

The Story of Isis and Osiris

In the days before Re had left the earth, before he had begun to grow old, his great wisdom told him that if the goddess Nut bore children, one of them would end his reign among men. So Re laid a curse upon Nut - that she should not be able to bear any child upon any day in the year.

"one of them would end his reign among men..."

Full of sorrow, Nut went for help to Thoth, the thrice-great god of wisdom and magic and learning, Re's son, who loved her. Thoth knew that the curse of Re, once spoken, could never be recalled, but in his wisdom he found a way of escape. He went to Khonsu, the Moon-god, and challenged him to a contest at draughts. Game after game they played and always Thoth won. The stakes grew higher and higher, but Khonsu wagered the most, for it was some of his own light that he risked and lost.

At last Khonsu would play no more. Then Thoth the thrice-great in wisdom gathered up the light which he had won and made it into five extra days which for ever after were set between the end of the old year and the beginning of the new. The year was of three hundred and sixty days before this, but the five days which were added, which were not days of any year, were ever afterwards held as days of festival in old Egypt.

But, since his match with Thoth, Khonsu the moon has not had enough light to shine throughout the month, but dwindles into darkness and then grows to his full glory again; for he had lost the light needed to make five whole days.

On the first of these days Osiris, the eldest son of Nut, was born, and the second day was set aside to be the birthday of Horus the Elder. On the third day the second son of Nut was born, dark Seth, the lord of evil. On the fourth her daughter Isis first saw the light, and her second

daughter Nephthys on the fifth. In this way the curse of Re was both fulfilled and defeated: for the days on which the children of Nut were born belonged to no year.

When Osiris was born many signs and wonders were seen and heard throughout the world. Most notable was the voice which came from the holiest shrine in the temple at Thebes on the Nile, which today is called Karnak, speaking to a man called Pamytes bidding him proclaim to all men that Osiris, the good and mighty king, was born to bring joy to all the earth. Pamytes did as he was bidden, and he also attended on the Divine Child and brought him up as a man among men.

When Osiris was grown up he married his sister Isis, a custom which the Pharaohs of Egypt followed ever after. And Seth married Nephthys: for he too being a god could marry only a goddess.

After Isis by her craft had learned the Secret Name of Re, Osiris became sole ruler of Egypt and reigned on earth as Re had done. He found the people both savage and brutish, fighting among themselves and killing and eating one another. But Isis discovered the grain of both wheat and barley, which grew wild over the land with the other plants and was still unknown to man; and Osiris taught them how to plant the seeds when the Nile had risen in the yearly inundation and sunk again leaving fresh fertile mud over the fields; how to tend and water the crops; how to cut the corn when it was ripe, and how to thresh the grain on the threshing floors, dry it and grind it to flour and make it into bread. He showed them also how to plant vines and make the grapes into wine; and they knew already how to brew beer out of the barley.

When the people of Egypt had learned to make bread and eat only the flesh of such animals as he taught them were suitable, Osiris, went on to teach them laws, and how to live peacefully and happily together, delighting themselves with music and poetry. As soon as Egypt was filled with peace and plenty, Osiris set out over the world to bring his blessings upon other nations. While he was away he left Isis to rule over the land, which she did both wisely and well.

But Seth the Evil One, their brother, envied Osiris and hated Isis. The more the people loved and praised Osiris, the more Seth hated him; and the more good he did and the happier mankind became, the stronger grew Seth's desire to kill his brother and rule in his place. Isis, however, was so full of wisdom and so watchful that Seth made no attempt to seize the throne while she was watching over the land of Egypt. And when Osiris returned from his travels Seth was among the first to welcome him back and kneel in reverence before "the good god Pharaoh Osiris".

Yet he had made his plans, aided by seventy-two of his wicked friends and Aso the evil queen of Ethiopia. Secretly Seth obtained the exact measurements of the body of Osiris, and caused beautiful chest to be made that would fit only him. It was fashioned of the rarest and most costly woods: cedar brought from Lebanon, and ebony from Punt at the south end of the Red Sea for no wood grows in Egypt except the soft and useless palm.

Then Seth gave a great feast in honour of Osiris; but the other guests were the two-and-seventy conspirators. It was the greatest feast that had yet been seen in Egypt, and the foods were choicer, the wines stronger and the dancing girls more beautiful than ever before. When the heart of Osiris had been made glad with feasting and song the chest was brought in, and all were amazed at its beauty.

Osiris marveled at the rare cedar inlaid with ebony and ivory, with less rare gold and silver, and painted inside with figures of gods and birds and animals, and he desired it greatly.

"I will give this chest to whosoever fits it most exactly!" cried Seth. And at once the conspirators began in turn to see if they could win it. But one was too tall and another too short; one was too fat and another too thin - and all tried in vain.

"Let me see if I will fit into this marvelous piece of work," said Osiris, and he laid himself down in the chest while all gathered round breathlessly.

"I fit exactly, and the chest is mine!" cried Osiris.

"And the chest is mine!"

"It is yours indeed, and shall be so forever!" hissed Seth as he banged down the lid. Then in desperate haste he and the conspirators nailed it shut and sealed every crack with molten lead, so that Osiris the man died in the chest and his spirit went west across the Nile into Duat the Place of Testing; but, beyond it to Amenti, where those live for ever who have lived well on earth and passed the judgments of Duat, he could not pass as yet. Seth and his companions took the chest which held the body of Osiris and cast it into the Nile; and Hapi the Nile-god carried it out into the Great Green Sea where it was tossed for many days until it came to the shore of Phoenicia near the city of Byblos. Here the waves cast it into a tamarisk tree that grew on the shore; and the tree shot out branches and grew leaves and flowers to make a fit resting place for the body of the good god Osiris and very soon that tree became famous throughout the land.

Isis suckling the Horus-Child in the papyrus swamps

Presently King Malcander heard of it, and he and his wife, Queen Astarte, came to the seashore to gaze at the tree. By now the branches had grown together and hidden the chest which held the body of Osiris in the trunk itself. King Malcander gave orders that the tree should be cut down and fashioned into a great pillar for his palace. This was done, and all wondered at its beauty and fragrance: but none knew that it held the body of a god.

Meanwhile in Egypt Isis was in great fear. She had always known that Seth was filled with evil and jealousy, but kindly Osiris would not believe in his brother's wickedness. But Isis knew as soon as her husband was dead, though no one told her, and fled into the marshes of the delta carrying the baby Horus with her. She found shelter on a little island where the goddess Buto lived, and entrusted the divine child to her. And as a further safeguard against Seth, Isis loosed the island from its foundations, and let it float so that no one could tell where to find it.

Then she went to seek for the body of Osiris. For, until he was buried with all the needful rites and charms, even his spirit could go no farther to the west than Duat, the Testing-Place; and it could not come to Amenti.

Back and forth over the land of Egypt wandered Isis, but never a trace could she find of the chest in which lay the body of Osiris. She asked all whom she met, but no one had seen it - and in this matter her magic powers could not help her.

At last she questioned the children who were playing by the riverside, and at once they told her that just such a chest as she described had floated past them on the swift stream and out into the Great Green Sea.

Then Isis wandered on the shore, and again and again it was the children who had seen the chest floating by and told her which way it had gone. And because of this, Isis blessed the children and decreed that ever afterwards children should speak words of wisdom and sometimes tell of things to come.

At length Isis came to Byblos and sat down by the seashore. Presently the maidens who attended on Queen Astarte came down to bathe at that place; and when they returned out of the water Isis taught them how to plait their hair - which had never been done before. When they went up to the palace a strange and wonderful perfume seemed to cling to them; and Queen Astarte marveled at it, and at their plaited hair, and asked them how it came to be so.

The maidens told her of the wonderful woman who sat by the seashore, and Queen Astarte sent for Isis, and asked her to serve in the palace and tend her children, the little Prince Maneros and the baby Dictys, who was ailing sorely. For she did not know that the strange woman who was wandering alone at Byblos was the greatest of all the goddesses of Egypt. Isis agreed to this, and very soon the baby Dictys was strong and well though she did no more than give him her finger to suck. But presently she became fond of the child, and thought to make him immortal, which she did by burning away his mortal parts while she flew round and round him in the form of a swallow. Astarte, however, had been watching her secretly; and when she saw that her baby seemed to be on fire she rushed into the room with a loud cry, and so broke the magic.

Then Isis took on her own form, and Astarte crouched down in terror when she saw the shining goddess and learned who she was.

Malcander and Astarte offered her gifts of all the richest treasures in Byblos, but Isis asked only for the great tamarisk pillar which held up the roof, and for what it contained. When it was given to her, she caused it to open and took out the chest of Seth. But the pillar she gave back to Malcander and Astarte; and it remained the most sacred object in Byblos, since it had once held the body of a god.

When the chest which had become the coffin of Osiris was given to her, Isis flung herself down on it with so terrible a cry of sorrow that little Dictys died at the very sound. But Isis at length caused the chest to be placed on a ship which King Malcander provided for her, and set out for Egypt. With her went Maneros, the young prince of Byblos: but he did not remain with her for long, since his curiosity proved his undoing. For as soon as the ship had left the land Isis retired to where the chest of Seth lay, and opened the lid. Maneros crept up behind her and peeped over her shoulder: but Isis knew he was there and, turning, gave him one glance of anger - and he fell backwards over the side of the ship into the sea.

Next morning, as the ship was passing the Phaedrus River, its strong current threatened to carry them out of sight of land. But Isis grew angry and placed a curse on the river, so that its stream dried up from that day.

She came safely to Egypt after this, and hid the chest in the marshes of the delta while she hastened to the floating island where Buto was guarding Horus.

But it chanced that Seth came hunting wild boars with his dogs, hunting by night after his custom, since he loved the darkness in which evil things abound. By the light of the moon he saw the chest of cedar wood inlaid with ebony and ivory, with gold and silver, and recognized it.

At the sight hatred and anger came upon him in a red cloud, and he raged like a panther of the south. He tore open the chest, took the body of Osiris, and rent it into fourteen pieces which, by his divine strength, he scattered up and down the whole length of the Nile so that the crocodiles might eat them.

"It is not possible to destroy the body of a god!" cried Seth. "Yet I have done it - for I have destroyed Osiris!" His laughter echoed through the land, and all who heard it trembled and hid.

Now Isis had to begin her search once more. This time she had helpers, for Nephthys left her wicked husband Seth and came to join her sister. And Anubis, the son of Osiris and Nephthys, taking the form of a jackal, assisted in the search. When Isis traveled over the land she was accompanied and guarded by seven scorpions. But when she searched on the Nile and among the many streams of the delta she made her way in a boat made of papyrus: and the crocodiles, in their reverence for the goddess, touched neither the rent pieces of Osiris nor Isis herself. Indeed ever afterwards anyone who sailed the Nile in a boat made of papyrus was safe from them, for they thought that it was Isis still questing after the pieces of her husband's body.

Slowly, piece by piece, Isis recovered the fragments of Osiris. And wherever she did so, she formed by magic the likeness of his whole body and caused the priests to build a shrine and perform his funeral rites. And so there were thirteen places in Egypt which claimed to be the burial place of Osiris. In this way also she made it harder for Seth to meddle further with the body of the dead god.

One piece only she did not recover, for it had been eaten by certain impious fishes; and their kind were accursed ever afterwards, and no Egyptian would touch or eat them. Isis, however, did not bury any of the pieces in the places where the tombs and shrines of Osiris stood. She gathered the pieces together, rejoined them by magic, and by magic made a likeness of the missing member so that Osiris was complete. Then she caused the body to be embalmed and hidden away in a place of which she alone knew. And after this the spirit of Osiris passed into

Amenti to rule over the dead until the last great battle, when Horus should slay Seth and Osiris would return to earth once more.

But as Horus grew in this world the spirit of Osiris visited him often and taught him all that a great warrior should know - one who was to fight against Seth both in the body and in the spirit.

One day Osiris said to the boy: "Tell me, what is the noblest thing that a man can do?"

And Horus answered: "To avenge his father and mother for the evil done to them."

This pleased Osiris, and he asked further: "And what animal is most useful for the avenger to take with him as he goes out to battle?"

"A horse," answered Horus promptly.

"Surely a lion would be better still?" suggested Osiris.

"A lion would indeed be the best for a man who needed help," replied Horus; "but a horse is best for pursuing a flying foe and cutting him off from escape."

"...the time had come for Horus to declare war on Seth..."

When he heard this Osiris knew that the time had come for Horus to declare war on Seth, and bade him gather together a great army and sail up the Nile to attack him in the deserts of the south.

Horus gathered his forces and prepared to begin the war. And Re himself, the shining father of the gods, came to his aid in his own divine boat that sails across the heavens and through the dangers of the underworld.

Before they set sail Re drew Horus aside so as to gaze into his blue eyes: for whoever looks into them, of gods or men, sees the future reflected there. But Seth was watching; and he took upon himself the form of a black pig - black as the thunder-cloud, fierce to look at, with tusks to strike terror into the bravest heart.

Meanwhile Re said to Horus: "Let me gaze into your eyes, and see what is to come of this war." He gazed into the eyes of Horus and their color was that of the Great Green Sea when the summer sky turns it to deepest blue.

While he gazed the black pig passed by and distracted his attention, so that he exclaimed: "Look at that! Never have I seen so huge and fierce a pig."

And Horus looked; and he did not know that it was Seth, but thought it was a wild boar out of the thickets of the north, and he was not ready with a charm or a word of power to guard himself against the enemy.

Then Seth aimed a blow of fire at the eyes of Horus; and Horus shouted with the pain and was in a great rage. He knew now that it was Seth; but Seth had gone on the instant and could not be trapped.

Re caused Horus to be taken into a dark room, and it was not long before his eyes could see again as clearly as before. When he was recovered Re had returned to the sky; but Horus was filled with joy that he could see, once more, and as he set out up the Nile at the head of his army, the country on either side shared his joy and blossomed into spring.

There were many battles in that war, but the last and greatest was at Edfu, where the great temple of Horus stands to this day in memory of it. The forces of Seth and Horus drew near to one another among the islands and the rapids of the First Cataract of the Nile. Seth, in the form of a red hippopotamus of gigantic size, sprang up on the island of Elephantine and uttered a great curse against Horus and against Isis:

"Let there come a terrible raging tempest and a mighty flood against my enemies!" he cried, and his voice was like the thunder rolling across the heavens from the south to the north. At once the storm broke over the boats of Horus and his army; the wind roared and the water was heaped into great waves. But Horus held on his way, his own boat gleaming through the darkness, its prow shining like a ray of the sun.

Opposite Edfu, Seth turned and stood at bay, straddling the whole stream of the Nile, so huge a red hippopotamus was he. But Horus took upon himself the shape of a handsome young man, twelve feet in height. His hand held a harpoon thirty feet long with a blade six feet wide at its point of greatest width.

Seth opened his mighty jaws to destroy Horus and his followers when the storm should wreck their boats. But Horus cast his harpoon, and it struck deep into the head of the red hippopotamus, deep into his brain. And that one blow slew Seth the great wicked one, the enemy of Osiris and the gods - and the red hippopotamus sank dead beside the Nile at Edfu. The storm passed away, the flood sank and the sky was clear and blue once more. Then the people of Edfu came out to welcome Horus the avenger and lead him in triumph to the shrine over which the great temple now stands. And they sang the song of praise which the priests chanted ever afterwards when the yearly festival of Horus was held at Edfu:

"Rejoice, you who dwell in Edfu! Horus the great god, the lord of the sky, has slain the enemy of his father! Eat the flesh of the vanquished, drink the blood of the red hippopotamus, burn his bones with fire! Let him be cut in pieces, and the scraps be given to the cats, and the offal to the reptiles!

"Glory to Horus of the mighty blow, the brave one, the slayer, the wielder of the Harpoon, the only son of Osiris, Horus of Edfu, Horus the avenger!"

But when Horus passed from earth and reigned no more as the Pharaoh of Egypt, he appeared before the assembly of the gods, and Seth came also in the spirit, and contended in words for the rule of the world. But not even Thoth the wise could give judgment. And so it comes about that Horus and Seth still contend for the souls of men and for the rule of the world.

There were no more battles on the Nile or in the land of Egypt; and Osiris rested quietly in his grave, which (since Seth could no longer disturb it) Isis admitted was on the island of Philae, the most sacred place of all, in the Nile a few miles upstream from Elephantine. But the Egyptians believed that the Last Battle was still to come - and that Horus would defeat Seth in this also. And when Seth was destroyed forever, Osiris would rise from the dead and return to earth, bringing with him all those who had been his own faithful followers. And for this reason the Egyptians embalmed dead and set the bodies away beneath towering pyramids of stone and deep in the tomb chambers of western Thebes, so that the blessed souls returning from Amenti should find them ready to enter again, and in them to live for ever on earth under the good god Osiris, Isis his queen and their son Horus.