

Egyptian Myth: Historical Background

Civilization developed in Egypt between 4000 and 3000 B.C. The years between 3500 and 2500 B.C. were a Golden Age in which Egypt flowered politically, economically, and artistically. In about 3000 B.C., Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt united, becoming the first great nation of the Western world. About that time, the Egyptians invented *hieroglyphics*, a kind of picture-writing, which permitted them to record their thoughts and thus to establish a written heritage. By 2500 B.C., Re, the sun god, was the principal god, and the belief in Osiris, god of life, death, and resurrection, was widespread and of major importance. The great pyramids also had been constructed by that period, and the *Pyramid Texts* recorded important religious ideas.

In the years between 3500 and 2500 B.C., the political, economic, and religious climate in Egypt was very different from that in Mesopotamia, the other great ancient civilization of the West. Separated from the rest of the ancient world by large expanses of desert and by the Mediterranean Sea, the Egyptians lived in cultural isolation for many hundreds of years.

Until about 1700 B.C., civilization in Egypt proceeded without serious disruptions or significant outside influence. Egypt was more politically stable than Mesopotamia, so the people could concentrate on improving the quality of their lives. The Egyptians also kept to themselves economically. While the cuneiform (wedge-shaped) script of the Mesopotamians was adopted by many of the communities with which they traded, Egypt's economic isolation meant that its system of writing was not adopted by other peoples.

The differences between the physical environments in which the Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations developed led to profound differences in religion. In Egypt, for example, the Nile River flooded and receded with a predictable regularity. In Mesopotamia, however, the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers would flood fiercely and unpredictably, widely changing their courses from one year to the next and destroying everything in their paths. While the Egyptians feared that the Nile would dry up permanently and wither their culture, they had less cause for concern than those in Mesopotamia, who suffered the floods of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Thus, the

Egyptians envisioned kindly gods who were inevitably more gentle than those of the Mesopotamians.

EGYPTIAN RELIGION

Religious ideas influenced Egyptian politics, science, art, and literature. Like most ancient peoples, the earliest Egyptians prayed to their gods for children, success in farming and hunting, and success in war. However, from earliest times, the Egyptians also believed in the divine aspect of human beings and in the idea that when a human being died he or she left life on earth and began life in another world. In addition, the ancient Egyptians believed that their king—the pharaoh—was god and man combined. He was both king and priest, both a human being and the son of the sun god.

The great pyramid tombs of the kings and queens of Egypt testify to the Egyptian belief in the afterlife. The tombs, surviving to this day, contained not only mummified corpses but everything the ruler would need in the next life. For example, the tomb of King Tutankhamen—a tomb that was fortunate enough to escape grave robbers—revealed an incredible wealth of material: sculptures, wall paintings, and writings describing daily life; furniture; household utensils; wigs; jewelry; games; and musical instruments. Many of the golden and jeweled burial objects reveal a beauty and intricate design unequalled among the civilizations of the ancient world—and unsurpassed even today.

The Nile River was the lifeblood of the ancient Egyptians. Its waters created lush, fertile farmlands. Vegetation flourished along its banks, supporting the lives of animals and human beings.

In contrast, the desert was the great environmental enemy of the ancient Egyptians. It represented death, for human beings could not survive in such a hot, dry wasteland. It sheltered wild, poisonous animals and many evil spirits and appeared to lie in wait. Every summer, the intense heat and desert winds would cause the Nile to become slow and narrow. Although their river's flood cycle was predictable, the fear of death from famine haunted the earliest Egyptians. The nearby desert reminded these people that their existence was fragile. So the annual flooding of the Nile brought great

relief and celebration. Water brought the rebirth of the land and provided sustenance and survival to human beings.

From earliest times, Osiris was the god of grain and of the Nile; like the Nile, he nourished all life. In his own and neighboring lands, he taught people what grains to cultivate, how to irrigate the land, and how to prevent unwanted flooding. Just as the Nile flooded, dried up, and flooded again, so Osiris lived, died, and was reborn. His death represented the death of vegetation when the Nile dried up. His regeneration represented the rebirth of vegetation when the Nile flooded in the spring.

Osiris was both god and man. The son of a god, Osiris was king of Egypt and the earth, and he caused both to be fertile and to prosper. After Osiris's death, his father, Re, who was the great god of the sun, made Osiris king of the gods and king of the Other World. Osiris's resurrection gave the ancient Egyptians the hope that they could share his destiny. Just as the gods had helped Osiris return to life, so they would help human beings who had led good lives gain life after death.

The worship of Osiris was particularly significant because it turned the ancient Egyptian people away from cannibalism. Once the Egyptians came to believe that the human being was part divine, they viewed living humans with more respect and the human corpse as sacred. Once they came to believe that the key to their immortality was to have lived a good life on earth, their relationships with one another improved immeasurably.

Osiris was a particularly appealing god because he had also been a man. Because he had suffered and died, he could empathize with the suffering and death of each human being. Because he was a god, he could help people in both this world and the next. Osiris began as the example of a man who, with the help of the gods, regained life after death. In time, he became the god who caused the deceased person to achieve resurrection.

Horus, Osiris's son, became Osiris's counterpart on the earth once Osiris became Lord of the Other World. In effect, Horus was a form of the resurrected Osiris. He inherited his father's kingdom and restored the order, justice, and prosperity that had existed under his father's reign. Horus was called the avenger of Osiris because he had performed the tasks involved in resurrecting his father's body. As Osiris's son, Horus

acted as an intermediary between Egyptians who were destined to die and Osiris, who could grant them immortality.

The spirit of the newly dead person would appear before Horus and tell the god all of the good deeds that he or she had performed in life, to show why that individual deserved resurrection. Osiris would then take the person's heart (symbolizing conscience) and place it on one side of a great balance scale; a feather (symbolizing law) would be placed on the opposite side. A jury would watch the balance of the scale, and the god Thoth—lord and maker of law—would record the result.

A person who had led a good life would have a heart lighter than the feather and would be granted new life in Osiris's kingdom, where he or she would live just as on earth. If the heart weighed more than the feather, however, the jackal that was sitting near the scale would eat the person's heart and mummy, and he or she would remain dead. Thus, Osiris was also the god of truth and judge of the dead. He conducted this trial, which rewarded the virtuous and punished evildoers.

Isis, Osiris's sister and wife, was the greatest goddess in Egypt. She was called the Great Goddess, the Mother Goddess, the lady of green crops, and the lady of abundance. She represented both the devoted and loyal wife and the loving and nurturing mother. As an earth goddess, Isis created every living thing and nourished and protected all that she had created. Like Osiris, Isis was a human being as well as a goddess. Her persistent search for the body of Osiris and her trials while she reared Horus in the papyrus swamps endeared her to the Egyptian people. After Isis was reunited with Osiris, she remained in the Other World with him, giving life and food to the dead.

Set, Osiris's brother and enemy, represented the evil in the universe: natural catastrophes—such as earthquakes and storms—darkness, destruction, and death. He was the god of the desert through which he wandered. Naturally, Set plotted against Osiris, Isis, and Horus because they represented the forces of good. Good triumphed over evil in that Set could not destroy Osiris and Horus, no matter how clever his attempts. Yet the gods did not destroy Set either. Evil would continue to exist in the world.

Between 2500 and 1500 B.C., Osiris gradually became as important as Re, the god of the sun. By 1850 B.C., the great religious festival of Osiris was held annually at Abydos, in Upper Egypt, where Isis had found Osiris's head. The focus of the Abydos festival was the dramatic presentation of the story of Osiris: his death and dismemberment (which was a common ancient burial custom), the finding of the pieces of his corpse, and his return to life. There Horus had resurrected Osiris's body, and there the door to the Other World was located. Therefore, the dead person was judged at Abydos and was either permitted to enter the Other World or condemned to eternal death. Wealthy Egyptians chose to be buried at Abydos.

APPEAL AND VALUE

It is clear from the earliest existing writings of the Egyptians that the story of Osiris, Isis, and Horus was very well known. Numerous references to parts of the story exist in ancient Egyptian sources, the *Pyramid Texts* and *The Book of the Dead*. However, either the ancient Egyptian writers saw no need to retell such a popular tale, or the narratives that once existed have long since disappeared. The only existing narrative of the entire story is that of the Greek Plutarch, who wrote *De Iside et Osiride* in about A.D. 70. Considering that the story may well have been four thousand years old by that time, it is amazing that Plutarch's Egyptian sources were so accurate.

The fact that this myth continued to live in a form so close to the original for many thousands of years testifies to the timelessness of the values it contains. A wife's devotion to her husband has appealed to countless generations of human beings in cultures around the world. Equally appealing and enduring is the nurturance that a mother gives her child. As in ancient Egypt and in Plutarch's day, these values are steadfast.

Moreover, throughout time, human beings have had to confront the forces of evil in the universe. Like Osiris's brother Set, evil can be conquered temporarily, but it cannot be destroyed permanently. History and our own experiences confirm this to be true. In every age, people have feared their mortality and wanted to avoid death. The myth of Osiris gave Egyptians hope for life after death. Hope for stronger communal bonds. And hope that we would be able to appeal to, and strengthen, the angels of our better nature.