

MYTHS

Isis and Osiris

Egypt

The ancient Egyptian pantheon was envisioned as an elaborate hierarchy. Most important among the gods was Ra the god of the sun, later named Amen-Ra. The other important gods representing the forces of nature were: Khnemu, the spirit of the life-giving Nile; Nut, the sky god and in some versions the mother of Ra; Geb, the earth god; Isis, the principle of life and reproduction; and her husband Osiris, god of the dead and the rebirth of new life (crops).

For the full introduction to this story and for other stories, see *The Allyn & Bacon Anthology of Traditional Literature* edited by Judith V. Lechner. Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003

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While Ra yet reigned upon earth as the first Pharaoh of Egypt, Thoth, the god of wisdom and magic whom he had created at the beginning of the world, uttered a prophecy.

“If Nut, the Lady of the Heavens, bears a son, he will one day rule in Egypt.”

“Nut shall never bear a son, nor any children at all!” said Ra angrily. “No child of Nut shall take my throne from me! Lo, now I lay this curse upon her: she shall give birth to no child on any day in any year—no, nor in the nighttime either. I have spoken, and what I have decreed cannot be altered.”

Nut was heartbroken at this. Yet Thoth had said that her son should rule in Egypt, and he was the wisest of all the gods. So she went to Thoth, who loved her, and begged for his aid.

“Grant me your love, and I will show you how your wish may be fulfilled—and yet Ra’s curse remain unbroken,” said Thoth.

Nut consented readily to this, and Thoth soon devised a clever scheme. He visited Khonsu the Moon-god and challenged him to a game of checkers. Khonsu was a great gambler, and soon the stakes were high indeed—but highest of all on the Moon’s side, for he was wagering his own light. And he had no chance of beating clever Thoth, who went on playing—and winning—until he had won enough of the Moon’s light from Khonsu to make five extra days. These days he fitted in between the end of the old year and the beginning of the new. Before this there had only been three hundred and sixty days in each year: that number remained the same, but the five days between each year set the calendar right. Moreover, since that great game of checkers the Moon has not had enough light to shine at the full throughout each month, but dwindles down into darkness and then comes slowly to his full glory again.

Here, now, were five days that were not any days in any year—and on these days Nut's five children were born: Osiris upon the first day, Harmachis upon the second day, Seth upon the third, Isis on the fourth and Nephthys on the fifth.

When Osiris was born there were many signs and wonders. A great voice from heaven was heard crying, "The Lord of All comes forth into the light!" A woman drawing water at the well was suddenly seized with the spirit of prophecy and cried aloud, "Osiris the King is born." And in Thebes a certain man called Pamyles heard a voice coming from the temple of Ra which bade him proclaim the birth of Egypt's greatest king, Osiris the savior of mankind.

By the advice of Thoth, Nut entrusted the baby Osiris to Pamyles to bring up: but Thoth himself instructed both Osiris and Isis in all the wisdom of the gods and in the hidden lore of which he was the master.

Isis learned so quickly, and also persuaded Khonsu to teach her all the mysteries of the Moon, that she became the greatest magician that Egypt has even known.

When they were grown up, Isis and Osiris married, and Nephthys married Seth; and following their example, the human Pharaohs of Egypt ever afterward married their own sisters. Though most of them had many other wives as well, the sister-bride was always the queen.

Isis was not yet Queen, however, nor Osiris King. For Ra still ruled on earth as the Pharaoh of Egypt, though in his human form he grew older and older, his head shook with the palsy of extreme old age, and he dribbled at the mouth.

Wise Isis pondered in her heart how she might end the reign of Ra upon earth so that Osiris could become King. The wisdom which Thoth had taught her told her that only by learning Ra's hidden name could she gain power over him; the witchcraft of the Moon which Khonsu had shown her suggested a dark scheme to her heart.

All living things were made by Ra, and without him no new creatures could be created. Yet Isis made the first cobra—the "Uraeus" which became the sacred serpent of Egypt. As Ra passed on his way each morning to visit the Upper and the Lower Lands of Egypt, he dribbled at the mouth and his spittle fell in the dust by the roadside. Isis gathered the moist clay so made and fashioned it into the likeness of a hooded snake; she set in it the fiery poison of midnight magic, and she hid it in the grass beside the way which Ra was accustomed to take.

Next day as he stepped out to view his kingdom the glorious light of Ra's eye fell upon the cobra that Isis had fashioned and gave it life. The cobra reared its head out of the grass, bit Ra in the heel, and slipped away out of sight.

For a little while Ra was speechless with surprise. Then, as pain shot through him like fire, he uttered a great cry which rang through all the land of Egypt.

At once all the gods and goddesses came hastening to him, Isis among them, and bowed down before him and asked, "What is it that troubles you, maker of gods and men?"

"Something has wounded me!" cried Ra. "Yet my heart does not know it, my eyes have not seen it, my hand did not make it, I do not recognize it among the things I have made—I who made all things. Therefore let the children of the gods be brought before me, those who know magic spells, those whose wisdom reaches to heaven, for it may be that one of them can help me."

So, one by one, the gods and their children came before Ra. But none of them could help him, and ever the pain of the cobra's bite grew fiercer and fiercer.

At last it was the turn of Isis. She knelt humbly before Ra and said, "What is it, divine father, that has stabbed you? Is it some snake from among those you made that has lifted up its head against you? If so, I shall cast it down with powerful magic: I shall make it hide its head

from the sight of your divine eyes.”

“Then said Ra, “As I went on my way, as I walked between the Two Lands of Egypt to look upon all that I have made, I was bitten by a snake that I did not see—by a serpent that I did not make—with a poison that I do not know. It is not fire, neither is it water: yet one moment I am colder than water, and the next moment I am hotter than fire. Now my body is sweating, and now it is shivering. My eyes are clouded and I cannot see; my head burns as with the fierce beams of midsummer.”

Isis bowed her head before Ra and spoke softly. “Divine father, I can cure this grievous poison. Tell me your Secret Name—for you can only be cured if that Name is mingled with my spells.”

Then Ra spoke in turn the many names by which he was worshiped—the names that told of all he had made—the heavens and the earth, the sea and the mysteries of the two horizons, darkness and light, the great river Nile, all living creatures and all else besides.

“Yes,” he ended, “I am Khepera in the dawning, I am Ra at noon, I am Tum when the shadows of evening fall over the earth.”

But the poison was not checked in its course as Isis spoke one name after another, and she said again, “Divine father, your Secret Name is not among those you have told me. Tell me that Name and the poison will come forth—he whose Name of Power is spoken in my charm shall live.”

The poison burned fiercer yet: it was more powerful than the hottest flame of fire, and Ra cried out, “Swear first that none shall ever know my Secret Name save only Horus, the son you will bear to Osiris—Horus who shall rule Egypt when Osiris has passed westward to the Land of the Dead.”

Isis swore the oath, and the Secret Name passed from Ra’s heart into hers: his *Ka* or double whispering to her *Ka*. The Name she learned was not “Amen,” nor has it ever been known: but the name “Amen” seems to have been as it were, the body of that Name of which the hidden part was the *Ka*—for it was as Amen-Ra that the greatest of gods came to be worshiped for thousands of years afterwards in ancient Egypt.

Once she knew the Secret Name, Isis mingled the knowledge with her spell and chanted, “Flow forth, poison of the cobra! Flow forth from Amen-Ra! Come from the burning god at my spell—for he has shown me his Hidden Name: Ra is living and the poison is dead, through the spells of Isis the Mistress of the Gods—she who alone knows the Amen-Ra by his own Name.”

Then the pain of the serpent’s poison faded away and Ra felt it no more. But nevertheless he ceased to reign as a king upon earth and took his place in the heavens where, day by day, he crossed over from the east to the west in the likeness of the Sun itself, and night by night he passed under the earth through the twelve regions called the Duat which the spirits of the dead also must pass if they would win to Ra’s eternal kingdom.

As soon as Ra had taken his place in the heavens, Osiris became Pharaoh of Egypt with Isis as his Queen. They built the great city of Thebes as their capital and ruled well and wisely.

When Osiris came to the throne the Egyptians were cannibals and lived more like wild animals than human beings. All this he and Isis altered very soon, teaching mankind to sow and reap both wheat and barley to make bread; how to grow various fruits such as the date and the grape for food and wine; how to make laws and live in peace under them; and how to do due honor to the gods and build temples for them—the first and greatest being that of Amen-Ra at Thebes.

As soon as the land of the Delta and Upper Egypt as far as Thebes had learned all the arts

of peace and civilization, Osiris left Isis to rule over it and set out to teach the men and women in more distant parts. He took no army with him, but only a band of priests and musicians, and even the wildest tribes harkened to his kindly words and were won over by the sweet strains of music.

Not all men, even in Egypt, followed Osiris, however. There was evil awake in the world to strive against good—and in Egypt that evil found its leader in Seth, the younger brother of Osiris and Isis.

Seth would have rebelled and seized the throne while Osiris was away from Egypt on his mission. But Isis kept such good watch that he knew he would have no success. So he pretended to be a faithful subject and loving brother of the Pharaoh and his Queen. But he gathered secretly to him seventy-two wicked men, all of whom were ready to join in a conspiracy against Osiris, and to them he added Aso the Queen of Ethiopia who was on a visit to the court of Thebes.

As soon as Osiris returned, Seth invited him to a great feast which he had prepared in honor of his brother.

Suspecting nothing, Osiris came unattended and was welcomed by Seth and his seventy-two companions.

It was a very splendid feast during which each of the guests vied with the others to do honor to Osiris. At last, as it was drawing to a close, Seth said, “We have all paid our tributes of praise to my beloved brother, the good god Pharaoh Osiris. Now, to end the feast, I have a gift for one of my guests—but this time I do not know who it will be!”

Seth clapped his hands and his servants brought into the hall a most beautiful chest made of cedar wood from Lebanon and ebony from Ethiopia, inlaid with gold and silver, with ivory and lapis lazuli, and with precious stones.

When it was placed in the midst of the guests, the servants retired, the doors of the hall were shut, and Seth spoke again.

“Here is my gift to one of my guests. It shall be his who fits most perfectly into the chest!”

All were admiring its beauty with cries of delight; and now they began one by one to see how well each of them fitted into it. But some were too tall and some were too short, some to fast and others too thin.

“Let me try,” said Osiris at last. He stepped into the chest and lay down—and it fitted him perfectly, for Seth had secretly obtained the exact measurements of his brother’s body.

“It is mine!” cried Osiris gaily. “See, it fits me like the skin I was born in!”

“It is certainly yours,” answered Seth. “And it is fit to be the coffin you shall die in!”

So saying he slammed down the lid, and with feverish haste he and his evil companions nailed it up tightly, filled every crack with molten lead, and cast it secretly into the Nile.

It was the time of the Inundation, and the swift waters hurried the chest out through the Delta and into the sea near the city of Tanis. Away it went over the waves until it came at last to the city of Byblos in Syria, the oldest city in the world. There a great wave lifted it over the shingle and cast it into the heart of a young tamarisk tree growing near the shore. Speedily the tamarisk clasped it with its branches and grew around it until the chest was completely hidden in its trunk.

Of all trees this tamarisk was the fairest, with lovely blossoms and sweetly scented wood. Very soon it became famous throughout Syria—more famous even than the great cedars on Mount Lebanon at the foot of which stood the city of Byblos. Presently the fame of the tree

brought Malcander the King of that land to see it, with his wife Queen Astarte' ; and it seemed to them so wonderful that Malcander had it cut down and a pillar fashioned out of its trunk which he set up in the place of honor in his palace. And all men marveled at the beauty of the wood and its fragrance, though none knew that it held the body of a god.

Meanwhile Isis learned what had happened, and set out at once in search of the body of Osiris. For until the proper funeral rites were performed his spirit could not be free to enter the Duat, the Land of the Dead.

But first of all she went to the island of Chemmis in one of the streams of the Nile Delta; and there, tended by Buto the kindly goddess of Lower Egypt, her son Horus was born.

When she could travel, Isis set out once more in search of the body of her husband. But she left Horus in the care of Buto, and as a further safeguard against Seth she loosened the Island of Chemmis from its foundations and set it afloat—sometimes on the Nile, sometimes on the sea itself—so that Seth might not find it.

Then she cut her hair in token of mourning and went hither and thither on her search throughout Egypt. At first she had no success; but presently she found a group of children who had seen the beautifully decorated chest floating down the Nile near Tanis and heading for the Great Green Sea.

Asking the children at their games along the seashore, Isis followed the chest until she came at last to Byblos. And only then was her magic able to show her where the body of Osiris was.

Isis sat by the shore at Byblos in the likeness of an old woman. When Queen Astarte's serving-maids came down to the sea to wash their clothes and bathe in the waves, Isis spoke kindly to them and taught them how to braid their hair—for no one before this had ever thought to twist their hair into braids and twine it on their heads with flowers and leaves as ornaments.

When they returned to the palace Astarte' asked her maids where they had learned this new art, and they told her of the dignified old woman who sat on a rock beside the sea.

Full of curiosity, Astarte' bade them bring her to the palace. When Isis came, Astarte' realized that here was a stranger of no ordinary kind, though she thought her no more than a woman filled with the wisdom for which Egypt was already famous. So she welcomed her, and begged her to dwell in the palace and tend her little son the Prince Diktys—a delicate baby who seemed likely to die.

Isis nursed Diktys so well that day by day he grew and became stronger in a way that seemed more than natural. Queen Astarte' was curious, the more so because her maids told her that each night the strange nurse would turn them out of the room and lock the door. Then they would hear her heap up the fire; and after that there was a long silence broken only by a sound like the twittering of a swallow.

So Astarte' hid herself in the room one night. Presently she saw Isis turn out the serving maids, bar the door and heap up the fire. When the fire was burning fiercely, Isis made a glowing red space between the logs, took the baby Diktys and placed him in it. And immediately she herself turned into a swallow and flew around and around the pillar which held the body of Osiris, twittering mournfully.

With a scream Astarte' rushed forward and snatched Diktys out of the fire—to find that he was quite unharmed by it, and indeed began to cry indignantly at being plucked so suddenly from such a warm and comfortable bed.

Full of fear, Astarte' turned to flee, clutching her child in her arms. But instead she sank to the floor and hid her eyes: for Isis stood before her, tall and beautiful and quite obviously a

goddess.

“Foolish woman!” cried Isis. “Had you but left your son to my care I would have burned away all that was human in him and made him one of the gods, even as I am. But now he will die when old age comes to him, as all men do—if indeed death does not come to him sooner.”

Again and again King Malcander and Queen Astarte knelt before Isis, begging her to forgive them and offering all the riches of Byblos if she would continue to tend their son.

“That I cannot do,” said Isis. “But I will leave my blessing on you if you will give me what yonder pillar contains.”

Then the King sent for his workmen, and the pillar was taken down and split open. Inside rested the coffin of Osiris; and when this had been lifted out Isis poured perfume on the pillar, and said, “Place this in your most sacred temple, and it will bring pilgrims to Byblos for many ages. For this wood has held the body of a god.”

So the people of Byblos built a temple in which they set the wooden pillar; and it became known as the Temple of Baalat Gebal, “The Lady of Byblos,” the remains of which may be seen to this day.

But Isis set the coffin on a boat and sailed away from Byblos. When she was passing the mouth of the river Phaedros, the current flowed so strongly that it seemed about to drive the ship out to sea—so Isis in a moment of anger cast a spell upon the river and dried up the water.

When the ship was sailing gently over the sea once more in the direction of Egypt, Isis bade all leave her by herself, went into the cabin and opened the coffin. But the Prince of Byblos who commanded her escort, Maneros, was so filled with curiosity that he hid in the cabin and peeped over her shoulder at what was in the coffin. Isis felt his presence and turning gave him one glance—one awful look of anger—and he fell dead to the floor.

When the ship reached Egypt, Isis guided it to where the floating island of Chemmis was waiting for her and bade the sailors set the coffin on its shore. As soon as this was done and she stood beside it, she bade the sailors row home to Byblos as fast as they could, and she sent a wind to help them on their way.

But she herself floated up the Nile on the island, where Buto was still guarding the infant Horus, and hid it among the reeds of the Delta until she could perform the funeral rites of Osiris.

However, her quest was by no means at an end. For on the very next night Seth and his followers came hunting through the darkness and the moonlight—for Seth best loved the hours of darkness when evil things wander the earth.

As ill luck would have it, he came to the island of Chemmis that seemed now to be part of the firm earth. Isis hid with Horus deep down among the reeds and escaped his notice. But he saw the chest which had become the coffin of Osiris, and at once he recognized it.

With a great howl of rage and hate he snatched the body of his murdered brother out of the chest, tore it into fourteen pieces, and scattered them far and wide over the land of Egypt.

“It seems hard to destroy the body of a god!” he cried. “Yet now I have destroyed Osiris and kept his spirit out of the Duat!”

He went on his way laughing. But Isis crept out of her hiding place, entrusted Horus once more to Buto, and set out again in search of the pieces of her husband’s body.

As she rowed hither and thither on the Nile in her boat made of papyrus, the very crocodiles took pity on her and let her pass—and ever since anyone sailing on the Nile in a papyrus boat has been safe from the crocodiles, who think that it is still Isis searching for the last piece of the body of Osiris.

For she found all but one piece, which had fallen into the Nile and been eaten by certain

fishes who were accursed for ever after. But the other pieces she found with the help of Anubis, the son of Seth and Nephthys, who took the same of a wild dog in order to help her the better in her search.

Fearing lest Seth should desecrate even the tomb of Osiris, Isis buried him in the thirteen different places at which she found the pieces of his body, making a complete body by her magic in each place so that a great funeral might be performed. And for this reason thirteen cities of Egypt all boasted that they held the burial place of Osiris.

Yet some say that in her fear of Seth, Isis deceived even the high priests and people of the thirteen cities by burying the whole body of Osiris (adding the one missing piece by magic) on the holy island of Philae beyond the First Cataract above Elephantin'. And they prove this by the fact that in later years the most sacred oath an Egyptian could swear was "By him who sleeps at Philae!"

Whatever his earthly burial, once it was accomplished, the spirit of Osiris passed into the Duat. There he became the King of the Dead, welcoming all those whom the Judges of the Dead found worthy to enter his kingdom, and adding them to his army of the blessed with whom he would return to reign on earth after the last great battle with Seth.