



The Mythology of Egypt

Egyptian mythology is dominated by the theme of a sacred kingship and the related theme of death and the afterlife, often in relation to the role of the Nile in a cyclical process by which the land dies and is reborn. Underlying these themes is a tension between light and darkness—between the supreme solar deity, usually Re (Ra), and the god of earth, fertility, and the underworld, Osiris. The Egyptians, as revealed in their myths, their rituals, their funerary writings, and their symbolic art and architecture, were preoccupied—more philosophically than the Mesopotamians, for instance—with questions of the nature of the universe and the relation of humans to the unknown. Their deities and their myths, highly symbolic vehicles for complex theologies, varied considerably in particulars according to the era and the cult center. But different centers assimilated each other's versions of deities and generally participated in what was a constant revisiting and revision of myths from very ancient times. The various local traditions had in common the central themes mentioned above and the highly philosophical and symbolic treatment of them.

As in the case of other prehistoric cultures in the Middle East and elsewhere, the predynastic mythology of Egypt can only be surmised by way of archeological remains. It is likely, as indicated in burial sites, where bodies are buried in a fetal position with the head south and facing west, that there was a belief in the afterlife. Leonard Lesko

suggests the possibility of a sun god cult involving death and the setting sun or an early stage of the Osiris-type cult associated with a western necropolis (Lesko, "Egyptian Religion," 39). R. T. Rundle Clark and others assume the existence of a mother goddess cult such as the one we find indicated in Çatal Hüyük and other ancient sites (Clark, 28). This position is supported by the persistence among the Egyptian people over the centuries of the goddess cult as represented by Hathor, Neith, Maat, Ejo, and Isis, among others, at various ancient cult sites along the Nile.

We are on much surer ground with Egyptian mythology when we come to the Early Dynastic period—specifically the First and Second Dynasties, beginning perhaps as early as 3100 B.C.E. During these dynastic periods, hieroglyphic writing was developed, and Upper and Lower Egypt were unified with a capital at Memphis under the kingship of Narmer or Aha, known in combination as Menes. This was the first great nation-state of history, and its kingship seems already to have been justified by a sacred association of the king with the god Horus, represented by the emblematic falcon on one side of the slate palette—the so-called Narmer Palette—of the first monarch and the bull of kingly power on the other (Lesko, "Egyptian Religion," 39; Campbell, *Oriental*, 51ff.). The fact that kings of the Second Dynasty associated themselves in their titles with Horus and Seth and then in the south simply with Seth indicates a possible early development of the Osiris cult with its antithesis between Horus and Seth, a mythological antithesis that spoke to the historical split at the end of the Second Dynasty between the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt.

The Pantheons

It is during the Old Kingdom (Third through Sixth Dynasties, c. 2700–2190) that an Egyptian pantheon begins to take form in the context of developed theologies. Over the centuries theologies and their particular versions of the pantheon would develop at several major cult centers. The generally dominant theology was that formulated by the priests at Heliopolis, north of present-day Cairo. But important interpretations came from Memphis, also in the Cairo

area, from Herakleopolis and Hermopolis and, briefly, Akhetaton (Amarna) further south, as well as from the major sites in deep Upper Egypt: Thebes (modern Luxor and Karnak), Abydos, Dendera, Esna, and Edfu.

The High God

The high god of Egypt was a creator god, usually associated with the sun. In Memphis, the first capital, he probably began as the falcon-headed sky and sun god Horus, the source of earthly kingship. Soon, however, he emerged in the highly complex Memphite theology as Ptah, the god of the primeval mound (Tatenen), who created by thinking things "in his heart" and then naming them with speech. His wife was the lioness goddess Sekhmet. Ptah's human form was that of a man in a cloak holding a scepter. Later he was identified with the pantheon of Khemenu, or Hermopolis. The Hermopolitan pantheon, known as the Ogdoad or "the eight," was made up of four couples representing primordial chaotic forces. Amun (Amon) and Amaunet were forces of the invisible, Huh (Heh) and Hauhet (Hehet) were forces of infinity, Kuk (Kek) and Kauhet (Keket) were forces of darkness, and Nun and Naunet were the primal waters. In Memphis, Ptah was equated for a time with Nun and Naunet, out of whom was said to have come the creator god Atum (Lesko, "Ptah").

In the theology of Heliopolis, Atum was "the whole one," the creator who contained male and female. He was the head and founder of the Ennead, "the nine." Atum produced Shu and Tefnut (air and moisture), the progenitors of Geb and Nut (earth and sky), in turn the parents of Osiris and Seth and their sister wives Isis and Nephthys. Horus as the son of Osiris and Isis was an added, tenth member of the Ennead.

During the Old Kingdom Fifth Dynasty, Atum was displaced by or assimilated with the ancient sun god Re (Pre, Ra), the high god now becoming simply Re or Atum-Re or Re-Atum. As the center of the sun cult in later times, Re was Re-Harakhte (meaning "Re-Horus of the Great Horizon"), the personification of the noonday sun, and was usually depicted as a human with the head of a hawk surmounted by a sun disk. The rising sun was Re as Khepri, the scarab. The

evening sun was Re-Atum. Re assimilated the sacred king cult of Horus as indicated by Horus's title in the so-called Pyramid Texts of the Fifth Dynasty as "son of Re." Horus's mother in this configuration was Re's consort, the great cow goddess Hathor, a personification of the Ennead itself (Lesko, "Atum"; Lesko, "Egyptian Religion," 39-40; Lesko, "Re"). The Pyramid Texts reveal a further accommodation of the solar and sacred kingship cults by describing the king as a god who guards Re in his daily trip across the sky in his solar bark.

During the Middle Kingdom (2050-1756 B.C.E.) under the new rulers based in Thebes, an assimilation of gods took place that included the still-powerful Re. The Theban war god Montu merged with Amun, the Hermopolitan primal force of the invisible, and with the fertility god of the Coptos, the ithyphallic Min. To this mixture Re was added and Amun-Re came to the fore, especially at the Theban cult center of Karnak, as the sun god and king of gods. Represented with a ram's head, Amun-Re was accompanied by his consort, the mother goddess Mut. Their son was the moon god Khonsu.

Still another expression of the high creator god was Khnum at Esna, south of Thebes. Khnum, depicted with the head of a ram, created the primal world egg at his potter's wheel. He was one of the earliest of the *deus faber* (craftsman god) creators, although in some stories Ptah, too, was such a creator, molding beings out of metal (Bently, 114, 176).

Finally, during the Amarna period (c. 1353-1327 B.C.E.) of the pharaoh Amenhotep IV, who disassociated himself from Amun-Re and renamed himself Akhenaton (Ikhнатon), there was the god Aton (Aten), represented as a sun disk, the rays of which reach down to the earth as hands. Although it has been fashionable over the centuries to consider Aton a sole god and to claim Akhenaton as the founder of monotheism, it seems more likely that Aton was a manifestation of Re and was one among several gods worshiped at the time (Wasilewska, 95-96). Still, it is true that the pharaoh greatly favored the god from whose name he took *his* new name and the name of his new capital, Akhetaton (Amarna). The son of Akhenaton and Nefertiti, Tutankhaton (c. 1348-1339 B.C.E.), better known as "King Tut," changed his name to Tutankhamun to reflect a restoration of the Amun cult.

The Great Goddess

Egyptian mythology has many versions of the great mother goddess found in cultures throughout the Middle East and other parts of the ancient world. It seems likely that the mother goddess tradition existed as a powerful force in prehistoric Egypt (Clark, 87). One of the earliest historical forms is that of the cow goddess, Hathor. Other expressions of the cow goddess existed, as we have seen, at least from the Neolithic period and were prevalent among the goddesses of Mesopotamia, who were contemporaries of Hathor. Both sides of the Narmer Palette of the Old Kingdom First Dynasty of Memphis are presided over by heads of Hathor as a cow—four heads in all, representing the four directions, the four corners of the sky, the “Hathor of the horizon” (Campbell, *Oriental*, 52–53). Hathor was the all-enveloping sky goddess who, often with the sun within her horns, was the daughter of Re. As a cow, she suckled the baby Horus, and her name can be translated as “house of Horus.” As such, she is, as noted earlier, the personification of the whole pantheon or Ennead of Heliopolis as well as of *maat*, meaning “truth” or “proper order” (Campbell, *Oriental*, 54), a concept not unlike the Mesopotamian *me*. She was, as we learn from the Coffin Texts of the late third millennium B.C.E., also the “Eye of Horus” or Re, the Kali-like destroyer goddess, the sun that burns the desert.

Hathor’s cult center was in the south at Dendera. She was the “eye” in the north also, taking the form of the guardian cobra goddess Wadjet (Wedjat), whose symbol was placed on the forehead of pharaohs and who sometimes appeared as a pair—Ejo (north) and Nekhabit the vulture (south).

An important form of the great goddess in the delta was Neith, “the oldest goddess, the Mother of the Gods” (Clark 206). Neith was said to have emerged from Nun, the primal waters, and to have been a creatrix of gods and humans and to have been sought out by the gods for important advice.

The goddess was also Sekhmet, the lioness wife of Ptah who was both an annihilator and a savior of humankind, and Mut, the wife of Amun-Re.

In the creation myth of Heliopolis several goddesses play important roles. Tefnut (Tefenet) is a personification of moisture, who mated

with Shu (air) and gave birth to sky as the goddess Nut, who mated with her brother earth, as Geb. From the union of Geb and Nut came, among others, the most popular of Egyptian goddesses, Isis, the mother of Horus, whose story is so central to that of her brother-husband, the resurrection god Osiris, and around whom a cult developed that lasted well into Roman times. Isis was her husband's queen in the underworld and the theological basis for the role of the queen on earth. She was the mother of Horus and the "throne" (*isis*) of Osiris. It can be said that she was a version of the great goddess as Hathor. Like Hathor, she not only had death and rebirth associations but was the protectress of children and the goddess of childbirth. On her head the great cow horns of Hathor supported the solar disk (Lesko, "Isis").

The Dying God

Osiris, the first son of Nut (sky) and Geb (earth), was perhaps the most important of Egyptian gods. He stands at the very center of the most characteristic themes of ancient Egyptian mythology and culture. As the first mythical king of Egypt—literally a god-king—and as the source (the father) of the god-king Horus, he was the theological basis for the eternal and sacred kingship. The pharaoh died as Osiris and was resurrected as his son Horus. As the dying god who was resurrected and who became king of the underworld and was not only the dying pharaoh but eventually, as we are told in the Coffin Texts and the *Book of Going Forth by Day* (the *Book of the Dead*), any dying human, he was the basis for the Egyptian practice of mummification and afterlife belief in general. Furthermore, Osiris's life, death, and resurrection are metaphors for the central life-giving phenomenon in Egypt, the annual death and resurrection of the land flooded by the Nile. And as the resurrection god, who was usually depicted as a mummy, sometimes in an ithyphallic state, Osiris was, quite logically, a fertility god represented by the sprouting of crops after the flood. The fertility aspect was emphasized by the association of Osiris at Memphis with the Apis bull, an association that developed in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods into the cult of Serapis, a combination of Osiris and Apis. Osiris was said to have been born at Busiris and to have died at Abydos, his principal cult center (Lesko, "Osiris").

Closely associated with Osiris is the jackal- or dog-headed Anubis (Anpu), who in his earliest form devoured the dead. Later, as funerary practices developed, he became the embalmer—especially of the dead Osiris—and the protector of graves. He was sometimes depicted lying on the chest containing the inner organs of the deceased. Anubis was the son of Osiris by Osiris's sister Nephthys. He served Osiris in the underworld as a judge of the dead, and he became a Hermes-like conductor of souls in the mystery cult of Isis in Roman times (van Voss, 330–31).

Trickster Gods

In a very general sense the gods Seth and Thoth might be understood as negative and positive aspects of the archetypal trickster god. Seth, like so many tricksters, was amoral and was driven by Iago-like pure evil, jealousy, and greed. Like other sometimes reprehensible tricksters—Loki in Scandinavia, Ananse in Africa, Coyote in North America, for instance—he was extremely clever and could play positive roles as well. Early in the Old Kingdom, as we have seen, he was the patron of certain dynasties. And in his positive aspect, again like several trickster gods, he assisted the high god/creator. He was sometimes shown as a guardian of Re's sun bark, using his magic spells to defend it against the serpent Apopis (Apep). Depicted with floppy ears and an erect and divided tail, he was, however, more usually a negative deity, standing in the way especially of the "good" gods, Osiris and his son Horus. Seth's wife was his sister Nephthys, who helped Isis to revive Osiris. Theologically speaking, Seth performed the necessary role of death and destruction in the overall process of life. It was he who was responsible for the death of Osiris and for the loss of one of Horus's eyes—the moon—which was retrieved by Thoth (Lesko, "Seth"; Clark, 224).

Thoth was the moon god as well as the god of wisdom. In Hermopolis, his theological home, he gave the dead who were initiated into his secrets passage to the sky. His is the realm of the mysteries, magic, and arcane knowledge, such as that contained in the *Book of Going Forth by Day*. It was he who invented hieroglyphs and writing. In Hermopolis he might sometimes have been seen as a creator god

(Lesko, "Thoth," 493). For some, Thoth was the son of Re, Re in this case being the sun, the right eye of Horus, whose moon eye had been ripped out by Seth. His consort was Maat, the personification of divine order and justice. Thoth's head was that of a baboon or an ibis. As a funerary god, like Anubis, he weighed the hearts of the deceased. He was, as Joseph Campbell has written, "master of the word and of the magic of resurrection" (*Oriental*, 86–87). Early in the New Kingdom, certain pharaohs chose the name Thothmose (Thutmose) to associate themselves with this great and mysterious god (Lesko, "Thoth," 493). This was a family that considered itself particularly close to divinity. When Hatshepsut, the wife of Thothmose II, usurped the throne on her husband's death, she justified her action by claiming a particularly divine birth. She was the female version of Horus, conceived when Amun-Re took the form of her earthly father, Thothmose I, and had relations with Hatshepsut's mother, Ahmose (Lesko, "Egyptian Religion," 42).

Egyptian Cosmic Myths

The Heliopolitan Creation and Cosmology

As contained primarily in the Pyramid Texts originating in Heliopolis beginning in about 2350 B.C.E., the Heliopolitan cosmogony is generally considered to be the most orthodox. Like all versions of the Egyptian creation, it starts from the concept of the primeval waters—in some areas, especially Hermopolis, personified as Nun, the father of gods. Nun contained the essential energy of the dark and formless chaos out of which creation emerged. This creation, as R. T. Rundle Clark suggests, signified four aspects of existence: "light, life, land, and consciousness" (Clark, 36). From the primeval waters arose the god Atum—later Atum-Re—as the primeval mound, symbolized by the pyramids themselves and perhaps having its source in the creative mounds left annually by the receding floodwaters of the Nile. Atum-Re was Heliopolis itself and also the light of the rising sun and the embodiment of the conscious Word or Logos, the essence of life. In the somewhat later (c. 2000 B.C.E.) *Book of Going Forth by Day*, the emerging god or "becoming one," the visible form of the invisible

Atum, was Khepri, the scarab, the symbol of the rebirth of the sun that looked down from the sky as the god Re.

Like so many first gods in other cultures, Atum required the existence of others to render himself significant. As the all encompassing "great he-she," he had no mate but his hand—later known as the hand goddess Iusas. With that hand he masturbated "that he might obtain the pleasure of emission," and in so doing he produced the brother and sister Shu and Tefnut, air and moisture—life and order in the later Coffin Texts. In one Pyramid Texts version, Atum spit Shu and Tefnut into existence. This version, conveying the idea of creation from the mouth, suggests the sense expressed in the Memphite creation, in which Ptah created by thinking and naming "by word of mouth."

Shu and Tefnut, who were also associated with the sun and moon, gave birth to the male god Geb (earth) and the female Nut (sky). Geb and Nut at first lay together as one being but were separated by their perhaps jealous father, Shu, who, as air, provided space between earth and sky where other beings could be created. The theme of the separation of primordial parents to provide room for creation is a common one in world mythology. While no narrative exists for this Egyptian version of the myth, the story is depicted in many paintings, in which Geb is shown, sometimes with an erect penis, lying on his back as his sister-wife arches over him, often held up by her father Shu.

Separated from Geb, Nut could give birth to the stars, who rose to her. Each day she swallowed these children so as to protect them until they could be reborn at night. Together Geb and Nut produced Osiris and Seth and their sisters Isis and Nephthys, the principles, with the god Horus—the son of Isis and Osiris—of what the Egyptians saw as the primary drama of earthly existence, that of life, death, and rebirth.

The Hermopolitan Creation

In the Middle Egyptian city of Hermopolis (Khemenu), an emphasis was placed on the great abyss of nothingness out of which creation came. This primordial chaos, the primeval waters or abyss, was made up of the four pairs that together were the Hermopolitan pantheon of eight, the Ogdoad. Huh and Hauhet, Nun and Naunet, Amun and

Amaunet, and Kuk and Kauhet—"the infinity, the nothingness, the nowhere and the dark"—are the negative or undifferentiated foundation for the primeval egg that was the immediate source of creation. In some tellings of the story it was the god Thoth in his ibis form who laid the primeval egg on the primeval mound formed by the Ogdoad. Another story held that it was the primeval goose, the "great cackler," who laid the egg. The egg was said to contain the sun god, who in another Hermopolitan myth was born as a divine child from a lotus. It was this god who would create the world (Wasilewska, 60ff.; Clark, 54ff.).

The Memphite Creation

Our source for the ancient creation myth of Memphis is a late text copied down from a much earlier text during the reign of the Nubian pharaoh Shabago during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty (c. 700 B.C.E.). In this document, the Memphite priests have asserted the dominance of their high god, Ptah, over the gods of Heliopolis and Hermopolis. As portrayed by the Memphites, Ptah was more a spirit than an anthropomorphic being. All the gods—those of Heliopolis and Hermopolis—were really aspects of Ptah. Ptah here is perhaps closer to the Abrahamic idea of God or even more so to the Hindu concept of the all-pervading essence of being, Brahman, than to the other Egyptian concepts of the creator. Ptah was the original spirit on the primeval mound, the "self-begotten." As Ewa Wasilewska puts it, "in him all divine forces were encoded" (65). He was Ptah-Nun (Niu) and Ptah Naunet, the primal watery abyss, the parents of Atum. In Atum's form the heart and tongue of Ptah "came into being." The gods of the Ennead were the teeth and lips of Ptah. Horus, in this case the sun god, the god of command, represented his heart, and the moon god Thoth, the god of intelligence and wisdom, was his tongue. The gods were conceived in Ptah's heart and given their *kas* or inner essences by him. The gods were named, and thus given form, by Ptah's tongue. Ptah, like the Old Testament God in Genesis, created by thought and word. He *was* the Word, the Logos.

Clark points out that as the Egyptians understood things, the "heart and the voice-organ, determine the actions of men and animals . . . so God is the heart and tongue of his Creation" (Clark, 62). By extension

the individual essences (*kas*) of human beings come from the Word, which is Ptah, and the world itself is of Ptah.

The Theban Creation

Texts dating to the New Kingdom period of Ramses II (1279–1213 B.C.E.) reveal the Theban high god Amun, later Amun-Re, as the creator. Amun, we are told, was the “invisible one” of unknown origins, with no parents to establish his name or *ka*. As such, he had no external identity and was invisible even to the other gods, who were aspects of him. From Amun’s mysterious being came the gods of Hermopolis and then those of Heliopolis—“the Ennead is combined in your body” (Allen, 24). A later version of the story says that Amun in his form as Ptah created the primal egg in the primal waters of Nun and that he fertilized the egg, and the other gods emerged from it (Wasilewska, 66). Once again, as in other Egyptian creations, especially the Memphite creation, the tendency at Thebes is toward an all-informing single God who, like the Hindu Brahman, takes many forms, a tendency furthered by Akhenaton’s cult of the Aton as the only creator and, according to some, the only god.

The Creation of Humans

As Ewa Wasilewska so clearly points out (136–42), the Egyptian theologians in general seem to have had little interest in the creation of humans. They were clearly more concerned with larger questions relating to cosmic arrangements, kingship, and the afterlife. There are a few texts, however, that present various ideas of our origins.

In Spell 80 of the Coffin Texts, Shu, who is air, is also regarded as life itself. He literally breathes life into the nostrils of humans and other animals, completing a process that also includes the ancient naming ritual:

I will lead them and enliven them,
Through my mouth, which is Life in their nostrils.
I will lead my breath into their throats, after I have tied on their
head by the Annunciation that is in my mouth.
(Allen, 13)

Wasilewska outlines the two primary traditions surrounding the creation of humans: creation by the god's tears and creation by clay. In both the Atum and the later Amun theologies we find the tear motif. According to the Coffin Texts Atum created the gods out of his sweat and humans out of his tears; in the later version it was from Amun-Re's eyes that "mankind came forth." In the case of Atum, the creation of humans seems to have been accidental. When Atum's eye disappeared one day, Shu and Tefnut brought it back, and when the eye was replaced in Atum he wept, and "that is the evolution of people" (Allen, 15). Wasilewska points out that the Egyptian words for "people" and "tears" were similar. It would seem likely that the association of tears with people might suggest a certain sadness implicit in mortality.

Wasilewska makes a strong case for the lost eye being the great goddess Hathor, who would then have played an important role with Atum in the creation of humans (138). Hathor figured prominently in the creation-from-clay motif contained in the myth of the southern god Khnum. As the ram-headed god—the word for "ram" being equivalent to the word for "soul"—Khnum was the soul of the high god Amun-Re. Khnum was the creator in one of the myths that evolved around the usurper queen Hatshepsut. He was said to have created the queen and her *ka* out of clay on his potter's wheel, and then to have placed her in her mother's womb to be born as Amun-Re's daughter. It was believed by some that humans in general were conceived in this manner and that after Khnum completed the forms, Hathor would provide life by touching them with her ankh, the Egyptian crosslike symbol of life itself.

As to the purpose of humans in the world, there is little information. In the instructions left in c. 2040 B.C.E., during the period between the Old and Middle Kingdoms, by the king of Herakleopolis to his son Merikare, we learn that humans are "god's cattle" but also that they are "his images who came from his body" (Hallo, 65).

Wasilewska reminds us of a similar sense of humans being made "in the image of God" that would emerge in the Hebrew Genesis (141).

Osiris and Isis

The dominant myth in Egypt for over three thousand years was that of the god Osiris and his sister-wife Isis. Of all the Egyptian deities

these two were the ones most closely associated with the world of human beings. As a victim and dying god, Osiris shared the human experience of mortality. This fact made him a mythological brother, as it were, of other Middle Eastern dying gods, including Dumuzi, Adonis, Attis, Dionysos, Telipinu, and Jesus. It was through Osiris and these others that humans in various cultures hoped to join the universal process of nature that involved afterlife or rebirth after apparent death. So it was that Osiris was associated with the Nile and its annual revival of the land through the death that was the flood. And it was Osiris whose revival was reflected in the grain rising from the earth. This was the god of all kinds of fertility.

Significantly, Osiris was the first pharaoh—a king in this world in a mythological golden age. As such, he was more of a material being, more tangible than the other gods. He was an example of god become man. As the ruler at the world's beginning, Osiris gave human society—that is to say, Egypt—law and civilization. The golden age came to an end when Osiris's brother Seth introduced death by killing his brother and depriving the world for a time of his potency and fertility. There are many versions of the manner in which this primordial murder was accomplished. Some say that Seth became a flea whose bite poisoned Osiris. Others say Seth threw his brother into the sea. A more common story, told much later by the Greek writer Plutarch (c. 46–120 C.E.), tells how Seth tricked Osiris into lying in a special coffin, after which he and his cohorts closed the lid and flung the coffin into the water. The coffin floated to the shore of Byblos in Phoenicia, where a tree formed around it, tying the god-hero once again to other Middle Eastern figures associated with trees. Adonis, Attis, Dionysos, and Jesus were all in one way or another imprisoned in or on trees.

The tree of Osiris, a symbol of renewed potency to come, was particularly sweet-smelling and grew very large—perhaps like the *linga* of Siva or the fruit tree that emerged from Dionysos's loins. It pleased the king of the region, who had it cut down for use as a column in his new palace. The column with a hermlike erection protruding from it was one of many symbols of Osiris. The column attracted the attention of Isis, who had traveled the world in search of her beloved husband.

It is at this point that Isis emerges as a principal figure, taking her place among the great goddesses of Egypt. Isis managed to obtain the column containing the coffin from the king, and she removed her husband's body and returned with it to Egypt. Although Isis attempted to hide her husband's body in Egypt, Seth found it and cut it into many pieces before flinging it into the Nile. Isis managed to retrieve the pieces of the body—all, according to Plutarch, but the penis, the symbol of fertility itself, which was eaten by a fish, another symbol of fertility.

After retrieving the pieces of her husband's body, Isis, helped by her sister (Seth's wife) Nephthys (and Anubis, according to some), repaired the body as the first Egyptian mummy and through various spells managed to revive it sufficiently for Isis to fly over it as a bird and to conceive Horus, presumably from the seed of the erect phallus that sprang plantlike from the dead king. Isis gave birth to Horus in the delta and hid him away until such time as he would be ready to avenge her husband's murder. Meanwhile, Osiris descended to the underworld, where he would remain in a passive state until his son could avenge him. In a sense Osiris was resurrected in his form as the grain god. It was said that Isis "planted" symbols of his missing phallus in many burial shrines all over Egypt, thus spreading his cult and ensuring the fertility of the land (see Clark, 97ff.).

Horus and Seth

The struggle between Horus and Seth is metaphorically related not only to the establishment of the early dynasties in Egypt and the struggle between north and south mentioned earlier, but, in connection with Osiris, to the whole question of the sacred kingship in Egypt. The old king died as Osiris, and the new king reigned as Horus, who had defeated the disorder of Seth.

According to the myth, when Horus grew into manhood he and his followers attacked Seth, who had usurped Osiris's throne. The struggle was acutely disturbing to universal order. Horus pulled out the testicles of his uncle, and Seth took out his nephew's eye. It was up to Thoth, the god of proper order, to convince the combatants to agree to arbitration. The gods decided in Horus's favor, and Horus was made the new king. Horus then traveled to the underworld to

take his retrieved eye to Osiris as a symbol of the reestablishment of proper order. Through this visit the soul of Osiris and, thus, fertility were revived. As Clark writes, "Osiris was nothing without Horus, just as the latter was no true king unless he was able to guarantee the fertility of the land. . . . It is Horus who fulfills the destiny for the present, undertaking the role played in other religions by the resurrected god" (108). As for Seth, he became Osiris's boat or the breeze that propels the dead king's boat on ritual voyages on the Nile.

The Egyptian Flood

The Egyptian flood story resembles the Mesopotamian and the Genesis flood stories in that it tells the story of the ungrateful evil of humankind, the punishment for that evil, and the saving of a few in order that a new beginning might be made. A late-third-millennium B.C.E. myth of the Herakleopolitan dynasties tells how humankind plotted against the high god Re, and Re called into council his "eye" (the goddess Hathor) and the other important gods "who were with me in the Primeval Waters," including the original god of the watery chaos, Nun himself (Clark, 181ff.). Re asked advice of Nun. What was he to do about these misguided humans, the children of his "eye"? Nun advised that he turn his "eye" against humankind, and the other gods agreed. And so the "eye," as the now Kali-like destructive Hathor (perhaps the hot, unbridled sun), descended upon humans and killed them in the desert. Hathor returned claiming that to destroy mankind was "pleasant to my heart." The "eye" as the lion goddess Sekhmet was sent to continue the destruction, but Re decided to prevent total destruction. He created beer from barley and red ochre and flooded the fields of Egypt with it. Sekhmet, on her way to the slaughter, was attracted by the beer and drank so much of it that she became intoxicated and forgot about killing humans. So it was that a few were saved.

Hero Myths of the Egyptians

Hero myths such as those found in Greece or Rome or even Mesopotamia are not common in ancient Egypt. Heroism as such seems to be inextricably tied to the themes of sacred kingship in relation to the

sun's journey across the sky and the idea of the king's and later any individual's passage after death to the underworld. At the center of what might be called the one Egyptian hero myth is Horus.

Horus as Hero

In a sense the pharaoh, who lived as Horus, was always a god-hero who at death made the heroic journey to the sky to join Re on his solar bark and to guard him against serpents and other perils there during the daily journey from horizon to horizon. In this context we need to remember that one of Horus's titles was "son of Re," so that the pharaoh, like Horus himself, was the son of the god to whom he returned after a sojourn on earth. The myth of Horus justifies the sacred kingship. Hero myths in general reflect human concerns and are expressive of that post mythological period when the high god—in this case Re—retreats to a kind of seclusion in the heavens and no longer communicates directly with humans. Not surprisingly, then, many of the myths of Horus himself—the god who, with Isis and Osiris, had most to do with human life—have more in common with traditional hero myths than with deity myths. Like those of another man-god, Jesus, they contain all of the essential elements of Joseph Campbell's monomyth. We have already seen that Horus was miraculously conceived, that his quest was to restore the "kingdom" of his father in a struggle with monstrous evil represented by his nemesis Seth. And we have seen that Horus is, in a sense, Osiris reborn. Osiris's resurrection as Horus represents the possibility of any individual's succeeding on the traditional heroic journey into the underworld. The *Book of Two Ways* tells us that a dead person who has learned the proper spells of the first stage of afterlife will join the moon god Thoth as a star.

Thoth also plays the traditional role of the hero's guide in the afterlife. If he knows the second stage of spells, the deceased will go to the underworld palace of Osiris. And if he learns the third stage of spells, he will accompany Re on his bark across the sky; in short, he will go to the "Father in Heaven" (Lesko, "Egyptian Religion," 41). Clark supports this concept of the heroic pilgrimage of the soul after death when he points out that the Coffin Texts assumed "the soul's

visit to Osiris at the end of the journey or a series of initiations during which the Horus soul-figure has acquired the superlative qualities of a hero—might, glory, strength, power and divinity.” Clark goes on to compare Osiris to the Fisher King of Arthurian lore, whose “wound” must be cured by the words—in this case the proper spells—of the Grail hero (Clark, 161–62, and see Joseph Campbell, *Hero*, 368ff.).

A hauntingly familiar aspect of the Horus story exists in the so-called Delta Cycle. After conceiving a child by her partially revived husband, Isis retreated from the evil usurper king, Seth, into hiding in the swamps of the delta. In that hidden and unglamorous place she gave birth to Horus. Many things happened to the divine child during his days in the delta. While his mother was off begging for food, he was attacked and bitten by Seth disguised as serpents, for instance. But the Pyramid Texts tell us that the holy infant “with his finger in his mouth” stamped on the serpent “with his foot” (Clark 187). Later, from the wilderness of the swamps, a place called Chemmis, the young man Horus went to the underworld to visit his father and then on to the great struggle with Seth. Clark suggests that Horus in these stories is the “essential hero who is destined to bring back order to the whole universe” (187).

Jealous Gods and Chosen People

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