OLA, 2 (1975) pp.33-116.

5) See ; Daumas, F., Geburtshaus, LÄ, II, cols, 466-472.

6) Esna, III, 300, 3.

7) Esna, III, 389, 16.

- 3- *1 p3 nb š3w rr wnw t hr mshnt* “O, the lord of destiny and nurse of the creations which are in the place of birth”¹.
- 4- *nb mshnt k3 šw hry k3w* “lord of the Place of birth, ka, Shu lord of foods”².
- 5- *š3w rr m wdt.f mw t3w m wdt.f* “destiny and nurse by his order, water and breath are under his command”³.
- 6- *š3w rr r ht.f* “destiny and nurse by his authority”⁴.

CONCLUSION

The textual evidence from the Temple of Esna offers a remarkably detailed and symbolically rich account of the ancient Egyptian understanding of human reproduction, tracing the entire childbirth cycle, from natural sexual intercourse to the physical challenges of labor and delivery, including cervical dilation and placental expulsion. These texts convey a worldview in which conception occurs through the act of intercourse, with semen, described as a viscous substance, ejaculated from the male penis into the female vagina to fertilize her egg. Although explicit descriptions of sexual behavior are limited, several key theological and symbolic points can be discerned:

- 1- The god enhances the sexual potency of couples, as seen in the epithet “*lord of semen, who causes the husband to impregnate,*” emphasizing divine involvement in successful conception.
- 2- Divine control also extends to semen production itself. The god is described as “*who creates the semen in the bones,*” and “*who impregnated his semen to fill up his wife.*” These expressions metaphorically suggest that semen is divinely fashioned in the innermost parts of the body, particularly within the bones, symbolizing strength and fertility.
- 3- Beyond its reproductive function, sexual union is also portrayed as a source of joy. This is illustrated in the phrase “*the moment of joy,*” indicating that intercourse was not only for procreation but also for pleasure, offering a more holistic and human-centered understanding of sexuality.
- 4- In a more mythic register, Khnum is identified as the inseminating bull, described in vivid terms as “*the ejaculating bull who rises upon women, and no pregnancy is free from his act*” Here, Khnum takes on a

1) Esna, III, 367, 12.

2) Esna, III, 389, 16.

3) Esna, III, 394, 28.

4) Esna, III, 388, 9.

zoomorphic form associated with strength, fertility, and divine virility, acting as the direct agent of conception for all women.

These theological motifs reflect the people's deep dependence on Khnum for fertility. This need is expressed through a set of devotional verbs *dbḥ* "to plead or invoke", *nīs* "to request", and *dw3* "to adore" each accompanied by determinatives representing acts of prayer and supplication. Such language reveals the urgency and sincerity of these petitions. In turn, Khnum's response is swift, articulated through the verb *di* "to give", reinforcing his role as a compassionate and responsive deity.

The texts also emphasize Khnum's role as an artisan who creates children with flawless physical integrity. He is referred to as "*excellent of fingers*," highlighting his divine craftsmanship. Another passage proclaims "*who created the people as his desire*," underscoring the intentional, personalized nature of creation. Children are not random outcomes but the result of divine will and careful design. This is affirmed by phrases such as "*complete of limb*," and "*indeed, there is no limb deficiency*," both of which assert the physical perfection of the newborn, free from defects or deformities. In one particularly revealing phrase, "*who [makes] the son born in the likeness of the father*," the texts appear to allude to hereditary resemblance. This may symbolically echo the modern biological principle of genetic inheritance implying that offspring are crafted according to a divinely ordained pattern that ensures continuity of traits across generations.

Throughout the gestational period, Khnum continues his divine supervision by supplying the fetus with essential elements through the mother's bloodstream: breath of life (symbolic of oxygen), food, and water.

The verbs *śd* "to nourish" and "to make food" describe the provisioning process. The concept of fetal respiration is conveyed through expressions such as "*who causes life*", "*who creates life*", and "*who causes the breath to circulate*", while the phrase "*who makes the narrow throat [to breathe]*," reflects a symbolic recognition of respiratory function in the womb. Additionally, Khnum is portrayed as safeguarding the fetus against miscarriage, as shown in "*he ensures what is in her womb is healthy*." As the woman approaches childbirth, the texts describe two distinct stages of labor.

The first is identified by terms such as "*breaking the womb*" and "*opening the vagina*", which correspond to cervical dilation and the rupture of the amniotic sac. The second stage—active uterine contractions—is captured in the phrase

“who gives breath to the pregnant woman to loosen her burden,” indicating the physical and divine facilitation of delivery.

Finally, Khnum is also credited with determining the child’s destiny. He reckons the length of the newborn’s life—an act traditionally associated with the god Shai—thus assuming the role of cosmic timekeeper and fate-giver. Even after birth, Khnum continues to provide sustenance at the place of delivery, supplying the infant with water, nourishment, and breath. In this holistic model, Khnum is not only the sculptor of form but the guardian of life, time, and divine order.

In sum, the Esna texts reveal a complex synthesis of theology, biology, and ritual. They represent human reproduction as both a physical process and a sacred drama enacted under divine supervision. Khnum’s role as creator, nourisher, protector, and fate-giver affirms that every stage of life—from conception to birth to destiny—is deeply embedded within a spiritual framework. This worldview highlights the ancient Egyptians’ profound reverence for the mysteries of life and their enduring effort to interpret human existence through the lens of divine craftsmanship.

JOURNALS ABBREVIATIONS:

- **BIFAO** = *Bulletin d'Institute Français d'Archéologie Orientale*, (Le Caire).
- **KMT**= *K.M.T. A Modern Journ.of Anc. Egypt* (San Francisco, Calif.).
- **OLA** = *Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta. Dept. orient .* (Louvain)

REFERENCE ABBREVIATIONS:

- **Edfou** = Chassinat , É , *Le Temple d'Edfou* , vols. 1 – 14, Le Caire , 1897 – 1934 (vol. 1 avec Rochemonteix & 2nd edition by Cauville , S. , Le Caire , 1984 – 1987) .
- **Esna** = Sauneron, S.; *Le Temple d'Esna*, 8 BdE, IFAO, Le Caire, 1959-1969.
- **LÄ** = Helck, W., & Otto, E., (Eds.) *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, 7 Vols., Wiesbaden, 1975- 1986.
- **LGG**= Leitz, C., *Lexikon der Ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 8 vols., OLA 110 -116, 2002; OLA 129, 2003
- **URK**= *URK VIII: Sethe, K., Thebanische Tempelinschriften aus der griechisch –römischen Zeit*, Berlin, 1957..
- **Wb** = Erman, A., and Grapow, H., *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, 7 Vols., Berlin/Leipzig, 1926-1971.

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