

# Myth and Mythmaking in Ancient Egypt

---

JACOBUS VAN DIJK

## INTRODUCTION

The study of ancient Egyptian myth confronts us with a curious paradox. On the one hand, we are dealing with one of the most highly developed cultures of antiquity, in which writing played an essential role and which was admired by the Greeks and Romans for its wisdom and learning; for us, too, Egypt conjures up a picture not just of pyramids and sphinxes but also of hieroglyphs and papyrus. On the other hand, myth, despite its obvious importance in the religion of ancient Egypt, appears to have belonged largely to the domain of oral literature. Especially in the earlier periods of Egyptian history, myths do not seem to have been written down at all, at least not in the narrative form that we associate with the term “myth,” or if they were, such writings have not survived. In later times myths were sometimes used for practical purposes in magical spells, and hence they were written down in magical handbooks. However, here we are to a large extent dealing with the everyday religious practices of private individuals, not with the great state religion that was the driving force behind ancient Egyptian culture. A hymn of Ramesses IV to the god Osiris actually expresses this difference when it says that after magic came into existence, it was “written down, not told

from mouth to mouth,” obviously in contrast to other forms of religious discourse. On the other hand, myths are often alluded to in various non-narrative texts, such as hymns to the gods or ritual texts, and they also underlie the vast repertoire of iconographic representations that developed during the New Kingdom and that are found on numerous funerary objects, such as coffins and stelae, on tomb walls, and in funerary papyri.

Myths appear to have been a hidden factor in Egyptian religion, almost like a layer of ore that is visible on the surface only in some places. Perhaps the most striking illustration of this hidden nature of myth is the best known of all Egyptian mythological stories, that of Osiris and Isis. Although this myth must surely go back to remote times and is alluded to in countless religious texts and representations throughout Egyptian history, it is never told in the form of a straightforward narrative in Egyptian sources. Such a narrative can only be found at the beginning of the second century CE in the work of the Greek writer Plutarch, who wrote as an outsider for a non-Egyptian audience.

### *The Language of Myth*

In the Egyptian language, there is no known specialized term for “myth.” The common word

for tale or story is *sḏdt*, "that which is told." This word can refer to anything people say or tell as a story, whether it is based on what we deem to be fact or not. One can tell stories about travels abroad, about things that have happened in the past, about the king's victories, or about the manifestation of a god. Sometimes the word is better translated as "rumor," "hearsay," or the like; in one case it is used for a story that is a lie. Clearly "truth" is not an essential element of the word *sḏdt*. The term can also be used for stories that have been handed down by past generations and for the wise words of sages from the past. Myths are also transmitted from one generation to the next, but because myths are concerned with religious truths, it comes as no surprise that the term *sḏdt* is never applied to myths. This fact is not without importance, for many cultures make a clear distinction between sacred myths, which are sometimes known only to the priests, and other tales, which everybody knows and that serve as entertainment. Only in one case does the word *sḏdt* refer to religious knowledge. In an autobiographical text from the middle of the Eighteenth Dynasty, a high official boasts: "I saw to the making of many monuments in the Temple of Amun in Karnak: the making of the sacred river-bark Userhat-Amun and the covering of it with gold, (making it) like the rising of Re, like what is told about (*sḏdt*) the Day-bark in the sky." Here the sacred bark of Amun is likened to the mythical bark in which the sun-god ferries across the sky, and knowledge about the appearance of this bark is obviously told, not written down; even here, though, this tale concerns a factual description, not a mythical narrative with a plot.

### *The Antiquity of Myth*

From the relative scarcity of mythical stories some scholars have concluded that they were virtually nonexistent in the earlier periods of Egyptian history and that myths were a fairly late development, "invented" in order to give an extra, sacred dimension to previously existing rituals. According to a recent interpretation, the pantheon originally consisted of individual gods or small groupings of gods ("constellations"); the relationships among these gods were determined by static factors; one god could be charac-

terized as the son or the brother of another, or gods could be king or enemy, but no interaction took place between them, and so no mythical stories could be told about them. Consequently, myths originally played no significant role in Egyptian rituals; only at a later stage were the rituals hallowed, first by the involvement of small groups of deities, then by myths describing events in the world of the gods that were considered important for the efficacy of the ritual. Other scholars have pointed out that only the last stage in this development is well documented, whereas the earlier stages are hypothetical and based on arguments from silence. Various allusions in the oldest body of Egyptian religious literature, the Pyramid Texts, already imply the existence of stories about the murder of Osiris and the trials and tribulations of Horus and Seth.

### *Mystery and Myth*

A more likely explanation for the absence of myths from early written documents is that they were originally transmitted orally, perhaps because knowledge of them was restricted to those directly involved in the state cult: the king and the fairly small group of high officials that later developed into a professional priesthood. Such a state of affairs is reflected by the use of the word *št*, meaning "secret," or "mystery," which is found in a Late Period text referring to the myth of the unification of Re and Osiris discussed below. In this text it is said that "he who will reveal it will be executed, for it is a great mystery (*št*), it is Re, it is Osiris." The same word *št* is also used to describe the cult image of the god in the innermost sanctuary of the temple, where it was kept hidden from the gaze of all but the highest priests. The text itself, as well as its use of the word *št*, clearly indicates that myths were sacred knowledge that was kept secret and that was, at least officially, known only to specialized priests. The very few examples of officially recorded myths that we do have are indeed found in places that were inaccessible to the vast majority of the population, hidden as they were in the innermost parts of the temples or in the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes. Even in the funerary iconography mentioned above, the vast array of often

complex mythical symbols reveals religious truth to those who know, as much as it conceals it from those who do not.

Even taking into account this secret nature of mythological knowledge, however, it is probably fair to say that in ancient Egypt, religious truth or dogma was not primarily expressed in the form of mythical narratives, but rather in the form of hymns and rituals and of funerary texts and representations, which served to guide and protect the deceased on the journey to the next world. This being so, it would not be very practical to give too narrow a definition of myth when dealing with Egyptian religion. For our purposes we will therefore take a pragmatic view and, disregarding its narrative aspect, define myth as a statement that seeks to explain social reality and human existence in symbolic terms by referring to a world outside the human world and to events that happen in a time outside human time but that makes the present situation meaningful and acceptable and provides a perspective on the future. Fortunately, such mythic statements are plentiful in all sorts of Egyptian texts.

There is only one brief period in Egyptian history that was almost entirely free of myths. It was toward the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty, when the pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV) introduced a religion that exclusively worshiped the sun-god "in his identity of the light of day which is in the sun-disk," often abbreviated as the Aten, the Sun-Disk. While even monotheistic religions are not necessarily free of myths, Atenism lacks them, even to the extent that it has been described as antimythical or hostile toward myth. Not only are there no interactions between deities, but there is no mythical past or mythical abode of the dead either. Creation exists only as an actual, daily phenomenon; the Aten imbues all of nature with life through the light of his rays. (See "The Hymn to Aten: Akhenaten Worships the Sole God" later in this volume.)

For most of their long history, however, the Egyptians worshiped hundreds of deities, many of whom were of no more than local significance, and mythical statements concerning the relationships between these deities are equally numerous. It is impossible to deal with this embarrassment of riches within the limited

space of this article, and we will therefore concentrate on the great, universally recognized deities of ancient Egypt and on the central myths about their origins and functions.

## CREATION MYTHS

From the earliest times, the Egyptians speculated about the origin of the universe and of the world in which they lived, and the resulting cosmogony belongs as much to the domain of mythology as to that of theology or even philosophy. Speculation on this subject mainly originated in the great religious centers of Heliopolis (biblical On), Memphis (biblical Noph, modern Mit Rahina), Hermopolis (modern al-Ashmunein), and Thebes, and the various theologies emerging from these centers have often been viewed as competing with each other. However, such a view is hard to reconcile with the persistent Egyptian tendency toward harmonizing; each school of thought further elaborated the train of speculation of the other, adding its own insights to it rather than replacing it.

### *Heliopolitan Theology*

The cosmogony that provided the basis for all later speculations was worked out by the Heliopolitan school and centers around the Ennead, a group of nine deities: Atum; Shu and Tefnut; Geb and Nut; Osiris; Isis; Seth; and Nephthys. These gods all emanate from the great primeval creator god, Atum, and are forms or "developments" (*hprw*) of Atum. They also represent the mythical genealogy of a tenth god, Horus, who is embodied in the living pharaoh. In the beginning the universe consisted of an undifferentiated watery substance called Nu(n), the Primeval Waters, often personified as a god. In these waters, and to a certain extent identical with them, is Atum, the creator god, whose name probably means "he who makes complete," "finisher." Atum floats in the Primeval Waters in an inchoate state, as "he who is in his egg," and creation begins with the differentiation of this "seed" of undeveloped matter from the Primeval Waters surrounding it. To visualize this beginning of creation, the Egyptians often used the mythical image of a Primeval Mound emerging

from the Waters, an image that was familiar to them from the annual recession of the waters of the Nile at the end of the inundation season. This Primeval Mound, which in the Heliopolitan version of the creation myth is identical to the sacred precinct of the temple of Heliopolis, is at the same time a manifestation of Atum himself and the place where Atum begins to "create" or "develop" himself (*hpr ḏs.f*). This process of self-generation brings about the gradual unfolding of undifferentiated unity into the differentiated diversity of the world as we know it: the elements of nature; the complementarities of life; and social institutions.

The first stage in Atum's self-generation is the creation of a void, realized as the god Shu, and of his female counterpart, Tefnut; Egyptian texts often call this first pair the Twins. Atum, being all alone, is an androgynous deity, and the first element of diversity to develop out of this unity is the differentiation of male and female. In mythological terms this event is expressed as the result of Atum's self-impregnation: Atum "produced orgasm and a drop (of semen) fell into his mouth"; then he "sneezed Shu with a sneeze of his mouth (other texts mention Atum's nose) together with his sister Tefnut," and he imbues them with his "life-force" (*k'*, pronounced *ka*). Thus, by sneezing, Atum produces the air on which all life depends; at the same time, the creation of Shu and Tefnut, although they have not themselves been "conceived in conception" and "formed in the womb," sets in motion the normal transmission of life-force from one generation to the next.

The development of diversity continues with the creation of another pair, the vault of the sky and the earth, which isolates the void from the Primeval Waters surrounding it. This is the next generation of gods, consisting of Shu and Tefnut's children, the earth-god Geb and the sky-goddess Nut. The gender of these deities reflects the fact that in Egypt the earth is fertilized not by rain from the sky but by the Nile, which springs from the earth. The mythical image chosen for this stage of the creation is that of Shu separating Geb and Nut by standing with his feet on the earth and supporting the sky with his arms. (See fig. 1.) Geb and Nut together form a permanent boundary between the newly created world and the Primeval Waters that sur-

round it, and the air confined within it enables Atum to manifest himself in a new form, that of his "Sole Eye," the sun-god Re. Thus the first sunrise, in many ways the most crucial moment of creation, comes about, and this necessitates the differentiation of time into two complementary aspects called *nḥḥ* and *ḏt*, for which the translations "Eternal Recurrence" and "Eternal Sameness" have been coined. These two concepts are linked with two "names" or "identities" of Shu and Tefnut, Life (*'nḥ*) and Order (*m't*); the latter is often represented as a goddess in her own right (Ma'at) who, like Tefnut, is called "daughter of Re (or Atum)." Ma'at represents the perfect, stable order of existence that governs every aspect of the world as we know it, from the laws of nature to the rules of human social life. Order lasts unchangeable forever, in Eternal Sameness. At the same time, Life is the Eternal Recurrence of the Sun, which rises and sets daily, and of all human beings, who are born and die only to be reborn in the next generation; all life is subject to this eternal cycle of death and rebirth, which is governed by Life's twin, Ma'at.

The self-development of Atum, which so far has proceeded from his all-encompassing unity, via the inseparable duality of the twins Shu (Life) and Tefnut (Order), to the true duality of the separated couple Geb and Nut, now reaches its next stage: that of plurality. Geb and Nut give birth to Osiris, Seth, Isis, and Nephthys, "from one womb, (one) after the other, and they (in turn) give birth to their multitudes upon earth." Plurality also involves more complex social relationships. The four children of Geb and Nut are organized into two pairs. Osiris and Isis are the harmonious couple who represent the fertility of the earth and of humankind as governed by Order. Seth and Nephthys, on the other hand, represent the opposite. Seth's arrival marks "the beginning of conflict," the element of confusion and disorder that is also part of everyday life. Seth is not lacking in virility, but he carries it to excess by breaking the boundaries of regular sexuality laid down by Order; he commits adultery and is often described as an aggressive homosexual. His virility is counterproductive; it results in infertility. Nephthys, his spouse, is usually described as a childless woman, or even as a "would-be woman without a vagina," who

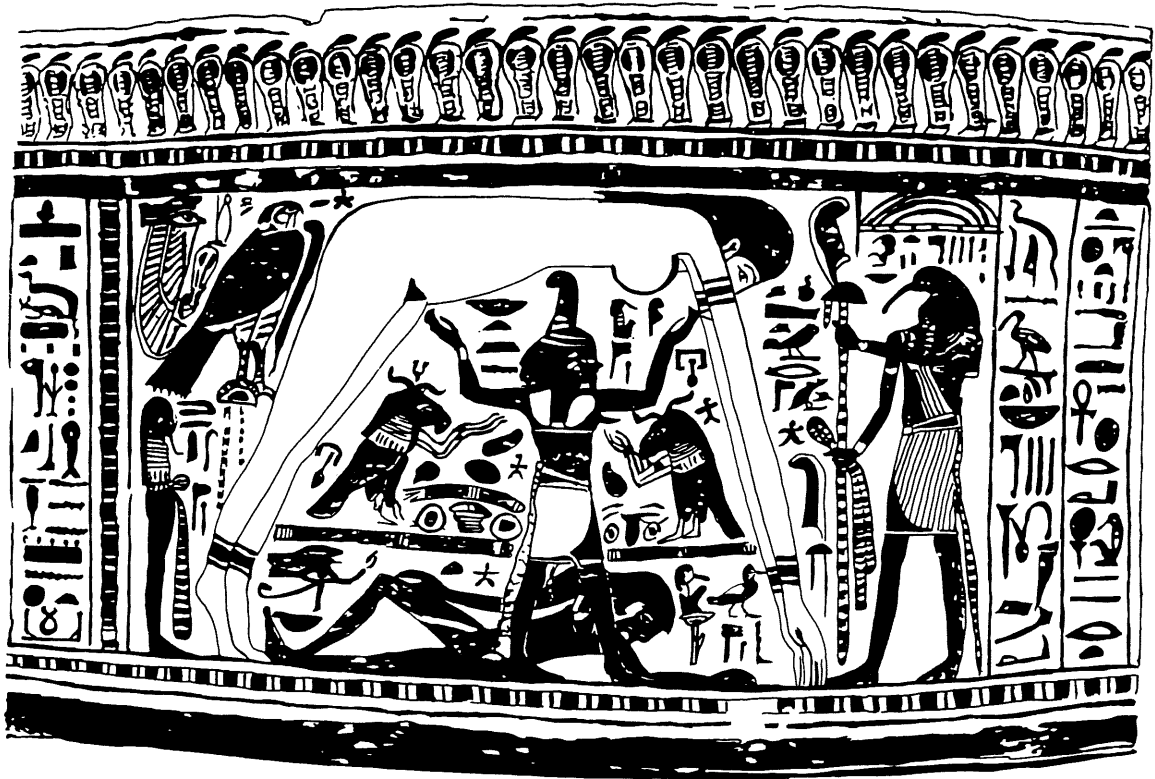


Fig. 1. Painting of Shu separating Geb and Nut, on a Twenty-first Dynasty coffin from Thebes. The coffin is now in the Egyptian Museum, Turin.

can play the role of a wet nurse but cannot give birth to children of her own. If Osiris represents the fertility of the earth, Seth conceptualizes the unpredictable, destructive forces of nature, such as thunder, storm, and rain. Seth also brings death into the world by murdering Osiris. Since Seth, like all the other members of the Ennead, ultimately emanates from Atum, these negative aspects, including death itself, also belong to the created world and are subject to Ma'at, the Order created by Atum. And because Order not only equals Eternal Sameness but also governs Eternal Recurrence, Atum's creation includes not only death but rebirth.

At Heliopolis itself, the nine gods (Ennead) consisting of Atum and his "developments" (*hprw*) could be further extended by giving separate names to various aspects of Atum that play a significant role in the process of creation. Thus Atum's sexual excitement, or libido, which caused him to masturbate, could be conceptual-

ized as the goddess Hathor, and his hand and his penis as manifestations of Hathor, namely the goddesses Ius-a'as and Nebethetepet. The intellectual forces causing Atum to develop himself were likewise conceptualized as gods. Heka is his magical or creative power; Sia, his perception, which enabled him to form an image of creation in his mind; and Hu, his authoritative word, with which creation began.

#### *Memphite, Hermopolitan, and Theban Theogonies*

The idea of creation through the spoken word was further worked out in Memphis. Here the Primeval God manifests himself first materially as Tatenen, the Primeval Mound, then intellectually as his "heart and tongue," embodied in the god Ptah, the divine craftsman, who is able to translate a concept of creation in his mind into its physical realization, like a sculptor who trans-

forms a block of stone into the statue that originally existed only in his mind.

In some early texts, the Primeval Waters are subdivided into four aspects of the undifferentiated state of the universe before creation; these are the infinite Flood, the Waters, Darkness, and Chaos. At Hermopolis these four aspects are represented as four like-named divine couples, the Ogdoad (Eight Gods) of Hermopolis. "Chaos" is sometimes replaced by another name, Amun, "the Hidden," and his female counterpart, Amaunet. These eight primeval gods are viewed as active forces in the creation process, as "the fathers and mothers . . . who created Atum."

In New Kingdom Thebes, Amun was singled out as the great creator, and in the form Amun-Re became the great state god of the Egyptian empire. Theban theologians then took Heliopolitan and Memphite cosmogony one final step further. Amun does not just develop himself, like Atum, resulting in a creation that is a manifestation of its creator. Rather, he is viewed as a transcendent god who exists independent of his creation; Amun "began development when nothing existed, yet the world was not empty of him in the beginning"; he is the hidden, incomprehensible cause of creation.

## THE MYTH OF OSIRIS

The complex of mythical statements that we habitually call the myth of Osiris centers around three main events: the murder of Osiris by his brother Seth; the posthumous conception and birth of Osiris's son Horus; and the conflict between Horus and Seth. Although these events are clearly related, they are often treated separately in Egyptian texts. The slaying of Osiris at the hand of Seth is usually avoided, and when it is mentioned, this is done with the utmost discretion, using evasive phrases like "the evil that was done to him." Because most of our sources derive from a funerary context, it is not surprising to find that the texts concentrate not on the death of the god, but on his resurrection. For a continuous account of this episode, we have to rely on classical authors such as Plutarch and Diodorus Siculus.

In Plutarch's version, *De Iside et Osiride*, Osiris ruled Egypt as a beneficent king, showing the Egyptians how to grow crops, establishing their laws, and teaching them how to worship the gods; he also went abroad to civilize the rest of the world. Meanwhile his brother Typhon (= Seth) and his gang conspired against him, and when Osiris returned, Seth secretly measured the body of Osiris and had a beautifully decorated chest made to fit his body exactly. He brought it with him to a banquet, and when the gods expressed their admiration, he promised them that whoever would lie down in it and show that he fitted it would be given the chest as a present. Of course only Osiris fitted it, and once he was inside, Seth and his gang slammed the lid on and locked it, took it to the Nile, and let it drift away to the sea.

When Isis heard of this, she mourned Osiris and went looking for the chest, which she finally found at Byblos (modern Jubayl) in Phoenicia. But after she had brought it back to Egypt, Seth managed to get hold of Osiris's body again and cut it up into fourteen parts, which he scattered all over Egypt. Then Isis went out to search for Osiris a second time and buried each part where she found it (hence the many tombs of Osiris that exist in Egypt). The only part that she did not find was the god's penis, for Seth had thrown it into the river, where it had been eaten by a fish; Isis therefore fashioned a substitute penis to put in its place. She had also had sexual intercourse with Osiris after his death (see fig. 2), which resulted in the conception and birth of his posthumous son, Harpocrates, Horus-the-Child. Osiris became king of the netherworld, and Horus proceeded to fight with Seth over the inheritance of his father, both on the battlefield and in court, and he finally triumphed over Seth.

There can be no doubt that Plutarch's version is on the whole genuinely Egyptian, even though some details appear to be at variance with the Egyptian sources. For example, Egyptian documents state that the penis of Osiris was successfully retrieved and buried in Mendes. The most complete Egyptian version of the myth is provided by an Eighteenth Dynasty stela in the Louvre with a hymn to Osiris, in which the narrative elements are embedded in a typically Egyptian series of laudatory phrases that begin with:

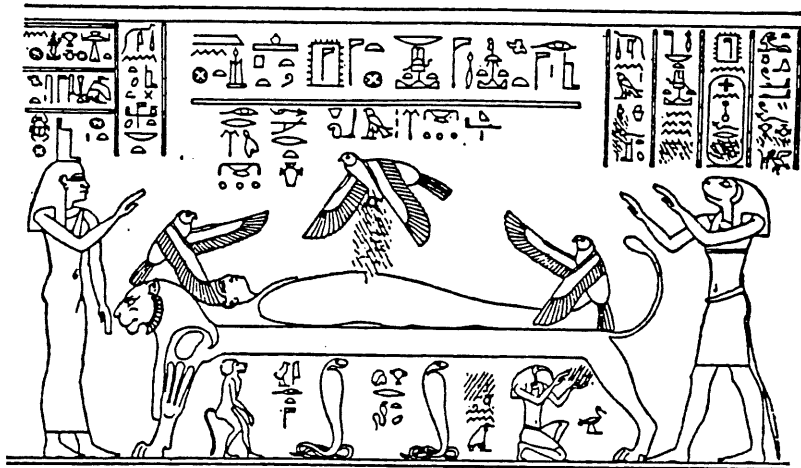


Fig. 2. Wall relief of Isis conceiving Horus, in the Temple of Hathor, Dendara, Roman period. EBERHARD OTTO, *OSIRIS UND AMUN: KULT UND HEILIGE STÄTTEN* (1966)

Hail to you, Osiris,  
Lord of Eternal Recurrence, King of the Gods,  
Manifold of names, holy of developments,  
Mysterious of forms in the temples!

After a long series of similar phrases, including an enumeration of the chief cult places of Osiris and praise of his benign rule upon earth, the text continues:

His sister (Isis) protected him,  
She who repels his enemies,  
Who stops the deeds of the Brawler (Seth)  
By the effectiveness of her speech,

Who searched for him (Osiris) without wearying,  
Who went round this land lamenting,  
Not resting until she had found him,  
Who made a shade with her feathers,  
And created air with her wings,  
Who rejoiced when she revived her brother,  
And raised the inertness of the Weyary One,  
Who received his seed and bore the Heir  
(Horus),

Who raised the lad in solitude,  
Unknown the place where he was kept,  
Who introduced him in the Hall of Geb  
When his arm had become strong.

The Ennead was overjoyed:

"Welcome, Son of Osiris,  
Horus, stout of heart, triumphant one,  
Son of Isis, Heir of Osiris!"

Horus was found justified (in his struggle against Seth),

The office of his father was given to him,  
He came out crowned by the command of Geb,  
He received the rule of the Two Shores (Egypt).

All the essential features of the myth are present in this hymn, except the actual murder of Osiris. Isis protects Osiris against any further onslaught by Seth, she searches for his body, and when she has found him, she revives him and conceives his child, whom she raises in a secret place (in the marshes of the Delta). When Horus is old enough, she introduces him to the Ennead, presided over by Geb, who vindicates his claim to the throne against Seth and installs him as ruler of Egypt.

The myth of Osiris and the conflict of Horus and Seth are the subject of many texts, including a story called *The Blinding of Truth by Falsehood*, which resembles a fairy tale in that it displays many motifs familiar from folktales all over the world. The antagonists are here called Truth (Osiris) and Falsehood (Seth). Falsehood has blinded Truth and then orders his servants to abduct Truth and cast him to the lions. Truth manages to persuade the servants to disobey their orders and hide him instead. Truth is found by a lady (Isis) who falls in love with him, and

they have a son (Horus). Once the boy has grown up, he learns who his father is and sets out to avenge him. He takes Falsehood to the tribunal of the Ennead; Truth and his son are justified, and Falsehood is blinded.

A much more elaborate treatment of the conflict can be found in a series of tales, known as *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, recorded in a Ramesside papyrus. This document also contains other literary compositions, including love poetry, and may, like them, have been intended primarily for entertainment. The events take place in the presence of the Ennead, this time under the chairmanship of Re-Atum himself. The gods are divided, some of them being on the side of Horus, others on the side of Seth. Even Isis, although strongly supporting her son, never distances herself completely from Seth, who is after all her own brother. After each contest Horus is proclaimed victor, but Seth keeps challenging Horus, so that their dispute goes on for eighty years.

In the initial court session, Isis speaks out on behalf of her son, but Seth, who while quite willing to stand up against Horus, is unable to cope with Isis and refuses to participate in the proceedings so long as Isis is a member of the tribunal. The Ennead therefore retreats to a secluded island, and the god Nemty, the ferryman, receives strict orders not to bring across any woman who looks like Isis. Isis then transforms herself into an old woman and pretends to be carrying some food for her young son, who is ostensibly on the island tending some cattle. (The word "cattle" is often used as a metaphor for "humanity" and in Egyptian sounds the same as the word for "office.") At first Nemty refuses to ferry her across, but he is eventually bribed into it with a gold ring. Once on the island, Isis changes herself into a beautiful young woman, and when Seth sees her, he "desires her very badly" and offers his services. Isis then tells him that she is seeking his help against a stranger who has beaten her son and stripped him of the "cattle" that he had inherited from his father. Seth readily agrees that this is outrageous, and when Isis reports this to the Ennead, they rule that his own words have condemned Seth and grant the office of Osiris to Horus. As in the hymn on the Louvre Stela, it is the "effectiveness of her speech" that enables Isis to thwart the at-

tempts of Seth. Nemty is severely punished, and gold, the cause of his disobedience, becomes a religious taboo in his city.

Seth does not accept the verdict of the Ennead, however, and the fight continues. In the episodes that follow, violence plays an important role; however, most of the contests between the two rivals are more in the nature of tricks or practical jokes that they play on one another. Perhaps the most famous episode involves a homosexual encounter between the two; allusions to this myth are found as early as the Pyramid Texts, and it is also told in a fragmentary Middle Kingdom text that may in fact have been part of a magical spell (the semen of Seth being a well-known designation of the poison of a snake or scorpion). The homosexual acts of the two gods have a negative effect; Horus's eye starts dripping, and as a result, it becomes small and loses its strength, whereas Seth temporarily loses his virility. In many later texts, particularly in the Greco-Roman period, these effects are ascribed to a fight between the gods during which they wound each other, Horus losing an eye and Seth his testicles. Thoth, the god of learning and writing who acts as secretary to the Ennead and who is also a moon-god, plays the role of arbitrator in the conflict; he reconciles Horus and Seth and "fills the Eye of Horus." (For this reason every offering made to the gods, whatever its actual substance, is called Eye of Horus.) This myth refers to the waning and waxing of the moon, which is the result of the "meeting of the Two Bulls" (Horus and Seth), as some late texts call it.

The homosexual episode as told in *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* also serves to explain the relationship between Thoth and the moon. Re-Atum orders Horus and Seth to stop quarreling, and Seth invites Horus to a party at his house. During the night, after they have both gone to bed, Seth inserts his erect penis between Horus's thighs in an attempt to assert his dominance over Horus by treating him like a woman. But Horus puts his hands between his thighs and catches Seth's semen, which he shows to his mother. Isis cuts off Horus's hands, throws them into the water, and makes him a new pair of hands. Then she makes him masturbate into a pot and spreads Horus's semen on the lettuce growing in Seth's garden. Seth eats the lettuce



and becomes pregnant with the semen of Horus. The two rivals then go to the tribunal, and Seth claims his right to the inheritance of Osiris on the basis of his supposed dominance over Horus. When Horus denies that dominance, Thoth summons Seth's semen to appear, and it answers him from the water. Then Horus's semen is summoned, and it appears from Seth's forehead in the form of a golden disk (the moon). The disk is promptly seized by Thoth, who puts it on his own head. Thus Thoth becomes the moon-god.

Even after this episode, the conflict is not yet over; in the end, Osiris himself has to write a letter to the Ennead, reminding them that only he is able "to create the barley and emmer which feed both the gods and their cattle (humankind)" and instructing them to give his office to his son Horus. Only then does Seth give up fighting Horus; the two gods "fraternize so as to cease quarrelling" and are pacified at last. Seth is given to Re as an assistant so that "he can thunder in the sky and be feared"; indeed, he is often depicted in the bark of Re warding off the Apopis snake, the monster of chaos that tries to overthrow Re when he rises in the morning. (See fig. 3.) Thus the unruly, aggressive Seth is given a positive function in the maintenance of cosmic order.

The myth of Osiris contains many features that cannot be discussed here. The myth's essence can perhaps be said to lie in the nature of the gods involved and in their relationships to one another. We have already seen that the final development of the creator god Atum did not consist of another male-female couple but of two brothers, each with his female companion. The

duality of this pair, which is made visible in the conflict between the two, is one of life and death. Osiris is life as we know it, life that incorporates death; without death there can be no renewal of life. Seth himself does not die—although as the "loser" in the conflict, he often symbolizes the sacrificial animal in rituals—but he has brought death into the world. The new life that arises from death is Horus, who is none other than the reborn Osiris. Osiris and Horus are two forms of one and the same god; Horus is both the living "son" and the reincarnation of his dead "father" Osiris. His legitimacy as ruler of Egypt rests on this genealogy. As the "tenth god" of the Ennead he is the final, living manifestation of the creator god Atum, embodied in the reigning pharaoh, who is the representative of the gods among humankind.

The myth of Osiris and Horus reflects and hallows the institution of divine kingship; the legitimacy of the reigning king also depends on the principle that he is both the living "son" (even if this were not always literally the case) and the immediate divine reincarnation of his dead predecessor. This idea is expressed most clearly in a series of New Kingdom temple reliefs and inscriptions known as "The Birth of the Divine King," in which the creator god (in this case Amun), who is none other than his earthly embodiment, the ruling pharaoh, unites with the queen in order to engender his son and legitimate heir. When a new king is crowned, "the Ennead gather together in order to give him the jubilees of Re and the years of Horus as king" (coronation text of Horemheb), and when an enemy attacks Egypt, he is unsuccessful

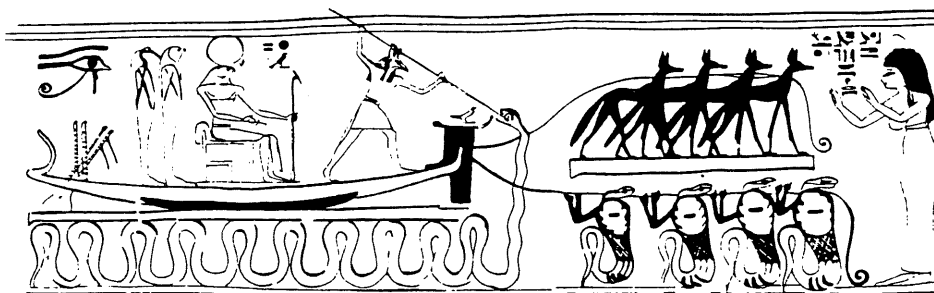


Fig. 3. Seth warding off the Apopis snake, as shown on a Twenty-first Dynasty papyrus, now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. s. D'AURIA ET AL., *MUMMIES AND MAGIC* (1988)

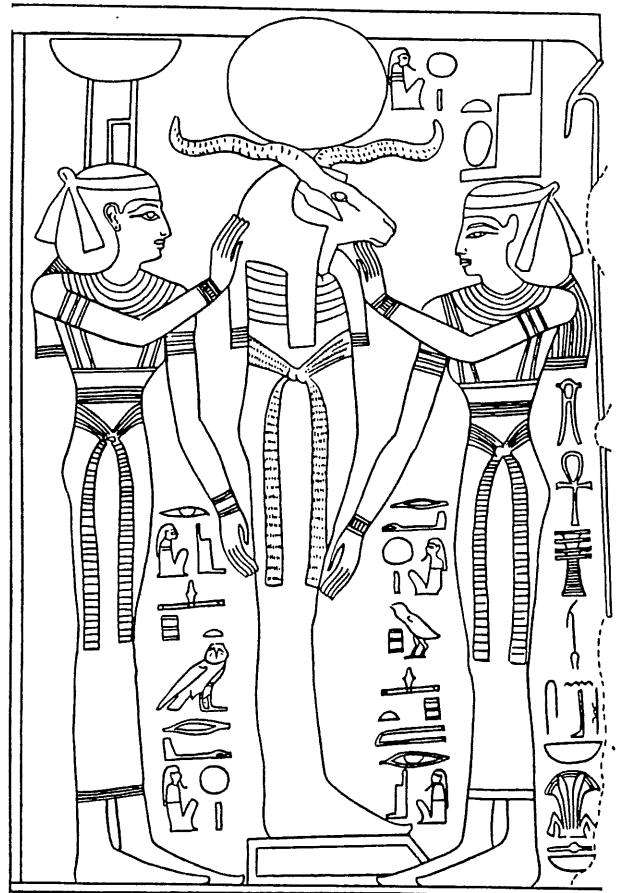
ful because "he has been contested in Heliopolis, and the Ennead found him guilty of his crimes" (Israel stela of Merneptah). What applies to the world of the gods and to the institution of divine kingship applies also to all human beings, for here too the transmission of life-force (*k'*) from father to son implies the transmission of the father's office to the son and guarantees the latter's legitimacy. Thus the system of positional succession, as described by anthropologists, is hallowed by a mythical charter.

## RE AND OSIRIS

Both the myth of Osiris and the creation myths have important implications for the funerary beliefs of the Egyptians. Whether king or commoner, the deceased's son succeeds his father as the new Horus, and the deceased himself becomes an Osiris. Just like Osiris, he is not really dead but rather enters a different mode of being; his death merely marks the transition to a new life in the underworld. This new Osirian existence can be viewed not only as a static mode of being, in Eternal Sameness, but also as an eternal cycle of death and resurrection, in Eternal Recurrence. This cycle is exemplified by the sun's journey along the sky, and countless funerary texts identify the deceased with the sun-god. The sun-god's daily course is described as a life cycle. In the morning Re is born from the womb of his mother, the sky goddess Nut, and he starts his life in the eastern horizon as a young child; in the evening he has become an old man, who dies when he sets in the western horizon and enters the underworld, only to be reborn the next morning. This cycle is viewed as a perpetual repetition of the creation, the maintenance of which is the main objective of the daily rituals in the great state temples of Egypt. When Re enters the underworld, he becomes Atum and returns to the Primeval Waters with which he was united before he began to develop himself, and in the morning he reemerges from them.

In the course of Egyptian history, and especially from the New Kingdom on, the myths of Osiris and Re were linked; when the sun-god dies and enters the underworld in the evening,

he too becomes Osiris. In the middle of the night, Re encounters the body of Osiris, which rests there in profound darkness, motionless and seemingly dead; then the two embrace each other and become one god. As the litany of Re expresses it: "Re has come to rest in Osiris and Osiris has come to rest in Re." (See fig. 4.) Through this union Osiris is revived by the rays of Re and becomes the sun-god's nocturnal embodiment; at the same time Re, who had "died" and entered the realm of the dead, is imbued with the life-force of Osiris; Re becomes "Horus in the arms of his father Osiris," and these arms lift him out of the Primeval Waters in the morning, when he is reborn as Re-Harakhty, or "Re-Horus of the Horizon." The unification of Re and Osiris is often called the unification of their



**Fig. 4.** Painted relief of Re and Osiris united, in the tomb of Queen Nefertari, Nineteenth Dynasty. A. PLANKOFF AND N. RAMBOVA, *THE TOMB OF RAMESES VI* (1954)

*bas*, or manifestations, which are given the names of Shu and Tefnut, the Twins who were the first development of Atum at the beginning of creation. Shu and Tefnut also represent Eternal Recurrence (Re) and Eternal Sameness (Osiris), neither of whom can exist without the other, as this myth makes abundantly clear.

## HUMANITY

In the creation accounts that we have discussed so far, not a word has been said about the origin of human beings. Egyptian texts that deal with the creation of humanity are very sparse; the only information we obtain is that people originated from the tears of the sun-god. Often this is explained in a typically Egyptian fashion, using what might be called "sacred etymology," as the words for "weep" (*rmj*), "tears" (*rmwt*), and "people" (*rmt*) sound very similar. There is more to it than that, however, for some texts seem almost deliberately to avoid this play on words by using completely different terms; a Ramesside text in the temple of Mut in Karnak says that the Creator "wept (*bjf*) all humankind (*bw-nb*) from his eyes, while the gods developed from his mouth." The exact notion that lies behind this remains unclear; perhaps there is a connection with ancient theories about the origin of semen, which was thought to derive from the brain, or more specifically from the region around the eyes. A late text explains that Re-Atum wept because his Eye (represented as a goddess) had left him; Shu and Tefnut went after her, and when they brought her back, she became angry because he had replaced her with another eye. Because of this the creator wept, and "that is how humanity (*rmt*) developed from the tears (*rmwt*) which came from my Eye." He then appeased her by promoting her to be ruler of the entire land.

This is one of a very complex group of mythical statements about the Eye of Re. One version deals with both the original and the present situation of humanity within the created world. This myth is recorded in the *Book of the Cow of Heaven*, which is inscribed in a number of royal tombs of the later New Kingdom. In the beginning gods and human beings live together

in one undivided world governed by Re. This god has become old, however, and his subjects have started to rebel against him. Re summons his Eye as well as Nun (the Primeval Waters) and the Ennead to come to his palace and tells them that he is contemplating annihilating all of his creation and returning into the Primeval Waters from which he came forth at the beginning of time because "humanity which has developed from my Eye has plotted against me." But the gods urge him to stay on as ruler and to send out Hathor, his Eye, in order to kill the rebels, who have fled into the desert. This happens, and Hathor, who has assumed the form of a fierce lioness, kills many people. When Re sees that not only the rebels but all other human beings are going to be killed as well, he devises a plot to stop the massacre. He makes his servants brew seven thousand jugs of beer, which is then mixed with red ochre from Elephantine, so that it becomes as red as human blood. This beer is poured out over the fields during the night, and when Hathor wants to resume her onslaught in the morning, she drinks from the beer and gets drunk. She fails to notice the people and returns to her father. Thus a small number of people survive, but when they promptly start to fight each other, Re has had enough. Nun orders the sky goddess Nut to transform herself into a cow, and gives Shu eight assistants to help him support this Heavenly Cow so that Re can sit on her back with his divine entourage and retire from his duties. (See fig. 10 in "Ancient Egyptian Religious Iconography" later in this volume.) The moon-god Thoth is summoned and ordered to replace Re at night, when Re illumines the underworld with his rays.

The part of the text that describes the punishment of humankind and the way its complete destruction is prevented can be seen as an etiological myth that explains the diseases which invariably spread over Egypt at the end of the dry season, during the heat of summer. The end of this period is marked by the advent of the annual inundation of the Nile, which brings new fertility to the parched soil. The first water of the inundation is red because of the ferruginous earth that it carries from the Ethiopian mountains, hence the ochre from Elephantine (the mythical location of the source of the inundation) that is mixed through the beer. The inunda-

tion of the Nile puts an end to the decimation of the people caused by the heat of the raging Eye of Re. The inundation coincides with the summer solstice when, according to a related myth known best from Greco-Roman sources, the Eye of Re retreats to Nubia. On a different level, the myth of the Cow of Heaven explains how paradise was lost and how gods and people became separated; only after death, when man enters the underworld, will he join Re and the other gods again.

The myths discussed in this essay deal with the creation of the universe and humanity's position in it. They explain the complementary aspects of life (male and female, order and confusion, conflict and reconciliation, fertility and infertility, life and death, and so on). They also provide a divine charter for social institutions (positional succession, divine kingship). All of these elements are reconciled and made meaningful by myth. Perhaps the importance of myth in Egyptian custom is nowhere better illustrated than in the way it is utilized in times of distress. When people are ill, selected mythical stories are told as part of medical treatment to reassure them of their own secure place in the cosmic and social orders. Thus equipped with knowledge and truths, they are able to continue to prosper and live at peace with the world that surrounds them.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Introduction

Readers may benefit from the succinct surveys of the various theories and definitions of myth in the following books: THEODORUS P. VAN BAAREN, *Menschen wie wir: Religion und Kult der schriftlosen Völker* (1964); ANNEMARIE DE WAAL MALEFIJT, *Religion and Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion* (1968); and HAROLD FALLDING, *The Sociology of Religion: An Explanation of the Unity and Diversity in Religion* (1974). Important insights can also be gained from the undogmatic but highly instructive approach of G. S. KIRK, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (1970).

Studies of Egyptian myth include the following: SIEGFRIED SCHOTT, *Mythe und Mythenbildung im alten Ägypten* (1945); JAN ASSMANN, "Die Verborgenheit

des Mythos in Ägypten," *Göttinger Miszellen* 25 (1977), and "Die Zeugung des Sohnes: Bild, Spiel, Erzählung und das Problem des ägyptischen Mythos," in J. ASSMANN, W. BURKERT, and F. STOLZ, *Funktionen und Leistungen des Mythos: Drei altorientalische Beispiele*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis*, vol. 48 (1982); and for a critical review of various approaches, and especially of Assmann's, see JOHN BAINES, "Egyptian Myth and Discourse: Myth, Gods, and the Early Written and Iconographic Record," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 50, no. 2 (1991). Most of the essential literature on Egyptian myth is quoted in these studies.

### Creation Myths

Here I have benefited greatly from the extremely lucid study by JAMES P. ALLEN, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (1988). A more traditional survey, with a much wider selection of Egyptian texts, is SERGE SAUNERON and JEAN YOYOTTE, "La Naissance du monde selon l'Égypte ancienne," in *La Naissance du monde*, *Sources Orientales* 1 (1959). Further aspects are treated in HERMAN TE VELDE, "The Theme of the Separation of Heaven and Earth in Egyptian Mythology," *Studia Aegyptiaca* 3 (1977), and "Relations and Conflicts Between Egyptian Gods, Particularly in the Divine Ennead of Heliopolis," in *Struggles of Gods: Papers of the Groningen Work Group for the Study of the History of Religions*, edited by HANS G. KIPPENBERG (1984). The relationship between Amun and the Ogdoad of Hermopolis was studied by KURT SETHE, *Amun und die Acht Urgötter von Hermopolis: Eine Untersuchung über Ursprung und Wesen des ägyptischen Götterkönigs* (1929). SUSANNE BICKEL, *La cosmogonie égyptienne avant le Nouvel Empire*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 134 (1994), offers a new detailed treatment and synthesis.

### The Myth of Osiris

Plutarch's account is available in J. GWYN GRIFFITHS, *Plutarch's "De Iside et Osiride"* (1970). An English translation of the Louvre Hymn to Osiris may be found in MIRIAM LICHTHEIM, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*, vol. 2 (1976), which also contains translations of *The Blinding of Truth by Falsehood* and *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*. Important studies of the Osiris myth include: J. GWYN GRIFFITHS, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth, from Egyptian and Classical Sources: A Study in Ancient Mythology* (1960); HERMAN TE VELDE, *Seth, God of Confusion: A Study of His Role in Egyptian Mythology and Religion* (1967; 2nd ed. 1977); and EDMUND LEACH, "The Mother's Brother in Ancient Egypt," *Royal Anthropological Institute News* 15 (1976). Myths about the

moon have been collected by PHILIPPE DERCHAIN, "Mythes et dieux lunaires en Égypte," in *La Lune: Mythes et rites*, Sources Orientales 5 (1962). For the "Birth of the Divine King," see HELLMUT BRUNNER, *Die Geburt des Gottkönigs: Studien zur Überlieferung eines altägyptischen Mythos* (1964; 2nd ed. 1986). For the Coronation Text of Horemheb, see SIR ALAN GARDINER, "The Coronation of King Haremhab," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 39 (1953).

## **Re and Osiris**

There is no monograph on this subject, but the reader will find discussion and references in ERIK HORNUNG, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, translated by JOHN BAINES (1982).

## **Humanity**

The latest edition of the *Book of the Cow of Heaven*, with translation and commentary, is ERIK HORNUNG, *Der ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh: Eine Ätiologie des Unvollkommenen* (1982; 2nd ed. 1991). For the mythical complex of the Eye of Re, see HERMANN JUNKER, *Der Auszug der Hathor-Tefnut aus Nubien* (1911), and *Die Onurislegende* (1917); and KURT SETHE, *Zur altägyptischen Sage vom Sonnenauge das in der Fremde war* (1912).

## **Conclusion**

For a case study of the application of myth in medical or magical texts, see JACOBUS VAN DIJK, "The Birth of Horus According to the Ebers Papyrus," *Jaarbericht Ex Oriente Lux* 26 (1979–1980).

SEE ALSO **Ethics and Piety in the Ancient Near East** (Part 8, Vol. III); **Ancient Egyptian Religious Iconography** (Part 8, Vol. III); **Theology, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Egypt** (Part 8, Vol. III); and **Ancient Egyptian Literature: An Overview** (Part 9, Vol. IV).