

OSIRIS AND ISIS

An Ancient Egyptian Myth

retold by

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◆ *The myth of Osiris and Isis has been called one of the world's oldest and greatest love stories. As you read, consider how Isis' quest to save her husband reveals her deep love for him.*

When Osiris reigned death was not in the land. Arms were not in men's hands; there were not any wars. From end to end of the land music sounded; men and women spoke so sweetly and out of such depth of feeling that all they said was oratory and poetry.

Osiris taught men and women wisdom and he taught them all the arts. He it was who first planted the vine; he it was who showed men how and when to sow grain, how to plant and tend the fruit-trees; he caused them to rejoice in the flowers also. Osiris made laws for men so that they were able to live together in harmony; he gave them knowledge of the Gods, and he showed them how the Gods might be honored.

And this was what he taught them concerning the Gods: In the beginning was the formless abyss, Nu. From Nu came Re, the Sun. Re was the first and he was the most divine of all beings. Re created all forms. From his thought came Shu and Tefenet, the Upper and the Lower Air. From Shu and Tefenet came Qeb and Nut, the Earth and the Sky. The Earth and the Sky had been separated, the one from the other, but once they had been joined together. From the eye of Re, made out of the essence that is in that

eye, came the first man and the first woman.

And from Qeb, the Father, and Nut, the Mother, Osiris was born. When he was born a voice came into the world, crying, "Behold, the Lord of all things is born!"

And with Osiris was born Isis, his sister. Afterwards was born Thout, the Wise One. Then there was born Nephthys. And, last, there was born Seth. And Seth tore a hole in his mother's side—Seth the Violent One. Now Osiris and Isis loved each other as husband and wife, and together they reigned over the land. Thout was with them, and he taught men the arts of writing and of reckoning. Nephthys went with Seth and was his wife, and Seth's abode was in the desert.

Seth, in his desert, was angered against Osiris, for everywhere green things that Seth hated were growing over the land—vine, and grain, and the flowers. Many times Seth tried to destroy his brother Osiris, but always his plots were baffled by the watchful care of Isis. One day he took the measurement of Osiris' body—he took the measurement from his shadow—and he made a chest that was the exact size of Osiris.

Soon, at the time before the season of drought, Seth gave a banquet, and to that banquet he invited all the children of Earth

and the Sky. To that banquet came Thout, the Wise One, and Nephthys, the wife of Seth, and Seth himself, and Isis, and Osiris. And where they sat at banquet they could see the chest that Seth had made—the chest made of fragrant and diversified woods. All admired that chest. Then Seth, as though he would have them enter into a game, told all of them that he would give the chest to the one whose body fitted most closely in it. The children of Qeb and Nut went and laid themselves in the chest that Seth had made: Seth went and laid himself in it, Nephthys went and laid herself in it, Thout went and

laid himself in it, Isis went and laid herself in it. All were short; none, laid in the chest, but left a space above his or her head.

Then Osiris took the crown off his head and laid himself in the chest. His form filled it in its length and its breadth. Isis and Nephthys and Thout stood above where he lay, looking down upon Osiris, so resplendent of face, so perfect of limb, and congratulating him upon coming into possession of the splendid chest that Seth had made. Seth was not beside the chest then. He shouted, and his attendants to the number of seventy-two came into the banqueting hall. They placed the heavy cover upon the chest; they hammered nails into it; they soldered it all over with melted lead. Nor could Isis, nor Thout, nor Nephthys break through the circle that Seth's attendants made around the chest. And they, having nailed the cover down, and having soldered it, took up the sealed chest, and, with Seth going before them, they ran with it out of the hall.

Isis and Nephthys and Thout ran after those who bore the chest. But the night was dark, and these three children of Qeb and Nut were separated, one from the other, and from Seth and his crew. And these came to where the river was, and they flung the sealed chest into the river. Isis, and Thout, and Nephthys, following the tracks that Seth and his crew had made, came to the riverbank when it was daylight, but by that time the current of the river had brought the chest out into the sea.

Isis followed along the bank of the river, lamenting for Osiris. She came to the sea, and she crossed over it, but she did not know where to go to seek for the body of Osiris. She wandered through the world, and where she went bands of children went with her, and they helped her in her search.

The chest that held the body of Osiris had



The Granger Collection, New York

Osiris enthroned in the domain of the Dead, 19th dynasty. *The ancient Egyptians worshiped Osiris as the ruler of the dead.*

? *In the beginning of this myth, what is Osiris' role on earth?*

drifted in the sea. A flood had cast it upon the land. It had lain in a thicket of young trees. A tree, growing, had lifted it up. The branches of the tree wrapped themselves around it; the bark of the tree spread itself around it; at last the tree grew there, covering the chest with its bark.

The land in which this happened was Byblos. The king and queen of the city, Melquart and Astarte, heard of the wonderful tree, the branches and bark of which gave forth a fragrance. The king had the tree cut down; its branches were trimmed off, and the tree was set up as a column in the king's house. And then Isis, coming to Byblos, was told of the wonderful tree that grew by the sea. She was told of it by a band of children who came to her. She came to the place: she found that the tree had been cut down and that its trunk was now set up as a column in the king's house.

She knew from what she heard about the wonderful fragrance that was in the trunk and branches of the tree that the chest she was seeking was within it. She stayed beside where the tree had been. Many who came to that place saw the queenly figure that, day and night, stood near where the wonderful tree had been. But none who came near was spoken to by her. Then the queen, having heard about the stranger who stood there, came to her. When she came near, Isis put her hand upon her head, and thereupon a fragrance went from Isis and filled the body of the queen.

The queen would have this majestic stranger go with her to her house. Isis went. She nursed the queen's child in the hall in which stood the column that had closed in it the chest which she sought.

She nourished the queen's child by placing her finger in its mouth. At night she would strip wood from the column that had grown

as a tree, and throw the wood upon the fire. And in this fire she would lay the queen's child. The fire did not injure it at all; it burned softly around the child. Then Isis, in the form of a swallow, would fly around the column, lamenting.

One night the queen came into the hall where her child was being nursed. She saw no nurse there; she saw her child lying in the fire. She snatched the child up, crying out. Then Isis spoke to the queen from the column on which, in the form of a swallow, she perched. She told the queen that the child would have gained immortality had it been suffered to lie for a night and another night longer within the fire made from the wood of the column. Now it would be long-lived, but not immortal. And she revealed her own divinity to the queen, and claimed the column that had been made from the wonderful tree.

The king had the column taken down; it was split open, and the chest which Isis had sought for so long and with so many lamentations was within it. Isis wrapped the chest in linen, and it was carried for her out of the king's house. And then a ship was given to her, and on that ship, Isis, never stirring from beside the chest, sailed back to Egypt.

And coming into Egypt she opened the chest, and took the body of her lord and husband out of it. She breathed into his mouth, and, with the motion of her wings (for Isis, being divine, could assume wings), she brought life back to Osiris. And there, away from men and from all the children of Qeb and Nut, Osiris and Isis lived together.

But one night Seth, as he was hunting gazelles by moonlight, came upon Osiris and Isis sleeping. Fiercely he fell upon his brother; he tore his body into fourteen pieces. Then, taking the pieces that were the

body of Osiris, he scattered them over the land.

Death had come into the land from the time Osiris had been closed in the chest through the cunning of Seth; war was in the land; men always had arms in their hands. No longer did music sound, no longer did men and women talk sweetly and out of the depths of their feelings. Less and less did grain, and fruit trees, and the vine flourish. The green places everywhere were giving way to the desert. Seth was triumphant; Thout and Nephthys cowered before him.

And all the beauty and all the abundance that had come from Re would be destroyed if the pieces that had been the body of Osiris were not brought together once more. So Isis sought for them, and Nephthys, her sister, helped her in her seeking. Isis, in a boat that was made of reeds, floated over the marshes, seeking for the pieces. One, and then another, and then another was found. At last she had all the pieces of his torn

body. She laid them together on a floating island, and reformed them. And as the body of Osiris was formed once more, the wars that men were waging died down; peace came; grain, and the vine, and fruit trees grew once more.

And a voice came to Isis and told her that Osiris lived again, but that he lived in the Underworld where he was now the Judge of the Dead, and that through the justice that he meted out, men and women had life immortal. And a child of Osiris was born to Isis: Horus he was named. Nephthys and the wise Thout guarded him on the floating island where he was born. Horus grew up, and he strove against the evil power of Seth. In battle he overcame him, and in bonds he brought the evil Seth, the destroyer of his father, before Isis, his mother. Isis would not have Seth slain: still he lives, but now he is of the lesser Gods, and his power for evil is not so great as it was in the time before Horus grew to be the avenger of his father.



Isis, from the sarcophagus of Ramses III, 20th dynasty. *Isis was the most popular and beloved Egyptian goddess. Among other things, she was regarded as a protector of children.*

? *What protective qualities does Isis demonstrate in this myth?*