
MYTHICAL TIME LINES

The Egyptians did not think of time as moving at the same rate for all classes of beings or in all parts of the cosmos. For the dead, an hour in the presence of the sun god was said to be equivalent to a lifetime in Egypt. Nor was time always thought of as a linear progression. Historical Egyptians lived in linear time, experienced by each person as past, present, and future—like points on a straight line. King lists reflect this view of time, sometimes arranging kings or dynasties one after another even when they reigned contemporaneously. Yet the standard dating system started again with the reign of each new king because the Egyptians also thought of time as moving in cycles.

In these cycles, time appears to loop back on itself, and patterns of events are repeated, often at fixed intervals. In this view of time the roles of cause and effect can appear to be reversed, creating temporal paradoxes. Egyptian kings, for example, were sometimes said to be their own fathers.

The main part of this mythical time line consists of a linear mythical “history” in which I have laid out the principal events of Egyptian myth in the order in which they should logically occur. It is important to bear in mind that although everything in this section is drawn from original sources, no Ancient Egyptian text that we know of attempts this kind of synthesis. I then look at how the same events recur in different patterns in cyclical time.

LINEAR TIME

The mythical story of Egypt can be divided into seven stages: chaos (pre-creation), the emergence of the creator, the creation of the world and its inhabitants, the reign of the sun god, the period of direct rule by other deities, the period of rule by semidivine kings (history), and the return to chaos.

Chaos

Summary: Before creation there was a state of chaos that contained the potential for all life. This inchoate state was imagined as a dark watery domain of unlimited depth and extent. Elements and qualities of chaos could be personified as gods and goddesses. Some of these deities had to change or die to begin the creative process.

The origin of the universe was an intellectual problem that came to fascinate the Egyptians. Texts that allude to the unknowable era before creation define it as the time “‘before two things had developed.”¹ The cosmos was not yet divided into pairs of opposites such as earth and sky, light and darkness, male and female, or life and death.

The Egyptians speculated that the primeval substance was watery and dark and had no form and no boundaries. These primeval waters, known as the *nu* or the *nun*, continued to surround the world even after creation and were thought of as the ultimate source of the Nile. When personified as a deity, Nun could be called the father and mother of the creator, because the creator was thought of as coming into existence within the *nun*.

After creation, qualities of the primeval state, such as its darkness, were retrospectively endowed with consciousness and became a group of deities known as the Eight or the Ogdoad of Hermopolis (see “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”). The Eight were imagined as amphibians and reptiles, fertile creatures of the dark primeval slime. They were the forces that shaped the creator or even the first manifestations of the creator. In order to become “the fathers and mothers” of life, they had to change or, in some accounts, to die. Several temples claimed to be the burial place of these primeval deities.

Amun and his female counterpart Amunet were often regarded as part of the Eight and personified hidden power. When Amun became a national god, a new theology made Amun the invisible, unknowable force that began the movement toward independent life. In some accounts the Eight join together to be fertilized by the “seed” of the serpent Amun Kem-atef, the “first primeval god who gave birth to the primeval gods.”²

The serpent may have been considered an appropriate form for the spirit of the creator because of its undivided body or because it periodically renewed itself by shedding its skin. When creator gods such as Amun or Atum are spoken of as serpents, they usually represent the positive aspect of chaos as an energy force, but they had a negative counterpart in the great serpent Apophis. Apophis represented the destructive aspect of chaos that constantly tried to overwhelm all individual beings and reduce everything back to its primeval state of “oneness.” So, even before creation began, the world contained the elements of its own destruction.

Emergence of the Creator

Summary: The creator attains consciousness and becomes lonely. He/she differentiates the elements of chaos by speaking their names. The first light or the first sound begins the process of creation. The creator appears as the sun god. He may be born to a cow, emerge from a lotus on the water or from an egg, or alight in the form of a bird on the first mound of solid land.

The creator was the “unique one in the *nun*” who existed in this womblike environment as “one who is in his egg.” The creator was in an inert state, yet this state contained the potential for all life. Passages in the Coffin Texts stress that the “self-created god” came into being alone. For a group-oriented culture such as that of the Egyptians, such loneliness must have been almost unimaginable. The creator remained alone until his/her “heart became effective” and he/she began to think and feel.

In Coffin Texts spell 76, the creator (here named as Atum) brings eight gods into existence “by speaking with the *nun*,” presumably separating the elements of chaos by the process of naming them. Other texts refer to the creator’s driving back the primeval waters, perhaps by the power of spoken command, to create a space in which to begin the work of creation.

Images of Emergence. The “primal event” of the emergence of the creator to dispel the watery silent darkness could be represented in many different ways. No single image or narrative was considered sufficient to express such a wonder. Egyptian cosmogonies (creation accounts) often combine several different traditions about the creator, but rarely in any kind of temporal framework.³

The first act of the creator might be an exhalation of breath or a great cry. The first light came with the first appearance of the creator as the life-giving power of the sun. This manifestation could be pictured as an eye, a child, or a fiery bird. In Coffin Texts spell 75, although the creator is still alone in the *nun*, he/she sends out his/her eye to illumine the darkness and search for other life. Another image of the first sunrise was a blue lotus rising above the surface of the *nun* (see “Lotus” in “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”). From the New Kingdom onward, a naked child or a ram-headed figure was shown sitting in the lotus to represent the newborn sun.

The fertile aspect of the *nun* could be personified as the goddess Mehet-Weret, whose name means the Great Flood or the Great Swimmer. She was usually shown as a cow and was considered the mother of all the primeval beings, including Apophis. Mehet-Weret was envisaged as giving birth to the sun child and lifting him up on her horns. A New Kingdom hymn tells us that with the first light the sky became like gold and the primeval waters like lapis-lazuli.



Figure 11 . A pyramidion from a Late Period tomb showing the creator god Atum with the primeval benu bird. The pyramidion itself may represent the Primeval Mound.
(Courtesy of Geraldine Pinch)

The sun might also be thought of as emerging from a “cosmic egg” laid by a primeval bird (see under “Birds” in “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”) or, less often, by a snake or a crocodile. The role of the primeval bird could also be to break the silence. Some cosmogonies allude to a goose known as the Great Honker or Cackler whose strident cry was the first sound. The shining *benu* bird (see “*Benu Bird*” in “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”) brought both the first noise and the first light to the *nun*. The creation myths inscribed in the Edfu temple give this role to a falcon, who alights on a floating mass of vegetation.

Alternatively, the first bird was said to have found a resting place on the first mound of dry land. The creator could not become fully active until there was a place in which to exist. At this stage, the *nun* was thought of as a great swamp from which the first land, the Primeval Mound, suddenly emerged. This mound could be personified as the god Tatjenen, “the rising land.” Tatjenen, who was often identified with Ptah, could also be called the “father” of the creator.⁴ One of the sacred books at Edfu was the Book of the Mounds of the First Time. This presents a primeval landscape of mounds, water, and reeds

that is close to what the Nile valley must have looked like before it was settled by the first Egyptians.⁵ The creator could now begin the work of creating the world and its inhabitants.

Creation

Summary: At different periods and in various theological centers, a number of deities could be identified with the creator who emerged from the primeval waters. These creator deities include the gods Atum, Ra (often combined as Ra-Atum), Shu, Ptah, Khnum, and Amun-Ra and the goddesses Neith, Hathor, and Isis. Important stages in the creation process were the establishment of *maat*, the divine order; the division of beings into male and female; and the separation of earth and sky.

The Egyptian cosmos consisted of a divine realm in the upper sky; the earth, with Egypt its center; and the *Duat* (or *Dat*), the underworld that was to become the realm of the dead. The creator produced other deities and then lesser beings such as people and animals.

The One Who Made Himself into Millions. In many Egyptian sources the creation of life involves three elements: the creation of a body, the transfer to that body of some part of the divine essence of the creator, and the animation of the body by the breath of life. Some creator deities were more strongly associated with one of these elements than with the others. Khnum, for example, was chiefly a creator of bodies, whereas Shu and Amun-Ra were both gods of the unseen breath of life. The second element, the transfer of the divine essence, eventually led to the concept that all deities, or even all living beings, were not just *made* by a transcendent creator but were in some sense *forms* of the creator. From the New Kingdom onward, this was a distinctive feature of Egyptian religious thought.

The creator was sometimes referred to as “the One Who Made Himself into Millions” or “He Who Made Himself into Millions of Gods.”⁶ Creation could be seen as a process of differentiation, in which one original force was gradually

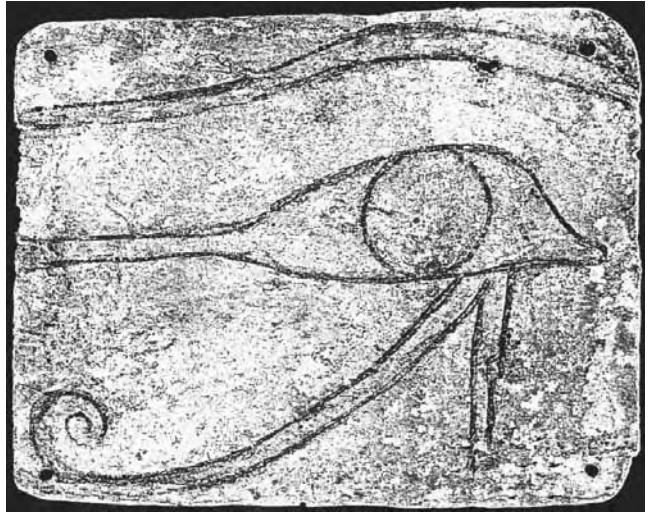


Figure 12. Plaque with a Wedjat (Sacred Eye). The Eye of Ra and the Eyes of Horus could all be shown in this way. (British Museum)

divided (without necessarily diminishing itself) into the diverse elements that made up the universe. The ways in which this could have happened were the subject of much speculation.

The Heart and the Tongue. The intellectual powers that enabled the creator to bring himself/herself into existence and to create other beings were sometimes conceptualized as deities. The most important of these were the gods Sia, Hu, and Heka. Sia was the power of perception or insight, which allowed the creator to visualize other forms. Hu was the power of authoritative speech, which enabled the creator to bring things into being by naming them. In Coffin Texts spell 335, Hu and Sia are said to be with their “father” Atum every day. In the illustrated Underworld Books of the New Kingdom, these two deities were often shown accompanying the creator sun god.

The power by which the thoughts and commands of the creator became reality was Heka (Magic). In Coffin Texts spell 261, the god Heka claims to have been with the creator even in the primeval era. In the cosmogony of Neith recorded in the Roman Period temple at Esna, this goddess creates the whole world with seven magic words. When Isis came to be worshipped as a creator deity during the same period, she was called the Mistress of the Word in the Beginning.

From at least as early as the New Kingdom, the god Ptah could represent the creative mind. Then Sia and Hu were identified as the heart and tongue of Ptah. This concept is expounded in the so-called Memphite Theology and in various hymns to Ptah. The Ancient Egyptians believed that the heart was the organ of thought and feeling. So Ptah was said to have made the world after planning it in his heart. It was “through what the heart plans and the tongue commands” that everything was made. Typically, the Memphite Theology also mentions other models of creation, such as the concept of the creator as Divine Craftsman or as the biological source of all life. The Egyptians did not take any one of these theories too literally. They were diverse but complementary attempts to convey something of the ultimately unknowable mystery of creation.

The Divine Craftsman. Two deities, Ptah and Khnum, were sometimes credited with physically “fashioning” the world and its inhabitants. Ptah was the patron god of craftsmen and artists. He was particularly associated with sculpture and metalworking. Ptah was said to have invented the **Opening of the Mouth** ritual in which an adze and other tools were used to “bring to life” statues and mummies.⁷ Hymns to Ptah speak of him designing and crafting the world and “smelting the Two Lands” (Egypt). He was also said to make bodies for kings out of electrum (an alloy of gold and silver), copper, and iron.

Presumably these were the bodies that kings hoped to inhabit in the divine realm.

The shaping of royal bodies was a task more usually attributed to Khnum. Khnum was represented by a ram, an animal renowned for aggressive virility. He was sometimes described as “begetting” the gods, but as a creator he was usually celebrated as the divine craftsman who “formed everything” on his potter’s wheel. Craftsmen were valued and well treated in Egyptian society, but few of them attained high social status. Khnum’s original role seems to have been as the divine potter who made things at the command of the creator. When he became a form of the universal creator, Khnum’s name was usually linked with those of more established creator deities such as Ra or Ptah.

The Hand of Atum. Before creation begins there is no division into genders. The creator seems to include both the male and female principles. Creator deities were commonly called “the father and mother of all things.” Deities who were normally regarded as male, such as Atum, are described as “giving birth” to other deities during the creative process.⁸

The actual means by which the creator reproduced were sometimes left vague and sometimes described in terms of blunt sexual imagery. Pyramid Texts (PT) spell 527 says that Atum took his penis in his hand and masturbated “and so were born the two siblings, that is Shu and Tefnut.” In PT 600, Atum-Khepri is said to be the one who spat out Shu and Tefnut.⁹ Several passages in the Coffin Texts refer to Shu being exhaled from Atum’s nose and Tefnut being spat from his mouth.

These apparently contradictory statements are clarified in later sources, such as the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus and the Memphite Theology. Atum excites his penis with his hand and takes the semen into his mouth. The vignettes to some mythological papyri illustrate this moment in graphic detail. The mouth of the creator acts as a substitute womb. Atum uses his powers of thought and utterance to transform the seed into the first two gendered deities, who are expelled from his mouth or through the nose and mouth.

The combination of biological and intellectual methods of creation is stressed in the Memphite Theology, which states that the Ennead of Atum (the first nine deities created) “came into existence through his seed and his fingers, but the Ennead is the teeth and lips in this mouth that spoke the name of every thing and from which Shu and Tefnut came forth.”

Once the twins had been born, the sexual identity of Atum becomes fixed as a father. A further development was the personification of the Hand of Atum as a goddess, thus giving him a sexual partner. Since the Hand goddess came directly from the creator, she was his “daughter” as well as his consort. This god-

dess was often identified with Hathor, who came to be regarded as the female creative principle.

The twins sometimes appear to be the male and female aspects of Atum. He embraces them to transfer his *ka* (vital essence) to them. In Coffin Texts spell 80, Shu and Tefnut are described as living with their father in the primeval waters. The three deities cling tightly to each other as if they were still one entity. For creation to continue, Shu and Tefnut had to become fully differentiated from the creator.

The Lost Children. There are some allusions in the Coffin Texts to Atum becoming separated from his children. Shu and Tefnut seem to have drifted away from their father and become lost in the darkness of the primeval waters. In Coffin Texts spell 76, Shu is made to say that “Atum once sent his Sole Eye searching for me and Tefnut, my sister. I made light in the darkness and it found me.” This eye is usually called the daughter of Ra, rather than of Atum, because she is part of the creator’s solar aspect.¹⁰ The Sole Eye is the disk of the sun envisaged as a goddess. She can function separately from the sun god but remains a part of him. The search for the lost children in Coffin Texts spell 76 is one of the many myths about the first sunrise. Shu, the god of air, creates a void in the primeval waters so that the solar eye can shine for the first time.¹¹

A fuller version of this myth found in the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus has a different emphasis. The Lord of All recounts how Shu and Tefnut were nurtured by the god of the primeval waters, “with my Eye (following) after them from the time they became separated from me.” When the creator came fully into existence on the Primeval Mound, Shu and Tefnut rejoiced and returned with the Eye. “Then she became furious after she had come back and found that I had put another in her place.” The creator has apparently grown a new eye/disk.

To appease his angry “daughter,” the creator transforms her into the first snake, the *uraeus* cobra, and puts her in the place of honor on his forehead.¹² This is one of several myths about the anger and appeasement of the solar eye. The creator’s relationships with the aspects of his being that are embodied as daughter-goddesses are crucial to this stage of creation.

The Divine Order and the Separation of Earth and Sky. In Coffin Texts spell 80, new identities are given to Shu and Tefnut. Atum names Shu as Life and Tefnut as *Maat* (Truth, Justice, Order). By naming these qualities, the creator brings them into existence. Atum embraces the two forms of his daughter, Tefnut and Maat.¹³ Nun, the god of the primeval waters, tells Atum to kiss Maat and place her at his nose “so that your heart may live.” Maat the goddess

was the favorite daughter of the creator, the one who brought her father joy. *Maat* as a concept was the ordering and governing principle of the created world.¹⁴ The opposite of *maat* was *isfet* (chaos, disorder) or *gereg* (wrongdoing, evil). The creator and all his/her creations were to live on and through *maat*. All Egyptian rulers, and those who helped them to govern, were supposed to establish the state of *maat* on earth, "as it was in the First Time."

A series of cosmic events was part of the First Time. Shu and Tefnut separated from their father and came together in the first sexual union of male and female. Tefnut then gave birth to another pair of deities, a son Geb, who was associated with the earth, and a daughter Nut, who was associated with the sky. Geb and Nut embraced each other so ardently that there was no room between them for anything to exist. Nut conceived children but could not or would not give birth to them. Geb and Nut seemed to want to become one, reversing the movement toward diversity. If creation was to continue, another separation was necessary.

In his new manifestation of giver of life, Shu separated his children Geb and Nut. According to Coffin Texts spell 76, Shu lifted up his daughter Nut and set his son Geb under his feet. This image was first portrayed in detail on coffins and funerary papyri at the end of the New Kingdom. Geb is shown sprawling at the bottom of the picture, sometimes still in a state of sexual arousal. Shu stands with his arms raised supporting the arched body of Nut (see Figure 42). This arm position was the hieroglyphic symbol that wrote the word *ka* (life force or vital essence), which helps to emphasize that Shu is making life possible. Many other beings, including the entities known as the Heh gods, can be shown assisting Shu to support the sky above the earth.

Shu created a space between earth and sky in which creatures could breathe the air that gives life. In this space, the sun could rise for the first time and drive away the primeval darkness. This first sunrise is "the perfect moment" celebrated in numerous Egyptian texts and images. From this moment the creator was chiefly manifest in the world as the sun god Ra. The boundaries of the physical world became fixed, though the upper sky (Nut), the atmosphere (Shu), and the earth (Geb) were still encircled by the dark primeval waters. As part of establishing the divine order, Shu and Tefnut also become two different types of time. "Shu is Eternal Recurrence and Tefnut is Eternal Sameness."¹⁵ This began a great cycle in which everything had to change to survive and yet everything remained fundamentally the same.

The separation of Nut and Geb made it possible for their children to be born. These were the gods Osiris, Seth, and Horus "the Two-Eyed" and the goddesses Isis and Nephthys. Some sources leave out Horus. A tradition as old as the Pyramid Texts had Seth break violently out of his mother's womb. Seth was

a god whose nature linked him with chaos, so the birthday of Seth was said to be the day on which disorder and strife first entered the world.

Osiris, Seth, Isis, and Nephthys, together with Geb and Nut, Shu and Tefnut, and Ra-Atum, made up the four-generational group of deities known as the Ennead of Heliopolis or the Great Ennead. Horus, the sky falcon whose two eyes were the sun and the moon, was probably left out of the nine because he was usually thought of as a manifestation of the creator sun god. The number nine was sometimes used by the Egyptians to indicate “many,” so the establishment of the Ennead can stand for the creation of the whole pantheon of deities. Other deities were said to come into existence through words spoken by the creator or from substances exuded from his/her body, such as saliva, sweat, or blood.

Now that a world existed, it could be inhabited by the whole range of beings conceived of by the creator. These included all manner of animals, birds, fish, and reptiles “which are on the back of Geb.” In addition to these, there was “god’s herd”—humanity.

The Creation of Humanity. The creation of humanity does not occupy a central position in Egyptian myth. Some creation accounts omit humans altogether. They are only mentioned in passing in the Memphite Theology, listed between gods and cattle (a term covering all animals). The Egyptians sometimes divided sentient beings into four types: gods, kings, the spirits of the dead, and living people.

The Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom concentrate on the afterlife of the king and have little to say about living people, so it is not surprising that they contain no allusions to myths about the creation of humanity. Such myths seem to have been well established by the time of the Middle Kingdom. Several spells in the Coffin Texts include speeches referring to the creation of humanity. In Coffin Texts spell 1130, the Lord of All says that he created deities from his sweat and “people from the tears of my eye.” Everything that came from a god’s body was deemed to be divine and capable of creative power. As with the sneezing and spitting that produced Shu and Tefnut, wordplay is involved. The Egyptian words for *people* and for *tears* were homophones; they sounded similar although they would have been written differently. Most such mythical wordplay was ephemeral or relatively insignificant, but the association of people with divine tears was a popular theme for over 2,000 years.

Several different traditions about the tears of the creator are discernible even in Middle Kingdom writings. In Coffin Texts spell 80, these tears belong to the period of pre-creation. Humanity, it says, came forth from the Sole Eye, which was sent out while the creator Atum was still alone and inert in the

primeval waters. The cause of the Eye's weeping is not stated, but it may be from loneliness as it searches for other beings. The potential to produce humans is contained in the Eye, but they cannot come into existence until the world has been created. This is described later in the text, when Shu separates the earth and sky and gives the breath of life to all creatures on earth, including people, "in accordance with the command of Atum." So Atum wills the creation of humanity, but another deity carries it out.

In Coffin Texts spell 714, humanity is said to have sprung from tears wept by the creator because of the anger against him, tears that caused a temporary state of blindness. This may be a reference to the rage of the Sole Eye when she discovers that the creator has grown a new eye in her absence. The creator's blindness implies a temporary loss of his power of creative insight or perception (Sia). Humanity is the imperfect product of rage and misery: a genesis suited to the rebellious role humanity plays in mythical history.

One hymn to the creator states that humanity came forth from the two divine eyes, which are the sun and the moon.¹⁶ In the account of creation in the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus, people originate in the tears wept by the creator on the return of Shu and Tefnut. It is not clear whether these are tears of joy at the reunion with his children or tears of sorrow at the angry reaction of the solar eye. In the cosmogony of Neith, the sun god Ra is said to weep when he is first born because he finds himself alone and unable to see his mother. It is these tears of sorrow and loneliness that produce humanity. In contrast, deities arise as a by-product of Ra's joy when his mother, Neith, returns. So, most versions of the tears myth provide an explanation for the perpetually sorrowful and imperfect state of humanity.

In spite of this imperfection, the creator was said to have done many things to help humanity. In Coffin Texts 1130, the Lord of All describes his four good deeds. These were to create the four winds to give the breath of life to every body, to make the annual Nile flood so that everyone would get enough food, to create everyone with equal potential, and to make every person's heart "remember the West." This last deed implies that from the beginning humans were destined for an eternal life in the Beautiful West, the realm of the dead. A Middle Kingdom text set in the turbulent First Intermediate Period compares humanity with a flock and the (unnamed) creator with the good shepherd who cares for them. "For their sakes He made heaven and earth, and drove away the rapacity of the waters. So that their nostrils should live He made the winds. They are images of Him, come forth from His flesh. For their sakes He rises in heaven. For them He made plants and flocks. . . ."¹⁷

New Kingdom hymns to the creator god Amun also refer to god making people "in his own image" but are vague about how this was done. In a hymn to Ptah

this god is said to have “crafted people” as well as fashioning the physical forms of the gods. The bodies of deities were usually said to be made of precious metals and stones, but those of people were made from mud or clay. These were the materials used by the creator god Khnum, who “formed all on his potter’s wheel.”

Khnum did not perform this task just once during the First Time. His wheel was said to turn every day. He appears to be a god of continuous creation, working to make the bodies of all creatures destined to live on earth. Khnum shapes a body for each individual before they are born and a double for their *ka* or vital force. Hymns in the temple of Esna elaborate on this idea. They list all the parts of the human body created by Khnum and the functions they are to perform, such as the tongue for speaking and the legs for walking. The list includes both male and female body parts.

The Egyptian word for *people* used in creation texts was normally written with pictures of a man and a woman following the phonetic part of the word. Humanity seems to have been divided into two genders from the beginning. This is in contrast to other ancient mythologies that made woman an afterthought or an offshoot of the male body. One surviving text may suggest the existence of a myth of this type. This is the New Kingdom story known as the Two Brothers (see “Mythology in Literature” under “New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period ” in “Introduction”).

After being falsely accused of trying to rape his brother’s wife, Bata goes to live in a remote valley. There he meets the Ennead of Heliopolis. These nine gods decide to give Bata a wife to relieve his loneliness. Khnum shapes a woman with a body more beautiful than any other, and the divine exhalations of the Ennead give her life. This “perfect woman” soon leaves Bata to marry the king of Egypt and subsequently murders her husband in several of his incarnations. In this story, women seem to be regarded as intrinsically flawed.¹⁸ Much the same could be said, however, of most categories of being in the Egyptian universe. Even the creator was not always all-powerful or all-knowing.

Period of Direct Rule by the Creator Sun God

Summary: The creator sun god, usually identified as Ra, ruled the earth for a long period. There was no separation between gods and people during this era. Some deities defied the authority of the sun god when he began to age. The goddess Isis plotted to make her unborn son the heir of Ra. The Eye of Ra quarreled with her father but was persuaded to return to defend him. When humanity rebelled against his rule, Ra sent his Eye to destroy the evildoers and withdrew to live in the sky.

Most Egyptian chronologies start with a mythical period when Egypt and the rest of the world were ruled directly by creator gods. The creator was thought of as living in a palace in Egypt, the most favored part of his creation. Many cultures have a myth of a lost golden age, when gods or semidivine rulers presided over a world without pain or conflict. The Egyptian material only partly fits this pattern.

In the reign of Ra, the gods, including Maat, live on earth, and the creator cares for his creation in person. Everything should be in harmony with the divine order, but two things prevent this age from remaining one of perfect peace and joy. First, the sun god gradually grows old; second, there are plots and rebellions against his authority. Peace and joy do not generate interesting stories, so it is hardly surprising that the only myths set in this era deal with the decline and end of the sun god's reign.

The aging of the sun god is described in a story known in modern times as *Isis and Ra or the True Name of Ra*. Its ancient title places it among "the spells for warding off poison from the First Time," and the narrator is the scorpion goddess Serqet. Her monologue forms part of a healing spell, but it is composed in an excellent literary style.¹⁹ As the story occurs in few sources, it cannot be seen as a very important part of the mythical cycle, but the names of the sun god recorded in the story reflect the kind of theological speculation found in New Kingdom hymns to the creator. Gaining power over a supernatural being by discovering its secret "true name" is a constant theme of Egyptian magical and funerary texts and a common motif in the folktales of many cultures.

The True Name of Ra. The story begins with a statement by Serqet that the creator "made heaven, earth, the waters, the breath of life, gods, people, small and large cattle, reptiles, birds, and fishes." Deities and people were both ruled by the creator in his identity of Ra. He appeared in many forms and was known by many names, but none of these was his true name. This name was concealed in his stomach to prevent any hostile force from using it against him.

Only one deity dared to challenge Ra's authority; that was his "daughter" Isis. She was "cleverer than millions of gods." She knew everything in heaven and earth except the name of Ra. So she "plotted in her heart how to discover the name of this noble god." Isis's opportunity comes when Ra starts to show symptoms of old age, such as a drooping mouth and a tendency to drool. Isis finds some of Ra's saliva on the ground. She mixes it with earth and shapes it into a snake. When the snake comes to life, she leaves it at a crossroads where Ra passes every day.

When Ra next walks this road to view his creation, he is bitten by the unseen snake. The poison burns like fire, and Ra gives a terrible scream that dis-



Figure 13. Votive bronze statuette of Isis with her son, Horus the Child. (Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of Harley C. Lee and Elizabeth K. Lee, 1993. 110)

turbs all the gods. As the snake has come from the body of Ra just like the Eye goddess, it presumably has the same terrible fiery poison as that goddess's snake form. At first, Ra is unable to speak because his lips are trembling and his limbs are shaking. "The poison had overwhelmed his body like the inundation overwhelms everything in its path." Then the sun god takes courage and explains to his followers that he has been stung by an unknown creature, not created by him. He summons his "children," the other gods, to see if any of them can help him.

The gods are distraught at the catastrophe that has overtaken Ra. Isis pretends to be as bewildered and upset as the rest. She asks Ra if one of his own creations has rebelled against him and promises to destroy the attacker with her powerful magic. Ra then tells again how he was stung while walking through the Two Lands (Egypt) because "my heart longed to see what I have created." He gives a vivid de-

scription of the symptoms of snake bite. He feels colder than water and hotter than fire; he is drenched with sweat and has lost his sight.

Isis claims that she can help if Ra will tell her his name. Ra describes himself by many phrases that define his role as creator. He is the one who created the physical world, he "made the bull for the cow so sex came into being." He is the one who causes the Nile to flood. He is the one who divided the year into seasons and the day into hours. He ends by proclaiming that he is called Khepri

in the morning, Ra at noon, and Atum in the evening, but none of these is his true name; so the pain continues.

Isis insists that she cannot heal him without knowing his true name. When the pain gets worse, Ra gives in and whispers his name to Isis. The actual true name is not given in the story.²⁰ Ra tells Isis that when the time comes, she can pass on the secret to Horus, the son who will be born to her. Then Isis recites magical words that drive the poison out of Ra and destroy it. The mention of Horus at the end of the narrative provides a justification for the behavior of Isis. By gaining knowledge of the secret name to pass on to her son, she is ensuring that Horus will become the ruler of Egypt. The Egyptian audience for this story would know that her marvelous child, Horus, is himself destined to be poisoned in a similar way by a close relative and only cured through the secret knowledge of one of the gods.

Isis was not the only goddess to act against her “father,” the creator sun god. Isis acted in a secret manner, but the goddess known as the Eye of Ra openly defied his authority. The story of the quarrel between the solar eye and her father and its eventual resolution is sometimes known as the myth of the Distant Goddess.

The Distant Goddess. As described earlier, the Sole Eye was a separable active force even when the creator was still inert in the primeval waters. The Eye was sometimes treated as a female form of the sun god, but she was also called the “daughter of Ra.” Various important goddesses were associated with this role, most commonly Bastet, Hathor, Mut, Sekhmet, Tefnut, and Wadjet. For reasons that are rarely stated, the Eye goddess becomes angry and uncontrollable and refuses to stay with her father, Ra. Originally, this may only have been thought to happen when the Eye returned with Shu and Tefnut. Later versions of the myth seem to relate to the period when the world and humanity were well established.

In these versions, the Eye goes to a distant realm, sometimes identified with the Nubian or Libyan deserts. There she rages in her terrible leonine form, destroying everything she meets. Ra is left vulnerable to his enemies, so he sends out one or more of the gods to persuade his daughter to return. This is a dangerous undertaking because the fiery power of the solar eye is stronger than all other deities.

In some versions the chosen divine messenger is Onuris (Inhur). Onuris was a hunter god whose name means “the one who brings back the distant one.” The Onuris myth is only known from scattered allusions. It seems that as the most powerful and cunning of hunters, Onuris is able to track down and subdue the solar lioness. He brings her back to Egypt and is rewarded with marriage to the lion goddess.



Figure 14. A dwarf god celebrating the return of the Distant Goddess. A relief in a temple which originally stood on the island of Philae. (Courtesy of Geraldine Pinch)

Other texts name Shu as the one who goes to persuade his sister-consort Tefnut to return. A reference to Shu in Coffin Texts spell 75 as having “pacified her who is in the middle of her rage” may allude to this mythical role. Thoth sometimes accompanies Shu or undertakes the mission on his own.²¹ As “the heart and tongue” of the gods, Thoth uses wise words to appease the dangerous goddess.

Several versions of an elaborate literary treatment of this myth were current in the late first millennium BCE. In the longest of these, Hathor-Tefnut is roaming the distant southern desert in the form of a “Nubian cat.” Thoth disguises himself as a dog-faced baboon to approach the angry goddess. He alternately harangues and cajoles her. Thoth lectures her about her duty and dignity as the daughter of Ra. He tells her about the desolate and gloomy state that Egypt has fallen into without her bright presence. He paints word pictures of the delicious food offerings and the singing and dancing she will receive in the

temples of Egypt if she returns. Thoth also tells her a series of entertaining animal fables on the theme of cosmic justice.

The best known of these is the story of the lion and the mouse.²² It tells of a mighty lion who (like the Distant Goddess) inspired fear wherever he went. One day, in the remote mountains where the lion lived, he met a panther suffering horrible wounds. The lion asked the panther who had pulled out his fur and ripped his skin. The panther replied that it was "Man." The lion did not know what men were, but he resolved to find Man and punish him.

On his journey he encountered chained horses, donkeys, cows, and oxen. The lion asked them who had imprisoned them, and they all replied "Man." Then the lion found a bear and another lion who had both been tricked and tortured by Man. The lion vowed that he would make Man suffer the same pain he had inflicted on all these animals.

As the lion searched for Man, a tiny mouse ran under his paw. The mouse begged the lion not to crush him. He pointed out that he was too small to satisfy the lion's appetite. The mouse promised that if the lion gave him his life, he would one day save the lion in return. The lion laughed at this, because he thought that no one was powerful enough to endanger him, but he let the mouse go anyway.

The lion did not realize how cunning Man was. A hunter had set a net over a hidden pit. The lion fell into the trap and was caught in the meshes of the net and bound with leather straps. He struggled for hours but could not free himself. In the middle of the night, the little mouse came and told the lion that he had come to repay him for the gift of life, because "it is beautiful to do good." The mouse gnawed through the straps and ropes until the lion was free. Then the mouse climbed into the lion's mane, and they went back to the mountains together.

The implication of this and the other fables is that if the destructive anger of the solar eye is not balanced by the justice and truth personified by Maat, the world will slide into chaos. The volatile goddess is not easy to persuade. One vivid passage describes how she becomes angry with Thoth and transforms from a cat into the terrible solar lioness whose eyes and nostrils spurt flame. Then "Thoth jumped like a frog, he quivered like a grasshopper."

Eventually, Thoth lures the goddess back toward Egypt. On the borders she is greeted with music and dancing that help to transform her into the "beautiful of face." This is the first of a series of benevolent forms of the Eye goddess.²³ An obscure passage deals with an attack on the goddess while she is sleeping. Thoth wakes her in time, and the forces of chaos are defeated. Eventually the goddess reaches Memphis, the capital of Egypt, where she is transformed into Hathor of the Southern Sycamore and joyfully reunited with her father. She is

needed to defend the creator sun god from his enemies. Chief among these, as in the fable of the lion and the mouse, is "Man."

In many mythologies, the gods make several attempts at creating people before they are satisfied. Such myths usually involve the destruction of the unsatisfactory part of humanity. As early as the Middle Kingdom, there are references to the creator deciding to destroy humanity and abandon the earth.²⁴ The fullest version of this myth is given in a text known as the Book of the Heavenly Cow, which is inscribed in five royal tombs of the New Kingdom. The earliest copy is on one of the large golden shrines surrounding the coffins of King Tutankhamun.²⁵

The Destruction of Humanity. After Ra had become the ruler of both gods and men,

Humanity plotted against him, while his majesty, may he live, may he prosper, may he be healthy, had grown old. His bones became silver, his flesh became gold, his hair true lapis-lazuli. When his majesty saw how humanity was plotting against him, his majesty said to his followers "Summon for me, my Eye, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut and the father and mothers who were with me when I was in the primeval waters, as well as the god Nun.²⁶ Let him bring his followers with him, but bring them secretly in case the humans see and their hearts escape.

The gods and goddesses all came and asked Ra to speak. He told them, "Humanity, which came into being from my Eye, is plotting against me. Advise me what you would do about it." Nun and the other deities advise Ra to send his Eye against the rebels. "No Eye is more able to smite them. Let it go down as Hathor."

The guilty ones among humanity flee into the desert through fear of Ra, but Hathor slaughters them and wades in their blood. When she returns to Ra, she tells him that she has "overpowered humanity and it was sweet to my heart." Ra replies, "I shall have power over them as king by culling them." Thus, says the text, "the Powerful One came into being."²⁷

The goddess intends to continue her slaughter the next day, but for reasons that are not explained, Ra has changed his mind. He summons messengers who can travel as fast as shadows and sends them to fetch a large quantity of a red mineral. Then he orders the Side-Lock Wearer in Heliopolis, a title of the high priest of Ra, to grind up the mineral while his maid servants mash barley to make beer. They make 7,000 jars of beer and add the red mineral to it to make the beer look like blood. Ra has the beer taken to the place where the goddess plans to destroy humanity. Before dawn Ra pours the red beer out until the fields are flooded to a depth of "three palms."²⁸ When the goddess arrives at dawn, she sees her own

beautiful reflection in the flood. "She drank and it delighted her heart. She came back drunk without having noticed humanity." Ra welcomed her back and from that day on alcohol was drunk during the festivals of Hathor.²⁹

It is not clear whether Ra took pity on humanity after the first day's slaughter or whether he only wanted to save the portion of humanity that he regarded as innocent. The latter is probably implied by the fact that the people killed on the first day have fled to the desert, part of the realm of chaos. These people become Enemies of Ra, a group that is shown in the Underworld Books being horribly tortured in the afterlife. The second day's slaughter is to take place in fields, presumably in the agricultural land of the Nile valley, usually associated with the realm of order.

The goddess Maat was sometimes said to have been sent down to live among humanity. She would stay with a virtuous person even after their death, but in times of general disorder and strife she would withdraw. Humanity was sometimes divided into the Followers of Horus (good) and the Followers of Seth (bad). This division appears to justify the ruthless destruction of many humans by the gods. A ritual drama inscribed on the walls of the temple of Horus of Edfu describes a rebellion by the people of Nubia in the 363rd year of Ra's reign. The rebels are tricked into killing each other, and their leader, Seth, is beheaded. A myth in Papyrus Jumilhac tells how the goddess Isis transforms herself into a form of Hathor, slaughters all the Followers of Seth with fire, and wades in their blood. This might seem to be a direct borrowing from the Book of the Heavenly Cow, but it should probably be seen as an example of a repeating pattern of events.

In the Book of the Heavenly Cow, even though the rebels have been defeated, the world can never be the same again. Ra announces that he is sick and weary, and he cannot bear to remain on earth. Nun, the god of the primeval waters, orders Shu and Nut to help Ra. Nut is transformed into a cow, and Ra rides away on her back. As the earth darkens, some of humanity beg Ra to stay, and they shoot at his enemies. This, says the text, was how death came into being. From this point on, humanity has to fight and die to maintain the divine order.

Nut carries Ra up into the heavens, and the single creator god transforms himself into many heavenly bodies. He creates the fields of paradise for the spirits of the dead. Nut "began to tremble because of the height," so Ra creates the Heh gods who live in twilight. Shu and the Heh gods support the body of Nut. Then Ra tells Geb to warn the powerful serpents that live under the earth not to abuse their magic because he will still look down on them. Ra puts Osiris in charge of humanity and calls "the moon of Thoth" into being, so that Thoth can rule the night sky as his deputy. This begins the era when the world was ruled by a series of lesser gods.

Period of Rule by Other Gods

Summary: After the creator had withdrawn, the earth was ruled by a series of gods. Violent struggles sometimes accompanied the transfer of power from one generation to the next. Osiris, son of Geb, was chosen as king of Egypt and ruled with his sister, Isis. Their ideal reign was brought to an end by the jealousy of their brother, Seth. This god and his followers murdered Osiris and mutilated his body. With the aid of magic, Isis was able to revive the body of Osiris long enough for her to conceive a son. Isis fled to the marshes where she gave birth to Horus.

Both the child Horus and the body of Osiris were frequently attacked by Seth and his followers. Horus survived to challenge Seth's right to rule Egypt. The two gods fought each other in many different ways. The Eye of Horus was damaged by Seth, and the testicles of Seth were damaged by Horus. Thoth restored the damaged Eye, and eventually Horus prevailed. He became king of Egypt and was reconciled with Seth. Horus performed rites that helped Osiris to rise again as king of the Underworld. In time, Horus was succeeded as king of Egypt by a series of gods and demigods.

The Reigns of Shu, Geb, and Osiris. Egyptian king lists trace the ancestry of historical kings back into a mythical age. According to Manetho's history of Egypt, this age lasted for over 11,000 years.³⁰ The order of the rulers in this divine dynasty was not fixed. Creator deities such as Ptah or Ra sometimes begin the list of divine ancestors, but either Shu or Geb may be named as the first god-kings of Egypt. Other sources treat Osiris or his son Horus as the first Egyptian kings. In stories such as *Astarte and the Sea* (see "Astarte" in "Deities, Themes, and Concepts") and the *Two Brothers*, the Great Ennead seem to rule as a group. The idea that each generation of the Ennead must have ruled in turn is probably a later rationalization of mythical history to fit an established pattern of royal succession.

Hymns to Shu in the Harris Magical Papyrus hail this god as the eldest son and heir of Ra and the king of Upper and Lower Egypt. The myth of Shu's separation of his children Geb and Nut to create the cosmos seems at some point to have been reinterpreted in more human terms of sexual jealousy and father-son rivalry. The latent hostility between Shu and his son, Geb, is made explicit in a text of the fourth century BCE.³¹ Like Ra before him, Shu has to contend with the forces of chaos and with rebels against the divine order. Geb challenges Shu's leadership, which causes the latter to withdraw from the world. Geb either rapes his mother, Tefnut, or takes her as his chief queen; thus he separates Shu from his sister-wife, as Shu had previously separated Geb from his sister-



Figure 15. A ruler of the fourth century BCE worships Osiris Wenenefer (center), shown as an idealized king of Egypt. Relief in the temple of Behbeit el-Hagar. (Courtesy of Geraldine Pinch)

wife. That Geb's claim to the throne is disputed is clear from an episode in which he tries to put on his father's headdress and is burned by its serpent guardian. Eventually, Geb is accepted as ruler and has to rally his forces to defend Egypt against the "children of Apophis."

More usually, Geb was regarded as the legitimate ruler of everything on earth. In the *Book of the Heavenly Cow*, Geb seems to be the chosen heir of the departing sun god. The warnings in this text about the need to control "the snakes who are in the earth and the water" suggest that Geb's reign was not thought of as a peaceful one. In the fragmentary tale of *Astarte and the Sea*, a sea monster opposes the gods and exacts tribute from Geb and Nut. A few scattered references allude to a myth in which Osiris tries to seize power from his father, Geb.³²

When Geb passed on the throne to his eldest son, Osiris, it might be logical to assume that he withdrew under the earth as Ra and Shu had withdrawn to the sky. There is, however, no clear account of this happening. After the reign

of Osiris, Geb takes on the role of judge in the Divine Tribunal of the gods. This Tribunal usually seems to meet in Egypt itself rather than in the underworld.

In most Egyptian sources, the reign of Osiris is only described in the vaguest terms. Osiris is the good king, and Isis is his queen and chief protector. The oldest references to Osiris link him with the astral or the funerary spheres. By the end of the Old Kingdom it became customary for all kings to be regarded as a form of Osiris after they died. The idea that Osiris had once reigned on earth as these kings did probably postdates this development.

When Greek writers began to take an interest in the myths of Osiris, they recreated Osiris and Isis as the great “culture heroes” who taught agriculture and crafts to the peoples of the world and established law and religion. Plutarch claimed that Osiris had civilized the whole world, a way of acknowledging the cultural debt that the Greeks felt they owed to Egypt. For the Egyptians, “culture heroes” were largely unnecessary, since most aspects of civilization were already implicit in the creator’s establishment of *maat*.

The Murder of Osiris. The death of Osiris is one of the most important events in Egyptian myth and one of the most obscure. There are no detailed accounts of the murder until the late first millennium BCE, and even these occur in descriptions of Egyptian religion by foreigners. In the Pyramid Texts, Seth is named as the attacker of Osiris and, by implication, as his killer. In Pyramid Texts spell 477, Seth claims to be taking revenge for a kick that Osiris had given him. Later tales loosely based on the Osiris myth make sexual jealousy a motive for the falling out between the two brothers. Some Egyptologists have argued that Osiris was originally a god of the dead rather than a god who died,³³ but once the concept of Osiris’s death was established, a slayer had to be identified.

Many Egyptian texts imply that Seth took the form of a dangerous animal, such as a wild bull, a wild ass, or a crocodile, to kill his brother in a lonely place. The Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts allude to Osiris being cast down or trampled and his body thrown in the Nile. In later times it was often stated that Osiris died by drowning. Being a god, Osiris probably had to be killed in several different ways to render him permanently dead.

A belief developed that the attack on Osiris was a unique and terrible crime, carried out on the “night of the great storm.” Yet in theological terms, his was a necessary death. By dying, Osiris becomes ruler of the underworld and a source of life for others. A remarkable dialogue in Book of the Dead spell 175 has Osiris complain about his sad fate to Atum. The creator god replies that Osiris has been favored beyond all others. He has been granted an eternal kingdom in the “land of silence,” whereas his son will be the perpetual ruler in the land of the living. Many Egyptian thinkers tried to make sense of death by mak-

ing something positive out of the death of Osiris, but it is the loneliness and despair of Osiris that is the most memorable element in this dialogue.

Early allusions to the death of Osiris all imply that it took place in a remote spot with no witnesses. Classical writers change this into a public assassination. Diodorus Siculus (whose visit to Egypt is described in "Introduction") says that Osiris was butchered by "his brother Typhon" (Seth). Typhon divided the body into twenty-six pieces and gave one piece to each of his followers to keep.

Plutarch relates that in the twenty-eighth year of Osiris's reign, Typhon (Seth) and his followers plotted against him. Typhon secretly obtained the exact measurements of his brother's body and had a beautiful chest made to fit it.³⁴ Typhon displayed the chest at a feast and promised to give it to whoever could fit inside it. Seth's seventy-two followers all tried the chest, but it did not fit any of them. Finally Osiris lay down in the chest. As soon as he did so, the conspirators bolted on the lid and sealed the chest with molten lead. Then they threw it into a branch of the Nile, which carried the chest out into the Mediterranean sea.

Isis was away in the city of Coptos, but she heard a terrible lament from the deities of the northern marshes and knew that Osiris was dead. She searched Egypt for the body and followed sightings of the chest all the way to Byblos in the Lebanon.³⁵ There the chest had grown into a marvelous tree that the king of Byblos had felled and made into a pillar in his palace. Isis stayed in the palace for a while in disguise before declaring herself and demanding the pillar containing her husband's coffin. She brought the coffin back to the Delta, but one night Typhon found it. He tore the body into fourteen parts and scattered them throughout Egypt. Isis searched for the parts and buried each in the place where she found it. The penis of Osiris had been eaten by fish, so she had to replace this with a model.³⁶ Some parts of Plutarch's narrative have few parallels in Egyptian sources, but from the Pyramid Texts onward, Isis is presented as a grieving wife searching the country for her murdered husband.

Isis is usually helped by her sister, Nephthys, and both goddesses may take bird form to carry out the search. When Isis finds the body or its parts, she restores them to wholeness. This originally seems to have meant that Isis was able to reverse the putrefaction of the flesh so feared by the Egyptians.

By the end of the second millennium BCE, the idea of the mutilation of the body by Seth was firmly established. This concept was greatly elaborated in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. Lists on temple walls mention fourteen or sixteen parts of the body of Osiris buried at various sacred sites. This was sometimes increased to forty-two parts, one for each district of Egypt.

The vigil of Isis and Nephthys as they watch over and lament the body of Osiris is one of the keynote images of Egyptian culture. It is unusual in showing

deities experiencing strong emotion, even though this emotion is conveyed by formalized gestures of mourning, such as beating the brow.

Isis already knows that she is destined to bear a child who will be king. In order to bring this about, she has to revive the sexual powers of Osiris, just as the Hand Goddess aroused the penis of the creator to create the first life. A relief at Abydos shows the all-important moment when Isis in bird form uses her wings to fan the breath of life into Osiris. Hymns celebrate the exaltation of Isis when she knows that she has conceived the child who “is king even in the egg.” Summoned by her cry of triumph, other deities acknowledge and bow down to the unborn Horus.

At some point, the myth of the death of Osiris and the restoration of his body by Isis was combined with the cult of Anubis as protector of the dead and overseer of funerary rites. All aspects of an Egyptian funeral were given mythical precedents in the mummification, entombment, and revivification of Osiris. A number of myths, particularly in Papyrus Jumilhac, deal with attempts by Seth and his followers to destroy or despoil the body of Osiris. The corpse is successfully protected by the magic of Thoth and by the ferocity of Anubis in his role as guardian of the tomb.

The Birth and Childhood of Horus. After a pregnancy of ten months, Isis gives birth to a son called Horus. This god was often referred to as Horus, son of Isis, to distinguish him from Horus the Elder, the sky god whom some traditions made a brother of Osiris and Seth. These two gods had distinct mythologies but were often treated as aspects of the same deity.

The place of Horus’s birth is said to be in the Delta, usually in the region of Chemmis. To evade his enemies, the divine child was hidden inside a papyrus thicket or on a floating island. This “nest of Horus” is one of the few mythical places that is commonly shown in Egyptian art. Temple wall scenes depict kings in the role of the Horus child in the marshes being washed or suckled by a cow. This cow can be identified with a number of goddesses but most often with Hathor, whose name literally means Mansion of Horus. She seems to have been regarded as the mother of Horus the Elder and the wet nurse or foster mother of Horus the Younger.³⁷ Many other deities were imagined as protecting the divine child whenever Isis was forced to be absent.

In literary spells these deities can be changed into the humble human inhabitants of the marsh. The theme of the poisoning of the infant Horus was a common one in magical texts (see “Horus the Child” and “Serqet” in “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”). Several spells start with Isis lamenting because her child has been poisoned. The source of the poison is usually the bite of an earth-dwelling snake.

Since destroying your enemies by sending a dangerous animal after them was a standard Egyptian curse, Seth should probably be regarded as the instigator of the attack. In one spell, Isis appeals to her mother, Nut, and her father, Geb, the controller of the earth snakes. In others she challenges the creator sun god to heal her innocent child. The creator sends one of his manifestations or attendant deities to drive the poison out of Horus, to the great joy of Isis.

The Metternich Stela and other magical stelae of this type show Horus as a naked child triumphing over all kinds of dangerous creatures. Some of these creatures, such as the oryx (a species of desert-dwelling antelope), were particularly associated with Seth. In a few magical texts it is the foolishness or greed of the young Horus that is to blame for his plight. In one spell, the young god suffers from a terrible stomachache after naughtily eating a sacred fish and has to appeal to his mother for help.³⁸ Horus is still an impetuous youth when he takes up the struggle to avenge the death of his father and gain the crown of Egypt.

The Struggles of Horus and Seth.

Some sources give Seth a reign of hundreds of years; others imply an interregnum, during which Seth and Horus struggle to establish who is fit to rule Egypt. Seth is consis-



Figure 16. Cippus (magical stela) with a central figure of Horus the Child overcoming evil animals and reptiles. (Chicago Oriental Institute Museum)

tently portrayed as sexually abusing the young Horus. This may be implied in the Pyramid Texts by the frequent references to the mutilation of the eye of Horus and the testicles of Seth.³⁹ The injury to Seth is sometimes interpreted as castration and sometimes merely as losing the “seed” from his testicles.

In the Middle Kingdom Kahun Papyrus, Horus complains to Isis that Seth has been admiring his buttocks and wants to sleep with him. Isis advises her son to tell Seth that he dares not sleep with him unless Seth shares some of his magical strength. When Seth has agreed to make Horus stronger, Horus must pretend to let Seth have his way but take care to catch all Seth’s semen in his fingers.

The Middle Kingdom text breaks off at this point, but a version of the story is found in the New Kingdom Contendings of Horus and Seth. In this text, Horus catches Seth’s semen in his hand and brings it to his mother. Isis cuts off the polluted hand and throws it in the river (see “Sobek” in “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”). After making Horus a new hand, she uses her own hand to give Horus an erection and catches his semen in a pot. In this episode Isis is appropriately playing the role of the Hand Goddess who combines with the penis of the creator to make the first life.

Isis spreads the semen of Horus on the leaves of some lettuces in Seth’s garden. When Seth eats the lettuces he becomes pregnant by Horus and gives birth to a radiant disk through the top of his head. Thoth takes the disk and places it on the brow of Horus as a sign that he is the true heir of the creator sun god.⁴⁰

A cluster of myths deal with the mutilation of the eye or eyes of Horus (see “Eyes of Horus” in “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”). In Horus’s sky falcon form, his eyes could be regarded as the sun and the moon or as the morning and evening stars. References in the Pyramid Texts to the eye of Horus being made small by the finger of Seth may relate to lunar phenomena (see “The Egyptian Year” under “Cyclical Time” later in this chapter). Later texts, such as Book of the Dead spell 17, imply that the eye was torn out and swallowed or broken into pieces by Seth.

In some versions, both eyes of Horus are blinded or torn out. Although Seth is the aggressor, he is sometimes said to be punishing Horus for mutilating or raping his mother, Isis.⁴¹ In the Contendings of Horus and Seth, Horus becomes angry with his mother for helping Seth and cuts off her head. One myth has Thoth heal Isis by giving her a cow’s head to replace the head that Horus has taken away.⁴² The Ennead decrees that Horus should be punished. Seth rips out the eyes of Horus and buries them on a mountainside, where they grow into lotuses. In this story, the eyes of Horus are restored by his foster mother, Hathor. In other versions he is healed by Isis or Thoth. The latter is particularly associated with finding the eye of Horus when it is lost or putting it back together

when it has been torn into many pieces. This myth mirrors the mutilation and reunion of the body of Osiris.

Many references to the contests between the Two Fighters imply that Horus and Seth were gods of equal strength. These probably reflect the tradition that Horus and Seth were brothers. Other versions adapt to the concept of Seth fighting with his younger and weaker nephew by making Horus win through guile. In the Contendings of Horus and Seth, the two gods compete by turning themselves into hippopotami and seeing who can stay under water longer. Later Horus challenges Seth to a race in stone boats. Horus's boat is only wood painted to look like stone. Seth tries to make a real stone boat that sinks as soon as it is launched.

The combat between the two gods was reenacted on temple lakes. By the first millennium BCE, the duel had become a battle between opposing sides with the Followers of Horus fighting the Followers of Seth. In the sacred play the Triumph of Horus, Horus pursues Seth by boat and attacks him with harpoons.

The Triumph of Horus. The Two Fighters disturbed the whole cosmos with their quarrel. The case needed to be brought before a Divine Tribunal so that right could be established and a peace made. This Divine Tribunal is usually headed by Geb, though the ultimate authority is the creator sun god. The Tribunal is said to assemble in various places, but most often in Heliopolis.

Myths deal with two different trials. In what is probably the older tradition, it is Osiris who is the plaintiff against Seth. Sometimes the body of Osiris is said to be present in court supported by Isis and Nephthys. Seth tries to justify his violence toward his brother but fails. Osiris is vindicated as "one true of voice," a term that came to be applied to all the virtuous dead. Only then, some sources imply, could Osiris complete his metamorphosis into the ruler of the underworld. Osiris is not resurrected in the sense of returning to life as an individual on earth. He enters into a new kind of existence in a separate realm that most beings can only reach by dying.

In some accounts Seth is punished by being forced to carry the body of Osiris to its final resting place. While performing this humiliating task, Seth can be envisaged as a boat, a carrying chair, a bull, or an ox. Even after Osiris became ruler of the dead, his corpse was preserved in a tomb, where it remained a source of great power.

In a parallel tradition, the disputants are Horus and Seth. Various deities put the case for each side. Osiris is sometimes represented as sending messages from the underworld to support his son's case. Osiris ominously reminds the other gods that only he can create the crops that feed them. Seth's claim rests chiefly on his being the strongest of the gods, whereas Horus stresses the legiti-

macy of his place in the royal succession. This argument between might and right must have seemed topical at many crisis points in Egyptian history.

It would be natural to assume that this crucial myth would always have the same ending, but many variations on the divine verdict are recorded. These variations are due to the fluctuating status of Seth as a national god and to the different contexts in which the myth might be used. The strength of Seth was needed to defend the gods from their enemies, so it was necessary to reintegrate the loser into the community of the gods.

In order to reconcile the Two Fighters and turn them into the Two Lords, the Divine Tribunal divided the land between Horus and Seth. Horus got Lower Egypt and Seth Upper Egypt, or Horus the Black Land of the Nile valley and Seth the Red Land of the deserts. The image of Horus and Seth uniting the Two Lands to support the ruling king was a popular one in royal art up to the end of the New Kingdom (see Figure 46).

In the Memphite Theology and other texts, however, this division of the kingdom is subsequently challenged, and Horus is given all of Egypt. The tale of the Contendings of Horus and Seth, written down at a time when the cult of Seth was particularly popular, has Seth summoned to live with Ra in the sky as god of storms. This fits with Seth's traditional role as a powerful protector of Ra in his sun boat.

In versions of the myth that occur in hymns or rituals concerning Osiris, Seth is driven out of Egypt rather than being compensated with any kind of divine realm. He may even be given over to Horus and Isis to be punished or executed. This is his fate in most temple texts of the first millennium BCE. At Edfu, the triumph of Horus over Seth was celebrated with the cutting up of a hippopotamus—the final act in the sequence of mutilations that began with the dismemberment of Osiris (see Figure 32).

Hymns and literary accounts of the Horus and Seth conflict usually end with a chorus of praise for the newly crowned Horus. Royal rituals and funerary texts that are structured by episodes from the Osiris myth have a different focus. Before or during his own coronation, Horus is represented as carrying out a series of rituals for his father, Osiris, including the Opening of the Mouth and the raising of a symbolic pillar (see "*Djed Pillar*" in "*Deities, Themes, and Concepts*"). These acts correspond with stages in the royal funerary ritual performed by the heir of the deceased king to ensure that king's survival in the afterlife. These rites validated the royal succession by confirming Osiris in his new role as king of the dead and Horus in his role as king of the living.

In these contexts, Osiris is represented as too weak or passive to achieve the transformation to ruler of the underworld without his heir's help. Here he seems to embody the vulnerability of the Egyptian state in dangerous transi-

tional periods. Other sources, such as hymns to Osiris, portray the god as having been created by Atum to be a powerful and terrifying force, the underworld equivalent of the sun god.⁴³ The “inertness” of Osiris is then comparable to that of the creator before the First Time.

The “time of Horus” was made the prototype for the reign of every king. Hymns refer to it as a time of peace and prosperity when evil and crime were unknown. In most Egyptian king lists, the reign of Horus is followed by periods of rule by other deities, such as Thoth and Maat. Then come nine *akhu* (spirits), associated with Hierakonpolis, Buto, and Heliopolis; towns that are known to have been important in the early history of Egypt. With these kings, and with a series of kings of lesser status known as the Followers of Horus, myth blends imperceptibly into history.

Period of Rule by Kings

Summary: Dynasties of gods and demigods were succeeded by dynasties of human kings who acted as intermediaries between humanity and the gods. This period corresponds with the time span of Pharaonic history. Gods and goddesses mainly communicated with people through temple rituals, oracles, or dreams, though deities might still be encountered beyond the boundaries of the Black Land. Most humans could only enter the divine realm by dying, but stories were told of priest-magicians who had the power to pass between the worlds of the living and the dead.

The king was responsible for upholding the divine order in the world of the living. Failure to obey the laws of *maat* could lead to periods of chaos. These only ended when a new royal champion of *maat* arose. The gods might intervene in history by fathering such hero-kings.

Once the gods had withdrawn, humanity had to play an active role, through ritual and ethical behavior, in keeping any kind of divine presence on earth. Regular offerings and elaborate rites ensured that deities were present in statues or sacred animals kept in temples, but their true forms were thought to be in the divine realm.

On temple walls, kings are shown perpetually interacting with the gods, but specific communications from a deity to an individual king are usually described as coming in the form of a dream or a portent. The best known example is King Thutmose IV's dream encounter with the deity manifest in the Great Sphinx at Giza (see “Sphinx” in “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”). Similar dreams were occasionally recorded by private individuals of the elite class. It was probably the *ba* of a person that was thought to be able to enter the divine

realm in sleep and converse with gods and spirits. Ordinary Egyptians did not expect to meet their deities until after they had died.

Strange Encounters. Encounters between people and deities are described in stories that use mythological themes, but these usually take place beyond the Nile valley. In the story of the Two Brothers, it is only after the hero, Bata, leaves Egypt for the remote Valley of the Pine that he meets the Ennead. In the tale known as the Shipwrecked Sailor, an Egyptian survives a shipwreck in the Red Sea and is washed ashore on a paradise island. When he makes an offering to the gods to thank them for the food he finds on the island, a giant human-headed serpent appears.

The sailor is terrified, but the serpent promises that no harm will come to him and that he will be reunited with his family. The serpent reveals that there were once seventy-five snakes on the island, suggesting that he may be the creator sun god who traditionally had seventy-five forms. The serpent eventually sends the sailor back to Egypt laden with treasure but warns him that he will never find the “island of the spirit” again.

The hero of this tale does not behave heroically in the sense of being particularly strong, brave, or selfless. All the sailor does is show the proper attitude for humans by giving thanks to the gods even in adversity and by believing the serpent’s message of hope. In most Egyptian tales, intelligence and natural eloquence or book learning are more admired than feats of arms or willingness to die with honor. The main characters are often priest-magicians (see “Imhotep” and “Magicians” in “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”) who deal with threats from ghosts, demons, and foreign sorcerers by using spells, amulets, and rituals. The ability to communicate with supernatural beings is the basis of their power. Some stories feature magicians who are able to see the true forms of the gods or enter the *Duat* while still alive, but Egyptian literature is full of warnings about the misuse of such powers by the magicians or their royal patrons.

Magical tales were often set in the time of famous kings, such as Djoser (c. 2667–2648 BCE) or Rameses II (1279–1213 BCE), whose reigns were sufficiently far in the past to be imagined as an age of marvels. Nearly all Egyptian tales feature some royal characters, who are not always shown in a favorable light. In literature, kings and princes may be fallible or even cruel and lustful. In most royal inscriptions, by contrast, kings are presented as heroes on a cosmic stage.

Kings and Gods. Each king fulfilled the creator’s plan and the judgment of the Divine Tribunal: that Horus, son of Osiris, should always rule. Ideally, every new king (Horus) had to succeed his father (Osiris), even if history had to be

reedited to accomplish this so that intervening reigns or lack of blood relationships were ignored.

Many kings claimed that they, like Horus, had been chosen to rule “while still in the egg.” In practice, it was the inauguration rituals that turned the chosen heir into “the living Horus.” Since the office of kingship was so vital to the stability of Egyptian society, interruptions in the royal succession had to be explained as direct interventions by deities. The accession of individual kings might be validated by giving them a divine parent. One such royal birth myth is found in the inauguration inscriptions of King Horemheb (c. 1319–1307 BCE).⁴⁴

Horemheb was a soldier who served under Akhenaten and Tutankhamun, but the inscription presents his career in mythological terms. He is called the son of Horus, Lord of Hnes: the form of the Horus worshipped in Horemheb's native town. Horemheb claims that his exceptional qualities were evident as soon as he was born and that Horus of Hnes always intended that he should be king. To bring this about, Horus takes Horemheb to Thebes and presents him to the god Amun-Ra at Karnak and Luxor temples. Horemheb is accepted by Amun-Ra and by his daughter, the Eye goddess, and acclaimed by a gathering of all the gods. Horemheb is then able to restore the country and its institutions to the way things were “in the time of Ra.”

This inscription can be interpreted as a factual account of Horemheb's inauguration at Thebes during the Opet Festival in the presence of statues of the gods, but it elevates these events to the divine realm. A historical event of the fourteenth century BCE becomes part of the repeating cycle of the acceptance of the rightful heir by the Divine Tribunal and his restoration of harmony to Egypt.

In the Egyptian worldview, each reign was supposed to be a successful battle by the leader of the forces of order (the king or a prince representing him) against the forces of chaos (rebels, foreigners, and dangerous creatures or natural forces). Such victories were routinely attributed to the reigning king whether or not they had actually taken place, so that much Egyptian history is mythical in the modern sense of not being factually true.

Rameses II, for example, presented himself as a hero-king even though his greatest achievement was probably the peace treaty he negotiated with the rival Hittite empire. Scenes of his famous battle against the Hittites at Qadesh decorate the walls of many of the temples that he built. Conforming to the mythical prototype of the champion of order, Rameses is shown as a gigantic figure triumphing over chaotic crowds of enemies. A poem that accompanies the reliefs stresses the vulnerability of the king, however, and claims that disaster was only averted through the intervention of the god Amun.⁴⁵



Figure 17. King Rameses II smites the enemies of Egypt and the divine order while Amun-Ra looks on. Relief in Karnak temple. (Courtesy of Geraldine Pinch)

Royal, religious, and literary texts all admit the possibility that if humans fail to obey the laws of *maat*, chaos can get the upper hand. Specific acts, such as desecrating the tombs of the dead or failing to build proper homes for the gods, are sometimes blamed for these periods of national disaster. At such times, the gods withdraw even further from humanity, and “their sanctuaries are empty.”

Some texts, such as the Middle Kingdom Words of Neferti or the Roman Period Potter’s Oracle, project graphic descriptions of “a land in calamity” into the future. The prophecy of Neferti describes a period of turmoil and misery but ends with a vision of “a king from the south” who will overcome rebels and foreign enemies so that “Truth will return to its proper place, with Chaos driven outside.”⁴⁶ This future was the recent past for the author of the prophecy, as the “king from the south” was Amenemhet I, a commoner who founded the Twelfth Dynasty.

This alternation between order and chaos was seen as the pattern of human history, but a few writings allowed the possibility that one day the slide into chaos would not be stopped by a royal hero, humanity would be totally destroyed, and the world would end.

Return to Chaos

Summary: The end of the world will come about because of quarrels among deities or rebellions by humanity. The creator will become weary, and the world will return into the dark primeval waters from which it came.

In Book of the Dead spell 175, Atum complains to Thoth about “the children of Nut,” a term that can refer to the fourth generation of the Great Ennead or to the gods in general. The children of Nut are accused of making rebellion, war, and carnage and of dividing up the wholeness of creation. Thoth, who was in charge of fixing the length of all creatures’ lives, decrees that their years will be cut short.

In the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor, the serpent deities are suddenly destroyed by fire. Only the great serpent (the creator) and his little daughter (the Eye goddess/Maat) survive the holocaust. The serpent god warns the sailor that when he leaves, the “island of the spirit” will sink beneath the sea. This evokes an image of the Primeval Mound, the place of creation, being covered by the *nun* again.

In Coffin Texts spell 1130, after the creator has described the gifts he has given to humanity, he goes on to say that after millions of years he will become one with Osiris. When this happens, there will no longer be a division between life and death, and everything on earth will go through a period of catastrophic change. In Book of the Dead spell 175, Atum declares that after millions of years he will destroy everything that he has made “and the land will return into the Deep, into the Flood, as it was before (creation).” A spell in the Harris Magical Papyrus has the magician claim that he can, like the creator, cause the earth to go down into the primeval waters and the south to become north.

This strain of thought seems to be reflected in the Roman Period Hermetic text known as the Asclepius. In this dialogue, Hermes Trismegistus warns that in the “old age of the world” the gods will go back to heaven, Egypt will be deserted, and “all the people will die.”⁴⁷ References to an absolutely final destruction are rare in Egyptian or Egyptian-based texts. Even the Asclepius promises that the supreme god will remake the world. The **eschatology** of Egypt is most truly represented by the cycles of destruction and renewal expounded in the New Kingdom Underworld Books. Many of the events from this linear time line recur in cyclical time.

CYCLICAL TIME

The Egyptian universe remained eternally the same only through constant change in the form of cycles of decay, death, and rebirth. The Ouroboros, a snake



Figure 18. *The sun child inside the Ouroboros snake supported by the sky cow and the lions of yesterday and tomorrow. Vignette from the funerary papyrus of Herweben. (British Museum)*

swallowing its own tail, was an Egyptian image adopted by many other cultures as a symbol of eternity. It signified the capacity of the universe to perpetually renew itself, so that every end could also be a beginning.

The Egyptian Year

The great events of Egyptian myth could be treated either as things that happened once in the remote past or as things that needed to happen over and over again. The inauguration of a king, which ideally took place at New

Year, reenacted the creation of the world and the reign of the sun god as well as the establishment of "the living Horus" on the throne of his father.⁴⁸ Each year of a king's reign was seen as mirroring the great cycle of the creation, decay, and renewal of the cosmos. An annual renewal of kingship ceremony at Thebes seems to have involved a reenactment of a vital stage in the process of creation: the union between the creator and the Hand goddess.⁴⁹ After thirty years, the length of a generation, the king had to undergo a much more elaborate renewal process to identify himself once again with the life-giving youthful forms of the creator and the sun god.⁵⁰

The last month of the year was feared as a time when the gods seemed to be punishing humanity as they had after the rebellion against the sun god (see "Sekhmet" in "Deities, Themes, and Concepts"). The new year began with the coming of the inundation. By the Ptolemaic Period, the first Nile flood was said to have been caused by the return of the Distant Goddess from Nubia. Every year, the fearsome goddess had to be persuaded to return home and take on a benevolent form as she reached the southern border of Egypt. Kiosk-shrines built on the water's edge were decorated with comical figures of dwarfs or ani-

mals dancing and playing musical instruments to pacify the goddess and welcome the inundation (see Figure 14).

Alternatively, the Nile flood could be seen as the tears that Isis wept every year for her murdered husband or as the efflux from the decaying body of Osiris (see “Osiris” in “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”). During the flood season, Egypt resembled the *nun* again. When the floods began to recede, the land appeared to rise up like the Primeval Mound, and the fields could be planted. The growth cycle of food crops (particularly wheat and barley) was linked to the myth of Osiris. The scything down of the grain and its trampling and winnowing were equated with the murder and dismemberment of the “good god.” The sprouting of the seed that began the next agricultural cycle was celebrated as a resurrection for Osiris. There were annual festivals in which corn mummies—miniature figures of Osiris filled with mud and seeds—were planted in sacred areas and watered till they sprouted.⁵¹ These ceremonies were not just a remembrance of long-ago events; the death and renewal of Osiris were seen as archetypal acts that maintained the cosmos.

The mutilation and dismemberment of Osiris could also be linked to the lunar calendar (see under “Moon” in “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”). The full moon could represent both the complete body of Osiris and the complete eye of his son, Horus. Each month as the moon waned, the body of Osiris and the Eye of Horus were divided. Evil seemed to triumph, until the waxing of the moon “completed” these two symbols of beneficent power again. Periodic eclipses of the moon were explained by myths such as that of Seth taking the form of a black boar to swallow the eye of Horus and being forced to expel it again. Regular astronomical events such as the appearance of the morning star or the heliacal rising of Sirius also feature in Egyptian myth (see “Stars and Planets” in “Deities, Themes, and Concepts”), but by far the most significant heavenly phenomenon was the daily rising and setting of the sun.

The Solar Cycle

The apparent movement of the sun across the sky was seen both as a life cycle and as a journey. The daily life cycle of the sun was more an extended metaphor than a narrative. The sun was said to be born each morning from the womb of the sky goddess, Nut. At dawn the sun was a child—a daily repetition of the emergence of the sun child during the First Time. At noon, the sun reached the peak of his strength and could be portrayed as a triumphant falcon. By evening he was an old man, virtually the only god to be shown as old. The common



Figure 19. Symbolic image of the solar cycle painted on a coffin. Two baboon deities adore the ram-headed god inside the solar disk. (Courtesy of Geraldine Pinch)

identification of the evening sun as Atum linked it with the myth of the creator growing weary and letting the world sink back into the *nun*. Sunset was equivalent to death, and the sun's flesh and soul passed into the underworld. After moving through the underworld reviving its inhabitants with his light, the sun would be reborn. Each sunrise was a new beginning for the cosmos.

In early times, this cycle could be described in more brutal terms.⁵² In the evening, the sun god died by being eaten by his mother, the sky goddess, and was replaced by a multitude of stars. In the morning, the reborn sun god ate all the star gods, staining the sky with their blood (the redness of dawn) and absorbing their power. The one god became many and the many gods became one, so life came out of death.

Other sources envisaged the sun god in an eternal voyage across the skies above and below the earth. At sunset, the Day Boat of the sun left the upper sky to be replaced by the barques for the moon and the stars (see "Boats" in "Deities, Themes, and Concepts"). The Night Boat carrying the sun god was towed on water and over sand through the twelve regions of the underworld.

Just as the creator had to overcome darkness and chaos to create the world, the sun and his defenders had to subdue the monsters that embodied darkness and chaos. Just as the creator made deities and people in the First Time and gave them life, the Night Sun gave new life to all the beings in the *Duat*. In the fourth hour of the night, the sleeping dead were revived by the sun god and experienced a lifetime in his presence. Thus the reign of the sun god, the lost golden age of Egyptian myth, was reenacted every night. The fate of the human dead was locked into the solar cycle.

The Journey of the Soul

Egyptian concepts of the afterlife are strikingly diverse.⁵³ The Beautiful West could be seen as a place of joyful reunions or as a state of terrifying isolation. Death was regarded both as a unique event and as part of the continuous process of decay and renewal. There was no promise of eternal peace for the Egyptian dead. The afterlife was full of dangers and difficulties to be overcome, a belief that probably reflected the experience of life of the average Ancient Egyptian.

After death each individual faced a journey through the underworld to reach the presence of one of the gods who could grant eternal life. The deceased would find themselves in an eerie landscape of rivers, deserts, and lakes of fire, inhabited by demons and monsters. The adventures of the soul in this landscape are similar to the fairy tales of other cultures, but the prize to be won was not a precious object or the hand of a princess, but eternal life. Some deities were helpful to the dead, but others were hostile unless approached in the right way. The soul of the deceased had to act like a magician and overcome threats by knowing protective spells and the true names of the beings he or she would encounter.

Armed with these powers, the soul would eventually reach a divine domain. The last ordeal might be the judgment of the heart in the presence of Osiris and the assessors of the underworld. The goal of the journey was to be transformed into an *akh*, an “effective” or “transfigured” spirit. Those who failed to justify their existence in the divine court faced a second death in the jaws of the Eater of Souls. The fortunate spirits could take their place among the stars or among the followers of Osiris, Ra, Thoth, or Hathor, but they could not escape the cycles of destruction and renewal.

The soul might experience life in the **Field of Reeds**, a paradise similar to Egypt, but this was not a permanent state. When the night sun passed on, darkness and death returned. The star-spirits were destroyed at dawn and reborn

each night. Even the evil dead, the Enemies of Ra, continuously came back to life like Apophis so that they could be tortured and killed again.

As the Western Souls, the justified dead formed part of the crew of the embattled **Boat of Millions**. They might be thought of as rowing or towing the sun boat or even defending it against the forces of chaos. The vignette to Book of the Dead spell 39 shows a dead person taking on Seth's role of spearing the Apophis serpent. In death, everyone could be a cosmic hero in the perpetual struggle that was the central feature of Egyptian myth.

NOTES

1. The translation is by James P. Allen from his *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts*, 2d ed., Yale Egyptological Studies 2 (San Antonio, TX, 1995). For other important surveys of Egyptian creation myths, see S. Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne avant le Nouvel Empire*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 134 (Freiburg and Göttingen, 1994); and M. Bilolo, *Les Cosmo-Théologies Philosophiques D'Héliopolis et Hermopolis*, The Thought of Ancient Egypt and Nubia, vol. 2 (Kinshasa and Munich, 1986).

2. Unattributed quotations are the author's translations from Egyptian texts listed in "Appendix: Primary Sources."

3. Such a temporal framework is seen, for instance, in the account of the creation of the world in seven days described in the book of Genesis. For ancient creation myths in general, see the chapter "Chaos and Cosmogony" in M. R. Wright, *Cosmology in Antiquity* (London and New York, 1995).

4. This is one of the reasons why Ptah precedes Ra in some lists of gods who ruled the world. Although the imagery of the Primeval Mound is drawn from the inundation, the land is said to rise rather than the waters to fall. The rising of the mound was also seen in sexual terms as the life-bringing erection of the earth god.

5. The parts of Egyptian temples decorated with marsh foliage may represent this stage of the *nun* when chaos had been subdued by the creator to realize its potential. The mounds, which were places of life, had their evil counterparts in the shifting sandbanks, which were a danger to anyone traveling by water.

6. The question of whether this means that Egyptian religion developed into a form of monotheism is explored in Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (London and Ithaca, 1973); and in Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. John Baines (Ithaca, 1982) (see "Egyptian Myth: Annotated Print and Nonprint Resources").

7. The main purpose of this ritual was to allow the *ka* (vital force) of the being depicted to enter and "inhabit" the statue. When performed on mummies, the ritual was thought to restore the senses of the deceased, so that they could breathe, speak, eat, hear, see, and smell again in the afterlife.

8. For the creator as an androgynous deity, see J. Zandee, "The Birth-Giving Creator-God in Ancient Egypt," in *Studies in Pharaonic Religion and Society in Honour of J. Gwyn Griffiths*, ed. A. B. Lloyd (London, 1992), 169–185; and K. Mysliwiec, "La mère, la femme, la fille et la variante féminine du dieu Atoum," *Etudes et Travaux* 13 (1983): 297–304.
9. Two different terms for spitting that sound like the names Shu and Tefnut are used in this text. The Egyptians were fond of etymological explanations for the nature of deities. These explanations are often false in linguistic terms, but they can provide information on religious ideas.
10. Writers on Egyptian myth refer to the Eye of Ra as the Eye Goddess or as the solar eye (the sun disk) in distinction to the lunar eye (the moon disk).
11. For this interpretation, see chapter IIIC in Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*.
12. In representations of solar deities, this cobra is shown in front of or coiled round the sun disk. The *uraeus* cobra formed part of many Egyptian royal headdresses.
13. Confusingly, in spite of the story of the Sole Eye searching for Shu and Tefnut, the Eye is quite often identified as Tefnut. The role of a deity is often defined by the pair or group of which he or she forms a part. When Tefnut is paired with Maat, they usually play the contrasting roles of the fierce and gentle daughters of the creator.
14. For a comprehensive discussion of the place of *maat* in Egyptian culture, see the chapter "The Concept of Maat" in Erik Hornung, *Idea into Image: Essays on Ancient Egyptian Thought*, trans. Elizabeth Bredeck (Princeton, 1992); or J. Assmann, *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten*, (Munich, 1990).
15. The translation is that of Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 25–26. For other translations of the Egyptian terms *neheh* and *djet*, see 'Time and Eternity' in Hornung, *Idea into Image*. These two forms of time are occasionally shown as deities supporting the sky.
16. The hymn, from Papyrus Cairo 58032, is translated in John L. Foster, *Hymns, Prayers, and Songs: An Anthology of Ancient Egyptian Lyric Poetry*, ed. Susan Tower Hollis (Atlanta, GA, 1995), IV.32.
17. Richard B. Parkinson's translation of a passage from "The Teaching for King Merikare," in Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940–1640 BC* (Oxford, 1997), 226.
18. It has been suggested that the negative attitude toward women displayed in this story was part of an adverse reaction to the reigns of several powerful queens. See L. H. Lesko, "Three Late Egyptian Stories Reconsidered" in *Egyptological Studies in Honor of Richard A. Parker* (Hanover, NH, 1986), 98–103.
19. The language used in this text suggests that it may have been based on a Middle Kingdom original. The words of the spell were to be declaimed over images of deities drawn on the patient's skin or on a piece of linen applied to the patient's throat. A healing herb to be drunk in wine or beer is also mentioned. The whole spell is said to have proved effective against poison on countless occasions.

20. The name itself would have been the type of “secret knowledge” that was only passed on to the initiated. Some of the Pyramid Texts, which were for the eyes of the king, do claim to give the true name of the creator. New Kingdom hymns threaten that any unauthorized person who speaks the true name of god will die instantly.

21. Thoth may not originally have been linked to this myth, but the Egyptian sense of symmetry demanded that as Thoth restored the lost and wounded lunar eye of Horus, he should also bring back the solar eye of Ra. The various stages in the development of the myth cycle of the solar eye were first studied by H. Junker in *Der Auszug der Hathor-Tefnut aus Nubien* (Berlin, 1911); and by W. Spiegelberg in *Der Ägyptische Mythos vom Sonnenauge* (Strasbourg, 1918).

22. For a full translation, see Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 3: *The Late Period* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1980), 156–159.

23. This section of the myth is probably based on a list of names, epithets, and festivals of goddesses. By the Greco-Roman Period, and probably earlier, the myth of the Distant Goddess was linked with the winter solstice and the annual return of the inundation from the far south. The flood took some weeks to spread northward, so the priests of each major temple would greet it in turn. For the wild celebrations that marked the return of the wandering goddess, see J. C. Darnell, “Hathor Returns to Medamud,” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 22 (1995): 47–94.

24. These references are chiefly in the texts known as the Teaching for King Merikare and the Words of Neferti; see Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 138, 226. In another work of this period, the Dialogue of Ipuur, the protagonist expresses the opinion that it would have been better if the sun god had realized the true nature of humanity “in the first generation” and struck them all down. See Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 185, 197.

25. The best translation of and commentary on this text are to be found in Erik Hornung, *Der ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh*, 2d ed., Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 46 (Freiburg and Göttingen, 1997). For a recent discussion, see A. Spalinger, “The Destruction of Mankind: A Transitional Literary Text,” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 28 (2000): 257–282.

26. These cosmic beings are treated here as courtiers attending the king of the gods. It is a characteristic of Egyptian deities that they can manifest themselves in different forms and different locations at the same time.

27. “(Female) Powerful One” is the meaning of the name of the lion goddess Sekhmet. Egyptian myths are full of wordplay of this kind.

28. This would be a depth of about 9 inches / 22.5 centimeters. The mineral used to dye the beer was probably either ocher or hematite.

29. One of Hathor’s epithets was Lady of Drunkenness. A calendar for the temple of Mut at Karnak records the serving of special red beer at a festival celebrating the pacification of the solar eye. See A. Spalinger, “A Religious Calendar Year,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 44 (1993): 161–184.

30. *Manetho, Aegyptiaca*, trans. and ed. W. G. Wadell (London, 1940).

31. See "Appendix: Primary Sources" under "Ismailia naos." Some Egyptologists believe that this unusual text was influenced by the Greek myth of Zeus's overthrow of Chronos. This may be so, but the fact that the story was inscribed on a shrine in the holiest part of a temple shows that the designers of the temple considered it important and meaningful.

32. According to Papyrus Salt 825, Osiris was slain by Geb and then brought back to life.

33. E. Otto, for example, wrote that Osiris "is from the beginning a dead god to whom poetic thought later attributes a past life." See *Egyptian Art and the Cults of Osiris and Amon*, trans. K. Bosse-Griffiths (London, 1968), 28.

34. "He who was put in the chest" is a traditional epithet of Osiris, but it refers to being encoffined after mummification. Plutarch's story may be an imaginative attempt to explain the coffins in the form of the body of Osiris that were popular at many periods.

35. Cedar of Lebanon was the favored wood for royal and elite coffins and for the barque-shrines used to carry statues of deities.

36. The only partial parallel to this incident in an Egyptian text is an episode in the tale of the Two Brothers in which Bata cuts off his own penis after being accused of adultery by his brother. He throws it in the river where it is eaten by a catfish. Bata's name links him with Seth, however, rather than with Osiris. It may be that a myth about Osiris's losing his penis was created to balance the ancient myth about Seth losing his testicles.

37. This is a role that could be of great significance in Egyptian culture, particularly among royalty, who were often raised by foster mothers. Many writers have noted parallels between the myth of Horus in Chemmis and the story of Moses being hidden in a floating basket among the rushes and then given to his own mother to wet nurse.

38. The sacred fish was probably the one that helped to guide the sun barque through the rivers of the underworld. For a translation of this spell, see Number 49 in J. F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts* (Leiden, 1978).

39. H. te Velde argues in *Seth, God of Confusion* (Leiden, 1977) that the Eye of Horus was damaged because of sexual activity between Horus and Seth but that through the intervention of other deities, even this unorthodox union resulted in new life.

40. In this story the disk seems to be the solar disk, but in other versions it is a lunar aspect of Thoth, who is born from the "union" of Horus and Seth.

41. A spell from the Harris Magical Papyrus (BM 10042) refers to Isis weeping on the riverbank after Horus has had sex with her. This myth may have arisen through the common identification of Horus with the fertility god Min, "the bull of his mother." (See "Min" in "Deities, Themes, and Concepts.")

42. The myth is in the New Kingdom Papyrus Sallier IX. This seems to be the earliest example of a myth devised to explain the animal-headed divine forms common in Egyptian art. Plutarch angrily dismisses the story that Horus beheaded his mother as a ridiculous lie.

43. See the hymns to Osiris translated by M. Lichtheim in *Maat in Egyptian Autobiographies and Related Studies*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 120 (Freiburg and Göttingen, 1992).

44. For a recent translation of these inscriptions, see William J. Murnane, *Texts from the Amarna Period in Egypt* (Atlanta, GA, 1995), 230–233.
45. See B. G. Ockinga, “On the Interpretation of the Kadesh Record,” *Chronique d’Egypte* 62 (1987), 38–48; or C. Broadhurst, “Religious Considerations at Qadesh, and the Consequences for the Artistic Depiction of the Battle,” in Lloyd, *Studies in Pharaonic Religion*, 77–81. Both sides suffered heavy losses at Qadesh.
46. The translation is by Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 139.
47. The translation of the text is by Brian P. Copenhaver in *Hermetica* (Cambridge, 1992), 81–82.
48. See D. O’Connor, “The Denderah Chapel of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep: A New Perspective,” in *Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honour of H. S. Smith*, ed. A. Leahy and W. J. Tait (London, 1999), 215–220.
49. See L. Bell, “Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44 (1985): 251–294.
50. For this interpretation of the Sed Festival, see Hornung, *Idea into Image*, 53–54.
51. Or the corn mummies were left in a desert wadi until a flash flood brought the seeds to life. The best account of these objects is M. J. Raven’s “Corn-mummies” in *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden* 63 (1980): 7–38. For the Osiris myth as part of the agricultural cycle, see Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago, 1948), 181–197.
52. This myth has been reconstructed by Katja Goebs in her forthcoming study, *Crowns in Egyptian Funerary Literature—Symbols of Royalty, Rebirth and Destruction*.
53. For a survey of the full range of beliefs, see John H. Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (London, 2001).

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Geraldine Pinch



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