Is Seth a misunderstood god or an evil deity?

1500 words excluding title page and bibliography

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Introduction

Seth belongs to the ancient Egyptian pantheon, being part of the Ennead of Heliopolis. Atum, the creator god, created Shu and Tefnut, and from these two came Geb and Nut. Geb and Nut produced four offspring - Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephthys with Osiris and Isis, and Seth and Nephthys forming marital relationships (Pinch 2002: 63-66). However, while Osiris, Isis and Nephthys are considered good gods, Seth has been considered the evil one.

Seth's popularity has fluctuated throughout time, being well-perceived in the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods and New Kingdom, but falling from favour later. Many circumstances could have lead to this fall from grace, his association with foreigners/Egypt's conquerers, his rivalry with Horus, murdering Osiris, plus the increasing importance of the Osirian cult (Castellos 2016:83, Taylor 2017:19), but has Seth been misunderstood? I believe he has for the following reasons:

1. Seth *had to* murder his brother so that Osiris's destiny of rebirth could be fulfilled.
2. Similarly bad behaviour, including murder, was displayed by other gods
3. The Egyptian concept of duality was necessary to show the battle between good and evil

The seminal treatise, "Seth, God of Confusion: A Study of His Role in Egyptian Mythology and Religion" by Herman te Velde (1967) is an excellent work, but I feel that the author focuses on Seth's bad deeds, his fratricide, and homosexual interactions with Horus, without having sufficient regard to the reasons for his behaviour. His sibling gods are given more positive treatment than they perhaps deserve. However, of late, a number of scholars, such as Cruz-Uribe (2009) and Castillos (2021) are taking a broader, less negative view of Seth.

Background

Seth's cult originated in Naqada, Upper Egypt and he was an important god of the Predynastic and Early Dynastic Periods and in the New Kingdom (Castillos 2016: 83, te Velte 1967: 30). His prominence as a major god varied through time. During the Second Dynasty, the Seth animal replaced Horus on top of Seth-Peribsen's serekh, and the last king of this Dynasty, Khasekhemwy had both Seth and Horus depicted on his serekh, intimating that both gods were his patrons and at peace (Castillos 2021: 71-72, te Velde: 1967: 72-73).

Seth was worshipped by the Asiatics who assimilated him with their god Baal and was also venerated by the Hyksos (Castillos 2021: 72). By the New Kingdom, his reputation as a strong, violent god was advantageous to the Pharaohs aiding their imperialistic/militaristic ambitions and he was worshipped as a god of war (Castillos 2021:73, te Velde 1967: 31). Three New Kingdom Ramesside pharaohs were named after Seth, the 19th Dynasty's Seti I and Seti II, and the 20th Dynasty's Sethnakht with his centre of worship mainly located at Avaris in the Delta (Tyldesley 2010: 153).

Seth's reputation as a major god declined from the Late New Kingdom onwards and this may have been due to Egypt's conquest by foreigners, particularly the Assyrians and Persians (te Velde 1967: 144-145) and by the Greco-Roman period, he was vilified in much of Egypt. Conversely, he continued to be worshipped in the Dakhleh oasis in the Western Desert into Roman times alongside other deities, including Osiris, Isis and Amun, as a god of equal standing (Leonard 2020: 34)

Written and pictorial evidence

The first written reference to Seth is found in the Pyramid Texts of King Unas's pyramid at Saqqara where the murder of Osiris by Seth is alluded to (te Velte 1967: 84). A number of the spells describe the conflict and later reconciliation between Horus and Seth (Taylor 2017: 10).

Artistic evidence shows that Seth was known from the Predynastic Period (Taylor 2017: 1). The earliest known definite portrayal of Seth can be found on the King Scorpion macehead, although an ivory animal figure, found at Mahasna, and dating to the Naqada 1 period may be an earlier version of the god, notwithstanding the lack of a tail on the creature (Te Velde 1967: 7-8, 12).

Seth is usually depicted as a hybrid animal, which some authors believe to be a fictitious animal, with the body of what may be a dog, a downward curving snout, high, square-shaped ears and a raised tail (te Velte 1967: 19-20, 25-26). He may also be shown with a human body and animal head, occasionally in full human form and sometimes with wings (te Velte 1967: 19-20, 25-26).



Image 1. Statue of Ramesses III between Horus and Seth in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. https://egyptianmuseumcairo.eg/artefacts/statue-of-ramses-iii-between-horus-and-seth/

Discussion

Seth was angry, destructive and violent, whose unpredictability presented a challenge to *ma'at*. He was also associated with storms, the desert and its oases and foreign lands (Taylor 2017:9). The activity which really stigmatised him was the murder of his brother Osiris, in the most brutal

possible way, and this was followed by his homosexual relationship with his nephew Horus (te Velte 1967:109).

Outside of the factors mentioned in paragraph 2 which may have affected Seth's importance as a major god, the following three points need exploration.

1. Seth's actions were necessary to fulfil Osiris's destiny

Murdering Osiris is probably the most damaging factor for Seth's reputation. In order for Osiris to be resurrected, he had to be killed first. This could have been done by anyone, but it fell to Seth to commit the act (Tyldesley, 2010: 153). By murdering Osiris, he assisted him in fulfilling his destiny (Castillos 2021: 68). So rather than comparing Seth to the devil for this act, it might be more apposite to compare him to the Biblical Judas, who betrayed Jesus in order to fulfil *his* destiny (Tyldesley 2010: 152-153). In each case, while both individuals committed deplorable acts, one could argue that they were also victims.

2. Bad behaviour of the other gods

Following the decision of Atum and Re-Horakhty to award the kingship to Horus, Seth challenged Horus to a dual, whereby each would transform into a hippopotamus and stay underwater for three months. Should one surface before that time, he would forfeit the crown. Isis tried to assist Horus to win by cheating. She fired a harpoon intending to hit Seth, but harpooned Horus instead. Her second attempt succeeded, but Seth successfully appealed to her better nature, and she withdrew the harpoon. This perceived disloyalty by Isis in showing mercy to Seth enraged Horus so much that he beheaded his own mother (Tyldesley 2010:138-139 showing himself to be no better than Seth when he killed Osiris.

Taylor (2017:14-15) refers to a theory proposed by Alexandra von Lieven in 'Seth ist im Recht, Osiris ist im Unrecht' where she suggests that Osiris cuckolded Seth and when Seth confronted Osiris, Osiris struck the first blow, provoking a violent response from Seth resulting in his death.

On the occasion of Seth and Horus's sexual encounter, Isis severs Horus's hands and threw them into the water although she fashioned a substitute pair by magic (Tyldesley 2010: 139-140).

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These gods engaged in activities traditionally associated with Seth - murder, violence and licentious behaviour. Therefore, it is too simplistic to designate Osiris, Isis and Horus as the good gods and Seth the evil one as all have good and bad aspects to their personalities.

3. Duality - good versus evil

The concept of duality was important in ancient Egypt, and can be seen in the relationship between Seth and Osiris where Osiris is good and Seth is bad. Osiris also represents death from which comes life, and Seth represents the reverse (te Velte 1967: 95).

However, even though Seth murdered his brother, the king, he was divine protector of kings as shown in images from the Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 b.c.). (Leonard 2020: 34).

Spells in the Coffin Texts, dating to the Middle Kingdom relate how Seth, the only god powerful enough to take on Apophis in battle, conquered him to defend the god Re thus preserving *Ma'at.* (Castillos 2021: 69, Leonard 2020: 34). It seems that in order for *Ma'at* to exist, *isfet* (chaos) had to coexist.



Figure 2. A scene from Lady Cheritwebeshet's (c 1070-945BC) Book of the Dead - Seth protecting Ra by spearing Apophis. Image from Leonard (2020:35).

Conclusion

While Seth was undoubtedly a difficult, pugnacious and jealous individual who murdered his brother, it seems almost as if he were predestined to commit this murder. Had Osiris not been killed, resurrection and an afterlife would not have been available to the Egyptians. So in order for Osiris to die, someone had to do it, Seth was the inevitable choice for this. So, by helping his brother achieve his goal, he had to sacrifice his good standing in the eyes of others. But was he really any worse than Horus, who beheaded his mother, Osiris who cheated on Seth with Nephthys, or Isis who chopped off her son's hands. They did what Seth did, but for far less good reason, therefore, I feel that Seth has been unfairly judged and misunderstood when compared to his siblings.

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A scene from Lady Cheritwebeshet's (c 1070-945BC) Book of the Dead - Seth protecting Ra by spearing Apophis. Image from Leonard (2020:35). https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/2231077/Lord-of-the-Oasis.pdf.