

OSIRIS, ISIS, AND HORUS

Nut, goddess of the sky, was very beautiful and kind. She was married to Re, god of the sun and creator of all. But she also made love to her brother, Geb, god of the earth, and Thoth, lord of divine words. When Re discovered that Nut had secretly slept with Geb, his heart filled with rage and he cursed his wife. "You will not give birth to the child that is within you in any month of any year!" he exclaimed.

Nut's kind heart filled with sorrow at the thought that she would not become a mother. Tearfully she approached Thoth and said, "Re has cursed me so that I cannot give birth in any month of any year! Is there anything you can do to help me? Surely, one of the children within me is yours!"

Thoth replied, "Do not spoil your beauty with your tears. Instead, let good cheer chase your grief from your heart. Trust me to find a way to help you. I promise that before the next year begins, you will be called Mother of the Gods!"

Thoth's eyes sparkled as he left Nut and went off to find Moon. "Since you love to play games," he said to Moon, "I will agree to play as many games as you like if you will help me. Every time I win, I want you to give me a small part of your illumination. You will never miss the light, but it will be very useful to me. Do you agree?"

"I do not mind at all," Moon replied, "as long as you take very little light each time."

So it came to pass that Thoth and Moon played many games in the course of the next months. As they had agreed, whenever Thoth won a game he took from Moon a small part of her illumination. He then put this fragment of light aside and saved it.

Finally, Thoth had collected so many fragments of light that, when he put them together, they created five complete days. Thoth then added the five days he had won from Moon to the normal solar year of 360 days.

In this way, Thoth avoided the curse that Re had placed upon Nut. When the solar year came to an end, Nut gave birth to five children, one on each of the extra five days that Thoth had created. As Thoth had predicted, from that time on Nut was known as Mother of the Gods.

Re was the father of both Osiris, who was born on the first of these five days, and Horus the Elder, who was born on the second day. At Osiris's birth a voice called out from the heavens, "The good and great King Osiris, lord of all the earth, has been born!"

Geb was the father of both Set, who chose to be born on the third day, and Nephthys, who was born on the fifth day. Set showed his aggressive spirit from the moment of birth. While Nut's four other children were born at the proper time, Set chose the time and manner of his own birth. He cut an opening in his mother's side and forced his way into the world. In time, he married his sister Nephthys.

Thoth was the father of the Great Goddess Isis, lady of green crops, who was born on the fourth day. Thoth was the most intelligent of the gods. He was called lord of divine words because he possessed the magical power to compel whomever he chose to listen to and obey the words he uttered. Thoth taught his daughter something of this power. Isis and Osiris loved one another from the time they shared their mother's womb. In time, they became husband and wife.

Osiris became king of Upper and Lower Egypt and earned lasting fame for himself and his subjects. When he began his rule, his people were nomads. They lived a simple life, wandering from place to place and gathering the fruits of the earth. Osiris united these tribes and taught them to be a highly civilized people. First he made his subjects more industrious. He taught them the arts of farming so they could acquire more and better foods from the earth. Then Osiris gave his subjects a body of laws so they could live and work together in peace. Finally, he taught his subjects to revere and worship the gods. Osiris was the ideal king, and his rule created a Golden Age in Egypt.

When Osiris had improved the lives of his own people in these ways, he traveled to other parts of the world to convince the inhabitants to accept his ideas. He persuaded his listeners by entertaining them, setting his ideas to music and singing hymns and songs.

While Osiris was away from Egypt on these ventures, Set searched for an opportunity to take over the country. He was unable to succeed, for Isis and her father sensed his ambition and watched him carefully.

After Osiris returned, Set became even more determined to rule Egypt. One night, while Osiris was asleep, Set secretly measured the king's body. He then

commanded his craftspeople to construct a wooden box that could contain Osiris. He ordered the best artists in the land to decorate it so beautifully that it would be a work of art. Finally, he convinced seventy-two of Osiris's subjects to join him in planning a revolt.

Soon thereafter, Set entertained the conspirators and Osiris at an elaborate feast. At the end of the meal, he had his servants bring the beautiful wooden box into the dining hall. As he had anticipated, the box was admired by all of his guests.

Pretending to jest, Set announced, "Whoever among you would like to own this beautiful box should climb into it. I promise to give it as a gift to the person whose body is a proper fit. However, your body must fit exactly when you lie down. If you are so tall that your head or your legs overhang the box, or if you are so short that your body leaves a space at the head or foot of the box, then you will not qualify for the gift."

As Set had planned, his dinner companions eagerly gathered around the beautiful box, each awaiting his turn to try it. One after another, each guest climbed inside the box and attempted to lie down as Set had directed. But no one fit exactly. Finally Osiris took his turn, climbing into the box and lying down. The fit was exact.

Osiris had hardly settled himself inside the box when the conspirators quickly nailed the box lid in place, imprisoning the unsuspecting king. To make certain that Osiris would suffocate, the conspirators next poured melted lead over the box. Then they carried the box to the Nile River and dumped it into the water. The current carried the box to the mouth of the Nile, where it became lodged in the papyrus swamps in the eastern part of the delta.

The people who lived near the city of Chemmis were the first to hear about the murder of Osiris, and they spread word of Set's terrible deed. When Isis heard about Osiris's death, her heart overflowed with grief. She immediately cut off one of her locks as a sign of mourning and put on the clothing worn by a woman mourning the death of a loved one. Then she set off in search of the box.

As the Great Goddess wandered tirelessly from place to place throughout Egypt, her mournful cries interrupted farmers laboring in their fields, craftspeople working in their shops, and even those who slept soundly at night. Isis walked from town to town, questioning everyone she met. Finally, she found a group of children who had watched

the box drift into the papyrus swamps at the mouth of the Nile, and they told her the direction it had gone.

Isis eventually learned that the box finally had become lodged among the branches of a tamarisk bush in the papyrus swamps near Byblos. This bush had grown into a very large tree, and the box had been completely enclosed within the tree's trunk.

The king of the country, Melcarthus, was unaware of the box. When he heard of this large tree, he had his servants chop it down and bring it to his palace. Trees of great size were rare in his country, and he had a specific use for its huge trunk. He placed it in the center of his dining hall to help support the roof of his palace. The use of this tree trunk as a column was talked of far and wide.

In time, Isis heard about the fate of the large tamarisk tree. She traveled to the town near King Melcarthus's palace and seated herself beside the fountain where women came to draw water for their households. The goddess sat there in silence until Queen Astarte's handmaidens arrived for water. Then she spoke with them in a very kind, friendly fashion. She braided their hair for them and perfumed them with the aroma of her own body.

The handmaidens returned to their queen with the exciting news of the strange woman they had met by the fountain. Queen Astarte immediately announced to her servants, "I want to meet this marvelous stranger who can transfer her own perfume to the hair and skin of other people! Go to the town fountain quickly, before she leaves. Find her, and bring her to the palace at once!"

So it came to pass that Isis entered King Melcarthus's palace and met the queen. Queen Astarte was so delighted with Isis that, before long, she asked the Mother Goddess to become the nurse of one of her sons. In time, Isis told the queen her story and asked for permission to cut open the pillar that supported the roof of the palace. With the queen's permission, she did so and removed the box without harming the ceiling.

Once Isis was alone, she fell upon the box with loud cries of mourning. Then she took leave of the royal family and returned to Egypt, taking the sealed box with her.

Upon reaching a remote place in the desert, Isis stopped and opened the box. The sight of her beloved husband, lying still and lifeless, was more than her heart could

bear. The Great Goddess placed her face against the face of Osiris, embraced his body, and wept with grief. Then she placed the wings of a bird upon her arms and hovered over Osiris, flapping her wings in order to create air for him to breathe.

Finally, using knowledge that her father, Thoth, had taught her, she skillfully uttered the magical words of power in a way that she knew would bring temporary life to Osiris. Osiris returned to life! With delight, Isis embraced her great love and enjoyed him for as long as she could. Then, when Osiris once again lay lifeless and still, Isis replaced his body in the box. She carefully hid the box in a remote, isolated place where it would be safe from harm.

In time, Isis gave birth to Osiris's son, whom she named Horus. As the Mother Goddess gazed upon her newborn child, her heart overflowed with joy. She hoped that one day Horus would avenge his father's death and would inherit his kingdom.

Shortly thereafter Thoth, lord of divine words, visited his daughter. "Listen to my counsel, Isis, and obey me," he said. "Those who follow the advice of another live and prosper. You must now escape from the eye of Set, and I will help you. If you will hide your child from Set until he is grown, he will become doubly strong. Then he surely will avenge the death of his father and will sit upon his father's throne.

"However," Thoth continued, "until that time comes, Horus will never be far from danger. Therefore, I will teach you the words of power that will protect Horus from death on earth, in the world above, and in the Other World."

Isis followed her father's advice. That evening, she left the house with Horus and seven scorpion-helpers. The Mother Goddess said to them, "My child and I are all alone in the world. Because of the death of my husband, my sorrow surpasses the grief of anyone in Egypt. So turn your faces to the ground and take me to a hidden place where I may rear my child in safety and in peace."

With three of the scorpions leading the way, Isis brought Horus to an island in the papyrus swamps of the Nile delta. There she secretly nursed and reared her child. Isis would often hide Horus among the papyrus plants while she went into a nearby city to acquire food for herself and her child.

"Have no fear, dear Horus, my glorious son," she would croon. "Your grandfather and I will keep every evil thing from you, for you are the father of all that is yet to be

created. You will be in no danger, either on land or in the water. The sting of the most poisonous snake will not kill you, nor will the strongest lion be able to crush you. For you are the son of Osiris and Isis, and in time you will become lord of all the earth as your father was before you!"

Yet one day when Isis returned from the city, she found Horus lying lifeless and still with the mark of a scorpion bite upon him. She immediately recognized the treachery of Set. Isis leaned over the body of her baby son and carefully began to chant the magical words that Thoth had taught her. As she intoned the words, the color gradually returned to Horus's face, and his limbs began to stir. By the time Isis finished, Horus was smiling up at his mother. The infant had been restored to life. He grew up to be a healthy young man, skilled in the arts of medicine that his mother taught him.

It came to pass that Set was hunting in the desert by moonlight one night when he accidentally came upon the box that Isis had hidden. He recognized it instantly and opened it at once. As he gazed upon the corpse of his rival, Set's heart filled with implacable hatred and rage. In a mad fury, the evil god tore the corpse of Osiris into fourteen pieces. Then Set traveled throughout the kingdom of Egypt, scattering the pieces of Osiris wherever his whim led him.

Not long thereafter, Isis heard about Set's latest attack upon Osiris. Her sister Nephthys, although married to Set, was always loyal to Isis. Therefore, Nephthys accompanied Isis and Horus on the search for Osiris. They sailed up and down the Nile in a papyrus boat, and wandered throughout the country until they had located the various fragments of Osiris's body. Wherever they found a piece, Isis collected it and buried in its place a small figurine of Osiris. Isis then placed a tomb over each figurine. She hoped that this would mislead Set and give the time that she and Nephthys needed to find and heal Osiris.

When Isis found Osiris's head at Abydos, she possessed all fourteen pieces of his body. With Nephthys to help her, Isis set to work at once. First, they arranged Osiris's head, torso, limbs, heart, and organs as they would be in life. Next, the goddesses connected the various parts with wax. Then, they prepared a long piece of linen cloth by smearing sweet-smelling ointments upon it and sprinkling it with spices

that would preserve Osiris's body from decay. Finally, they wrapped Osiris's body in the treated linen cloth and buried it.

Once Osiris was properly buried, Horus prepared to do his part to return his father to life. He led Isis and Nephthys to the world of the dead, where they found Osiris. Then the two goddesses pronounced the magical words of power that would bring Osiris new life. Gradually, the dead god came back to life; he began to breathe, his eyelids fluttered, and he moved his limbs.

Horus then removed his eternal eye, placed it in his father's mouth, and directed him to swallow it. Osiris immediately became much stronger and regained the ability to see, speak, and walk. With the help of Re, Horus set up a ladder so tall that it reached from the Other World up to the world of the gods above the earth. Osiris slowly climbed up to join the gods, with Isis leading the way and Nephthys behind him. The gods welcomed Osiris warmly, for they were delighted to have him living among them once again.

Once Osiris had rejoined the gods, Re made him their king and king of the Other World. Horus then became king of Upper and Lower Egypt in his father's place.

Now that Horus had taken his place among the gods, Osiris decided that the time had come to deal with Set. He tested Horus's readiness to avenge his father's murder.

"What is the most glorious deed a man can perform?" Osiris asked his son.

Horus replied, "To take revenge upon one who has injured his father or mother."

"What animal is most useful to a warrior?" his father asked.

"A horse," said Horus.

"Why not a lion?" his father asked in surprise.

Horus replied, "A lion is more powerful, but a horse is much quicker. Therefore, a horse can help a warrior capture a fleeing enemy better than a lion can."

Osiris was pleased to hear his son's responses, for they showed that he was mature enough to fight Set. Osiris then taught Horus how to use weapons of war and encouraged his son to take vengeance upon Set.

Horus and Set did fight each other, first in the form of two men and then in the form of two bears. The battle was so fierce that it lasted for three days and three nights.

Osiris, Isis, and Thoth watched its progress. Joy flooded their hearts when Horus finally won and took Set prisoner.

But once Horus had conquered Set, Isis suddenly felt great pity for him. In her sympathy for her fallen enemy, Isis used her father's magical power with words. "Drop your weapons, Horus!" she cried.

Horus found himself powerless to resist. In spite of his own intentions, his weapons fell to the ground. Set was free!

Horus's heart filled with sudden rage and hatred toward his mother. "How can you do this to me, Mother?" he cried. "How can you let her do it, Grandfather?"

Father, did you train me to win, only to see me lose in my moment of victory? Set has been our enemy for so long! He is evil, and his ways are cruel beyond imagining!"

No one replied to Horus's accusations. He watched, helpless, as Set ran away. In a fury, Horus then tore after Isis like a panther chasing its prey. When he caught her, he fought as fiercely as he had fought with Set. Finally, Horus cut off her head.

Thoth immediately used his magical words of power to change his daughter's head into the head of a cow, and he quickly attached it to her body. Horus then knew that Set would have to remain free, at least for the time being. He would conquer him, but in some other way.

Set was still determined to become king of Upper and Lower Egypt. He next tried to acquire the throne by accusing Horus of being an illegitimate child of Isis and, therefore, not the legal heir to the kingdom. However, when the gods met in assembly to discuss the matter, Thoth convinced them that Horus was indeed the legitimate child of Isis and Osiris. The lord of divine words brought forth a great balance scale and weighed the testimony of Set on one scale and Osiris's defense on the other. When the balance registered in favor of Osiris, he, Isis, and Horus were recognized as speakers of truth, while Set was unmasked as a liar. As a result, Osiris became judge of the dead in the Hall of Judgment, weighing their testimony on the great balance scale just as Thoth had weighed his.

But Set did not give up. Twice more he challenged Horus, and twice more he lost in combat. At last he accepted Horus's right to rule the kingdom of Osiris.

So it came to pass that the assembly of gods formally acclaimed Horus to be lord of all the earth as his father had been before him. Horus once again established order and justice, and with his reign prosperity returned.

Since he had been born from the seed of his dead father, Horus was chosen to be the intermediary between the living and the dead. Men and women would pray to him while they were still alive, asking him to notice their good lives and plead with Osiris for their resurrection after death.

Once Horus had inherited his father's kingdom, Isis remained with Osiris in the Other World and always accompanied him. She was satisfied and happy. Her husband had returned to life and love. Her son had avenged his father. The gods had proclaimed the truth of their words against Set's accusations. The kingdom of Upper and Lower Egypt was in good hands, and all was well.