

# Isis And Osiris

## The Goddess and the Dismembered Savior God

*By Mary Longenecker Frorer*

### **Isis and Osiris – The Myth**

In the beginning there was only Nun, the primal ocean of chaos, which contained the seeds of everything to come. Out of these waters by an exertion of will arose the Sun God Ra. In time he was moved to give birth to Shu and Tefnut, the god and goddess of Air and Moisture. Tefnut, as the goddess of Moisture, consorted with her spouse, Shu, and they in turn gave birth to Geb and Nut, the Earth god and Sky goddess. And thus the physical universe came into being.

Against the orders of Ra, Nut and Geb likewise consorted, and Nut, the Sky goddess, became pregnant. Ra was angered by this disobedience of his royal decree, and he announced that Nut could not give birth in any month of any year. Now in those times there was a perfect year of 360 days. So, Thoth, the god of Truth, contrived a plan. He was fond of Nut, and to resolve her plight, he went to the Moon goddess. In gambling with her, he won one-seventieth of her yearly illuminations, or the equivalent of five days. Then Thoth provided Nut with the five extra days on which her children could be born.

The five children of Nut and Geb were Osiris, Horus the Elder, Set, Isis, and Nephthys. Of these, Osiris, the eldest, became the beneficent king and ruler of prehistoric Egypt, and husband of Isis. Horus the Elder, whom some refer to as Apollo, was later to become Horus, the child of Isis and Osiris, but he was conceived while both of them were still in the womb of Nut. Set, born on the third day,

is the god of darkness, death and evil. He was born, not by normal means, but burst through his mother's side. According to an alternative tradition, he and Nephthys were born from Geb, not Nut. Set also goes by the name, Typho, and like the Greek monster-serpent, Typhon, Set is sometimes represented as a serpent. At other times he is described as having red hair, and is said to be the god who rules the barren dry lands of Egypt. Isis, the fourth child, is the wife of Osiris and mother of Horus. She, too, according to other sources, is said to have been born not of Nut, but of Thoth, the god of truth. Nephthys, the fifth and last child of Nut, becomes the companion of Isis and the wife of Set. But in union with Osiris, she gives birth to Anubis, the Jackal-headed god who guides deceased souls through the Underworld.

Isis and Osiris are the first mythological royal family of ancient Egypt. Together they were enlightened rulers, introducing the art of cultivation. They taught the planting and harvesting of crops in accordance with the annual irrigation of the land by the Nile river. Isis and Osiris introduced language, and established laws for their people. They also promoted commerce and trade, and other civilizing arts, and taught their subjects to worship the gods. All went well, until one year when Osiris was off visiting neighboring lands. In his absence, his evil brother, Set, plotted against him, unbeknownst to Isis. Set secretly obtained the measurement of Osiris's body, and with the help of the dark Queen of

Ethiopia end seventy-two conspirators, Set had a lead-lined coffin built to exactly fit the dimensions of Osiris. On Osiris's return a special banquet was held, and Set announced after the festivities, that whomever fit perfectly into this magnificent chest would become its owner. Osiris was the last to try, and, as he stepped into the chest, Set and his conspirators nailed down the lid and threw the chest into the Nile. Some say that this event took place in the twenty-eighth year of his reign, while others claim it was during the twenty-eighth year of his life. It is also reported that this event occurred on the seventeenth day of the month of Athyr, when the sun was passing through the sign of the Scorpion. The coffin, as it is also referred to, then floated downstream and was carried by the waves of the sea to the coast of Byblos.<sup>2</sup> There it lodged against the bank of a river, and a tamarisk tree grew up around it, encasing the coffin completely within the tree. When Isis realized what had befallen her husband, she traveled the length of the Nile in deep grief, searching for the chest containing Osiris.

Isis dressed in mourning apparel, and learning the whereabouts of the chest from some children, traveled to Byblos to retrieve it. Upon arrival, she rested beside a fountain, and chanced upon the maidservants of Queen Astarte. Speaking kindly to them, she braided their hair, all the while transmitting to them a marvelous perfume from her own body. When the Queen learned of her, she sent for Isis and engaged her as a nurse to her newborn son. Isis soon found that the tree containing the chest had been cut down, and was in the King's palace, serving as a pillar to support the roof. Isis nursed the infant, offering him her finger in place of her breast. Every night she secretly performed a magic ritual to make the infant immortal, placing him in the fireplace in order to burn away his mortal parts. But one night the Queen interrupted the ceremony, crying out to save her son's life. Alas, the spell was broken, and the child was denied the gift of immortality. At this point Isis revealed herself

as the Goddess, and requested the tree trunk, or pillar, containing the chest. Removing the coffin from the tree, she wrapped the shell of the tree in fine linen and perfumed it with oil. Then she presented it to the king and queen who placed it in the temple of Isis. They say it is worshipped there to this day by the people of Byblos.

Isis returned with the chest to Egypt. Aided by Nephthys, Isis temporarily revived Osiris through magic, and conceived a son by him. Rumor of this news, however, got back to Set, and Isis had to flee into the swamps of the Nile Delta to escape his evil intent. She hid the chest containing the body of Osiris, and raised her son, Horus, in seclusion, until such time as he would be mature enough to win back his right to the throne of Egypt.

Despite Isis's precautions, Set came across the body of Osiris one night while he was out hunting under the light of a full moon. He took the corpse and, cutting it into fourteen pieces, scattered the portions about the entire length of the kingdom. Once Isis realized what Set had done, she patiently traveled throughout the land gathering up thirteen of the fourteen segments of the body. The sexual member she was not able to retrieve as it had been consumed by an Oxyrynchus fish. She restored the body and made a model of the missing phallus.

Horus, meanwhile, continued to grow to manhood, hoping to redeem his father's death and secure his rightful claim to the kingdom. In an effort to help him, Osiris made an appearance from the other world, and asked Horus two questions: "What is the most glorious action a man can perform?" To this, Horus responded: "To revenge the injuries inflicted upon a parent." Then Osiris asked, "And what animal is most serviceable to soldier?" Horus replied, "A horse, for it can overtake and cut off a fleeing adversary." These replies gave Osiris cause to rejoice, for he knew his son was prepared to defend his cause.

Shortly thereafter, Set's concubine,

Thueris, deserted his ranks. As she was approaching Horus's army, a serpent which was pursuing her was killed by Horos's soldiers. In a battle that followed soon after, Set was taken prisoner. Horus turned the captive over to his mother, Isis, and went off to finish the war. But wily Set managed to talk the forgiving Isis into releasing him. This action so incensed Horus that he tore off the royal insignia from his mother's headdress. Great Thoth replaced it with one from the cow goddess, Hathor: Set then publicly accused Horus of illegitimacy, but a council of the Gods decided in Horus's favor.

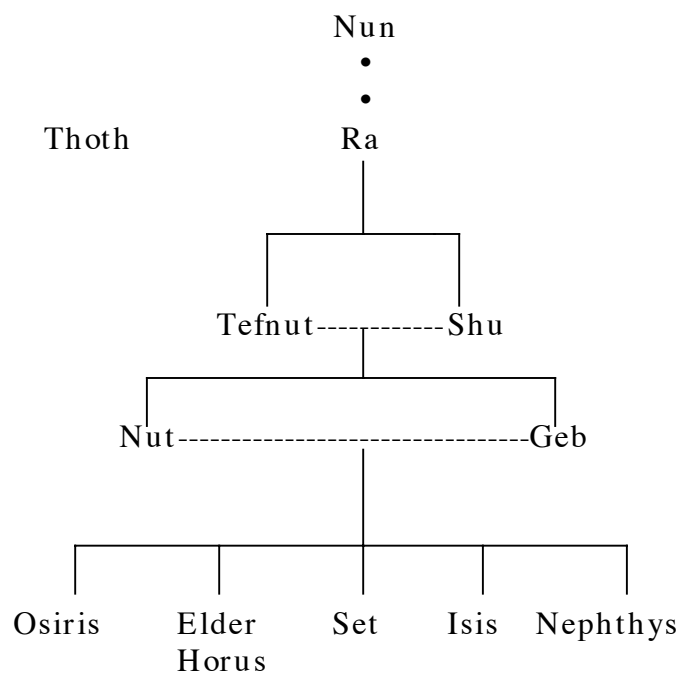
The struggle between the two went on for years. There were a number of attempts at cosmic judgment, mostly to no avail, for neither party had a clear majority of deities on its side. At one point, Set tore out Horus's left eye and threw it away. Isis retrieved it. Horus ripped off one of Set's testicles. Finally the Great Quarrel came to a head when Thoth and Ra made clear the issues on both sides, for, as Thoth declared, "Should one give the office to the mother's brother, while the direct son of Osiris is at hand?" And speaking for Ra, the Ram of Mendes cried out, "On the contrary, should the office be given to a mere lad while Set, his elder relative (and mother's brother, is at hand?" In the end, Set did concede the throne to Horus. Horus's eye was restored by Thoth as the Wedjat eye. The lunar eye thus became the eye of wisdom and illumination. In fact, Horus gave the restored eye to Osiris, so that he might be healed as well. Osiris was enthroned as Lord of the Underworld, and the land of Egypt was at peace once more.

### Isis and Osiris – The Commentary

Most ancient cultures had myths that were cosmological, such as this one, where the myth attempts to describe the origin and structure of the cosmos, offering a metaphorical account of how it came into being. In these myths, the gods and goddesses are personifications of archetypal and universal principles. The older

or original deities always represent the more abstract functions or processes. In the Egyptian pantheon, for instance, Ra represents the spiritual and creative energy of the Sun, the God who each day rises by an exertion of will out of the cosmic ocean of Nun. In the next generation, the god Shu and the goddess Tefnut are the substances of air and moisture. Their offspring, Geb and Nut, are personifications of the physical earth and sky. Thus are created the four elements: fire as Ra; air as Shu; water as Tefnut; and earth as Geb, with Nut functioning as the sky, or the space, within which these deities exist. Geb and Nut then give birth to the five gods and goddesses who are the central characters in this Egyptian myth.

### The Egyptian Pantheon



Thoth, the God of truth, stands apart from the scheme of creation, for he is an un-created and eternal principle, coexistent with Ra. By gambling with the Moon, Thoth wins the five extra days during which Nut's children can be born. This event accounted for our solar-lunar year of 360 + 5 days. Moreover, five as a number has perennially been associated with

"man," for humans have five fingers on each hand, five physical senses, and stand upright in the form of a five pointed star. Four, in contrast, has always been the number symbolic of Nature, the Earth, and the unconscious. It is also the number associated with the four elements, the four directions, and the material world. Five, as the number of humanity, becomes the number of choice and consciousness, a potentiality for moving beyond instinctive matter.

Thus it is not accidental that the Goddess Nut gives birth to five children. That they are born outside the solar year of Ra and thus combine solar and lunar influences is also significant. It implies that these five gods and goddesses partake of a dual nature, solar and lunar. And as the sun represents the principle of consciousness (light) and the moon, the unconscious (darkness), so these five children of Nut and Geb will experience in a mythic way the same struggle between consciousness and the unconscious that humans do. In effect, these five deities of Heaven and Earth are symbolic projections of the human self. Each of them is a separate archetypal divinity who, at the same time, represents a fundamental principle operating within every human being.

Of the five, Isis is the strongest figure in the myth, for she is the Mother Goddess who comes from the pre-patriarchal period in which the feminine energy embodied in the Earth and Nature was worshipped and honored as a divinity. She is almost always the positive aspect of Nature, the beneficent, nurturing, and educating force that assists human progress. Her sister, Nephthys, is the shadow side of Isis, symbolic of a darker and less conscious feminine. She is closer to the instinctive self, and the guardian of things hidden and concealed. Thus she assists Isis in the process of resurrecting Osiris after he has been slain by Set. Osiris is the consort of Isis, the brother, husband-lover of the goddess. Horus, the child who is born to Isis and Osiris, was preexistent in the womb of Nut as the Elder Horus. He represents, as Christ did

much later, the logos principle of light and reason, existing from all time. Thus Plutarch compares Horus to Apollo, the god of light. Horus is born after Osiris's death, conceived, as it were, through the magic of the Mother Goddess. Set, then, brother of Isis and Osiris, and uncle of Horus, is the adversary, a symbol of darkness and evil-that which the hero figure must fight against. During the course of the myth, Horus and Set engage in a lengthy battle for rulership of the kingdom of Egypt.

This battle for rulership of Egypt, which is basically the theme of the myth, is an excellent example of the way in which the myths of antiquity were always intended to be interpreted on multiple levels simultaneously. This myth, then, is not a simple linear narrative, but, as one author has put it, more like a "polyphonic fugue".<sup>4</sup> For instance, the historical level the battle between Horus and Set can be seen as a mythic account of an ancient battle which did indeed unify what had been the two separate kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt. The first king of this united kingdom of Egypt was known by the name Menes, and he wore a crown that symbolized the union of the two lands.

But viewed from an ethical level, the myth can also be seen as reflecting the transition from the unified world of the Goddess toward the world of duality created by the Gods, with Set, the usurper, representing the forces of darkness, and Horus as the hero who fights for truth and light. This battle between Horus and Set sets the stage for what later creates the dual world of opposites. But as long as myths originated within the age of the Goddess, the battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness does not completely polarize itself. For the Mother Goddesses, like Isis here, do not consistently align themselves with one side against the other. The Mother Goddess in her great wisdom recognizes that the light and the dark are inherently One, just as daytime and nighttime are two halves of a larger cycle.

A third interpretation of the myth is to recognize that it raises many of the Issues

involved in the historical transition from the matriarchal time of the Goddess to the patriarchal age of the Gods. In part, this represents two systems of inheritance. Is the throne to descend through the mother's line or the father's? In a matrilineal society, such as was likely during the Neolithic age, the mother's brother as an adult has a legitimate claim to the throne as long as her son is still a child. Set's claim comes out of this older tradition. Horus, as Osiris's son, represents the rising ambitions of the patriarchy. This is the reason behind Osiris's reappearance, and the two questions he poses to Horus, particularly the one concerning a soldier's choice of animal. In the Neolithic age of the Goddess, the animals of worship were the bull, the serpent and the lion, for they represent the power of the feminine unconscious. Horus, however, appropriately chooses the horse, the animal prized by the patriarchy, for with it the rider can overtake and wipe out the fleeing adversary. This answer clearly aligns Horus with the patriarchal position. And in a mythic sense, then, he is one of the earliest of the patriarchal hero figures.

This helps to explain why Set is also called Typho, and why he is often pictured in the form of a serpent. Set represents the serpent energy of the Mother Goddess, Isis, just as Mother Gaia had the serpent Python, and the Indian Goddess, Danu, had the serpent Vritra. The serpent embodies the force itself, which is later recognized as the powerful kundalini energy, that which energizes all life forms. The hero son of the Father in myth always battles the serpent, as the symbol of power of the feminine unconscious. It is a battle initiated by the conscious self in an attempt to master the much more powerful unconscious self. Apollo and Herakles defeat the Python in Greek mythology, just as in the East, Indra slays Vritra. This myth with Isis and Horus comes from an earlier age, however, and so Set, the serpent (and brother) of Mother Isis, is not totally defeated. Horus gains the throne, but Set does not lose face, even though the battle

centers around this central issue of the son of the patriarchy battling the matriarchal emblem of power. In fact, even in this myth a serpent is slain, for when Set's concubine deserted his ranks, a serpent pursuing her is slain by Horus's army. Thus the symbolism is here even though it is not yet Set who is slain. And, again, given the antiquity of this myth, Isis does not take sides in the long drawn out battle between the claims of Horus and Set.

Finally, the tradition of the Ancient Mysteries presents yet another level at which this myth was intended to be read and interpreted. In the Ancient Mystery Schools, such as that of Pythagoras at Crotona, the disciples and initiates read certain myths, of which this was one, and applied their meaning to the life of the individual disciple. For the mystery tradition rested on the belief that cycles, processes and truths at the universal level will have correspondences that are equally valid and relevant for the individual, since, invariably, these two realms are a reflection of one another. The microcosm always operates according to the same patterns and principles as the macrocosm. A day, for instance, goes through a cyclical progression from birth (dark) to fullness (light) and back to dark again. A year follows a similar pattern as it progresses through the four seasons, from winter (dark), to spring and summer (light), and back to fall and winter again. Thus, at the level of the "mysteries" (as these myths which expressed fundamental truths were called), everything in a myth-the characters, the places and events-was believed to have corresponding relevance at individual and universal levels.

In this tradition of the Mystery Schools, for instance, the land of Egypt was pictured as analogous to the human body, with the Nile as the spine, and the temples along the Nile as the major chakras, or energy centers. Even the historical experience that Egypt had gone through, of unifying two kingdoms and two peoples, of darker and lighter skin, was viewed as a fundamental truths, one of many esoteric

keys within the mystery tradition. For it was symbolic of a process which is repeated within the life of the individual initiate as well. For instance, following the geographical union of opposites within the land of Egypt, the Pharaohs created a monumental culture with a spiritual tradition and works of art for which Egypt has forever been famous. This example of the flowering of Egypt was seen as an analogy for the same process of fulfillment open to the disciple of the Mystery School. For, in like manner, the alchemical marriage or union of opposites within the disciple produces personal integration, and it is this process which, in turn, leads to the enlightened initiate.

Isis, particularly, of all the Goddesses, has always been associated with the mystery tradition. As Nature, she is "veiled" Isis, and yet she is always willing to reveal her secrets to those who are persistent in their efforts to penetrate her depths. There are many legends concerning Isis that reflect her power and personality. As a Mother Goddess, Isis takes great care in raising her son, Horus, protecting him from the wiles of Set. Isis was also a great healer. At one time, she had managed to steal from Ra his secret name, which held within it the knowledge and power to perform magic, and to heal the sick and raise the dead. This, in itself, was sufficient reason for her to be the mother of the mysteries. Thus it is Isis and Nephthys who resurrect Osiris after he has been slain by Set.

Throughout this myth, Isis's son, Horus, acts for the most part in concert with his mother, until he becomes impatient and angered by her tolerance toward Set. His robbing her of her insignia is an action that clearly signifies the demise of the Goddess in general, evident particularly in the fact that Isis's headdress is replaced by that of the cow goddess, Hathor. It is likely that this incident in the myth, representing the rise of masculine independence, was an addition that developed in time as the myth was retold over many centuries.

As the consort of the Goddess, Osiris is a stronger male figure than Dumuzl and Kingu, his mythic predecessors elsewhere in the Near East. His accomplishments as described in the myth would lead us to believe he and Isis work together as partners. It is important to remember, however, that this myth, as it has survived, was recorded by Plutarch around 100 A.D. Thus what this Greek biographer had in hand was a myth as it had been retold over a period of perhaps 3000 years! It is impossible to know what deletions and accretions had occurred prior to Plutarch, and, thus, to what extent we can accurately theorize about these mythic figures. It seems quite likely, however, that, given Osiris's dismemberment, he is yet another example of the consort of the Goddess who becomes the sacrificial figure, like Dumuzi, the consort of Inanna of Uruk, and like Kingu, the consort of Mother Tiamat in the myth of Marduk. None of these three males has the personal characterization that comes with later savior figures such as Dionysos, Herakles, and Quetzalcoatl. They certainly do not exhibit the highly evolved sense of mission that Buddha and Christ did later. Osiris is perhaps closer to them in the sense of having established moral and ethical standards for his people. But, even so, Osiris is still an early example of this complex archetype of the sacrificial figure, which over time evolved into a highly exemplary role model for humanity. In its initial form, as it is here, where the god remains essentially the consort of the Goddess, his dismemberment is not yet a conscious act of self-sacrifice. Rather, it is still equated with the vegetative cycle, the seasonal round of the fertile and fallow cycles of life associated with the crops.

Dismemberment is another of those concepts within the myth that has significance on many levels. The on-going round of life, death, and rebirth was most readily observed in the seasons-in the annual planting and harvesting of the crops. In the myth of Inanna of Uruk, which in its original form may be nearly contemporary to this myth of Isis, we

see Dumuzi and Geshtinanna, his sister, both sharing this seasonal cycle of life in the "upperworld" and the "underworld" in a manner that suggests ongoing reincarnation. What had been experienced as basic to the cycle of vegetation was transferred in Inanna's myth to human existence. To move repeatedly between the worlds of life and death was synonymous to "dismemberment." All life, all Nature experiences this cycle of dismemberment, and Dumuzi and Osiris as the consorts of the Goddess of Nature are the ones chosen to symbolize and sanctify her cyclical process. But they did not choose to do so consciously. They are chosen, and thus with these early examples of the dismembered god, their sacrifice is still an unconscious act on their part.

In later myths, however, the basic archetype of the dismembered god evolves into that of the crucified god, for the symbolism - hanging on the cross of matter-is the same in both instances. But what is significantly different with the later sacrificial savior gods is that they are aware of their dismembered state, and their act of sacrifice is a conscious act. They are aware that the human experience is a dismembered state of being, an act of sacrifice for the sake of soul growth. They choose to embody this awareness, as an act of faith, that others might come into the same consciousness. We see examples of this in the myths of Dionysos, Quetzalcoatl and Christ.

Osiris, as an example of the dismembered god, is not the only character in the myth that takes on such multi--dimensional roles. Looking further at Nephthys and Isis, it becomes apparent that they represent two separate dimensions of the feminine principle - Isis, the higher conscious feminine, and her sister, the darker feminine, related to the wisdom of the unconscious. They continue the tradition of Inanna and Ereshkigal in Sumerian mythology, except that they work together far more closely. Sometimes they are actually pictured as two in one. Isis is by far the more active and benevolent Mother

Goddess, acting on behalf of her child, Horus. Nephthys is her assistant, the inner and more unconscious principle of instinct. Nephthys is paired with Set, as his spouse/sister, just as Isis is with Osiris. However, Nephthys has a child out of wedlock, fathered by Osiris. This offspring is truly "instinctual," for he is the dog, Anubis. Nephthys and Anubis are guardians of secrets of the Underworld. In modern terminology, we would identify them as the voice of the personal unconscious, guiding us on the inner world journey. Thus, Isis, Nephthys and Horus are each independent mythic figures of considerable stature, and yet together they can also be seen as representing a trinitarian principle within each individual self. The masculine ego, or the individuating self, is seen in the figure of Horus. He fights for his rights, moves forward in consciousness, and thus stands out as the archetypal hero on the journey. Isis is symbolic of the higher feminine, the more conscious feminine, or soul principle within the self. Nephthys is the shadow side of self, the lower feminine, or personal unconscious within each of us. The ego self, like Horus, cannot directly connect with the higher self, for ego divides and separates, as it seeks to attain individuality. The higher self, like Isis, seeks union and oneness with life, which is as true function. Consequently, the two are best able to make contact and move toward union as they work through the medium of the unconscious self, through the wisdom of the instinctive animal nature represented by Nephthys and Anubis. This trinity of the conscious male ego, the feminine higher conscious and personal unconscious appears in all mythic traditions.

Set, as the adversary, or the principle of darkness against which Horus does battle, plays an extremely important role. In the ordinary sense, his function appears to be a negative one, but it is not at all negative in a deeper sense. First of all, he is very much a part of the family, the third child of Nut and Geb. This, in itself, indicates his legitimacy. In

actuality, he serves a quite positive function. Without Set to consciously struggle against, the human soul would have no opportunity for evolutionary growth, no increase in consciousness. Set embodies the principle of duality so that at the physical level opposites might struggle against each other. Without opposition, there can be no progress, no reflection, and thus no self-knowledge. Set, then, is an essential part of the family.

He builds a "coffin" for Osiris, lined with lead. Once Osiris is lured into it, the coffin "floats" downstream to Byblos. This part of the story reflects what is really the heart of the Ancient Mysteries—for most of the myths in the mystery tradition are essentially a metaphor for the process of embodiment. These myths indicate by analogy how it is that a soul takes on a physical body, in order to experience life in the material world. Thus these embodiment myths attempt to offer meaning and purpose for human existence. Osiris plays the role of the individual soul becoming entrapped in a coffin, the coffin representing the physical body. The coffin appropriately symbolizes a kind of death, for, as the spiritual soul takes on a physical body, it forgets itself and its origin. The coffin floats down the Nile, or, by analogy, downstream through the finer vibrations of spirit into the coarser vibrations of the physical world. It lodges itself in a tamarisk tree near Byblos. And the tamarisk tree, symbol of the tree of life, anchors the coffin on the physical plane as its branches grow up and around it.

A major clue to interpreting the myth lies in the fact that the coffin is lined with lead. In the ancient mysteries, this metal was traditionally associated with the planet, Saturn, and Saturn is considered to be the planet that governs form and embodiment. This correspondence between Saturn and embodiment is further emphasized by the mention of the number twenty-eight, as either Osiris's age, or the years of his reign. For both the Moon and Saturn have cycles based on this number, the Moon circling the earth in 28 +

days, and Saturn in 28 + years. Thus, again, the event is being connected with the process of materializing a body.

There are seventy-two conspirators. Now seventy-two degrees are one-fifth of a circle, and five, like the five-pointed star, in numerology is associated with humanity and with consciousness. But this number, seventy-two, has cosmic connections as well, for it takes seventy-two years for the sun to move backward one degree in the 360 degrees of the zodiacal cycle. Thus seventy-two seems to represent the most basic time unit in the grand round of the sun through the twelve zodiacal constellations, and in coming into embodiment, Osiris is entering the world of time.

Note that the coffin lodges in a "tamarisk" tree. In Sanskrit, *tamas* means "matter." The coffin in the tamarisk tree is symbolic of the soul having assumed a physical body and having descended at last to the level of the material world. So Osiris has entered the world of both time and space.

The date for this event according to the Egyptian calendar would be the seventeenth day of Hathor, or our month of November, "when the sun was in the sign of Scorpio." This is very similar to the same date given in Genesis for the great flood, for the biblical story of Noah's Ark is another metaphor for the process of embodiment. The ark floated for 40 days and nights, comparable to Osiris's journey down the Nile. What all this numeric symbolism indicates is that Osiris's journey downstream coincided with the arrival of the winter solstice, and concluded approximately on the date associated with the rebirth of the sun, December 25th, three days following the winter solstice. In all myths, this date is chosen as the appropriate date for the birth of the son of the Sun God, the birth date of the traditional savior figure - who ultimately stands for all of us.

The episode that follows in which Isis searches for the body of her lost husband is very similar to the story of Demeter searching for her lost child, Persephone. And in both



myths the intent is the same. Like Demeter, Isis assumes the role of nurse for the Queen, and tries to immortalize the royal child by him in the alchemical fire. This infant is symbolic of the final stage of Osiris's journey down through the ethers. The royal child is the soul that has at last been born as an infant, like every human being. But, again, Just as with the myth of Demeter, the Goddess, Isis, cannot perform the alchemical magic for the royal infant, as much as she might like to. In that process he must consciously participate, and so her attempt to immortalize him fails.

Then she requests the coffin containing Osiris, which is still embedded in one of the pillars of the palace. This complex image of the soul lying in a coffin encased in a tree reflects the concept that all matter is a "veil" for spirit, and that the eternal is always hidden within the ephemeral phenomena of nature. And as the pillar upholds the roof, so it is also a statement to the effect that it is always the inner or hidden spiritual source that sustains the outer physical structure.

When Isis is given the tree trunk or pillar containing her husband's body, she performs a most curious ritual. She wraps the hollow tree in fine linen and anoints it with perfumed oil. It eventually ends up in one of her own temples where it is forever venerated. This seems to be an ironic commentary on religion and the veneration of objects of worship. The life spirit that the tree had contained is no longer there, but the people of Byblos nonetheless worship the empty shell, believing it to be that which is of value. Too often religion in the temple, or church, becomes the mindless veneration of an empty coffin, mistaking the form for the essence.

Isis is given the chest containing the body of Osiris. She returns to Egypt and through her special magic conceives a child by Osiris. Actually this child, according to the myth, had been conceived as the "Elder Horus" while Isis and Osiris were still in the womb of Nut. The intention here is probably similar to that in the later Christian text of the Gospel of John: "In

the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."<sup>5</sup> To credit Horus and Jesus with such great antiquity gives them and their actions authenticity and legitimacy. Furthermore, the fact that Isis conceives from her husband's "dead" body is comparable in some ways to the tradition of an "immaculate conception." Isis then carefully hides the body of her husband and goes off to the swamps of the Delta to give birth to her child Horus.

Plutarch says very little about the birth of Horus, but in 1828 a stele was found in Alexandria with texts giving further details surrounding the circumstances of his birth.<sup>6</sup> It seems Set was content with murdering Osiris, but sought as well to confine his widow who was with child. While Isis was thus confined, the great Thoth appeared to her saying, "Come, O thou goddess, Isis ... and follow the advice of another. Hide thou thy son, Horus, and this is what shall happen. His limbs shall grow, and he will become endowed with great strength, and he shall be made to sit upon the throne of his father, and he shall avenge him, and (become) the prince of the Two Lands." Hearing these words, Isis departed secretly in the evening with her seven scorpions as protection, and upon arriving at the papyrus swamps, she came to the house of the overlord of the district. The woman of the house refused her entrance, but a poor fen woman close by opened her door to Isis. Shortly thereafter, Isis gave birth to Horus in a nest of papyrus plants.

There are several recognizable mythic themes here that are often associated with savior figures. First one recognizes the annunciation of the birth of a savior figure, and the need for discretion and secrecy. Then there is the familiar theme of the lowly birth in a manger, after being refused hospitality elsewhere. Horus in a nest of papyrus plants is also reminiscent of Moses in the bulrushes. There is also the familiar trinity of Father, Mother and Son, with Horus as the newborn son of the dying Sun God, Osiris. Finally, we see the universal theme of mother and child in

the image of Isis, the Mother Goddess, suckling her child, Horus, which later appears so frequently as a Christian motif. A deeper principle connected to the manger scene is that a being of great light often comes from the most humble of circumstances. During his inception and early years, the infant god or hero must also be hidden away and protected from the forces of darkness that will invariably rise up to oppose him. Thus Zeus is born in a cave, far way from Mt. Olympus; Jesus was born in a manger, and then secreted away to Egypt; Krishna was taken off into the forest; Arthur was placed in the custody of a humble and faithful family; Moses was left in a basket in the bulrushes, and so on. But a second principle also follows from the first. These savior figures grow up not knowing their earthly father. As a result, they are led to look more inwardly in search of the spiritual father. This theme of the fatherless figure on the quest is found not only in savior myths but also in many of the myths of the hero on the spiritual journey.

While Isis is secretly tending to her newborn son, hidden away in a swampy area of the Nile, Set, like Herod, is pursuing his own course of evil intent. Despite Isis's precautions, Set finds the body of Osiris under the light of a full moon. He proceeds to dismember it into fourteen pieces, and then to scatter the portions throughout the land of Egypt. The theme of dismemberment has been discussed earlier, but let us also consider its symbolism in connection with the cycles of the moon. The moon was thought to govern the cycles of germination and growth, just as it was also associated with women's fertility cycles. The crescent moon in its waxing phase was believed to be the major force influencing all vegetative growth. Likewise, the moon in its waning phase was symbolic of decay and death. Consequently, as the moon moves through its cyclical stages of new moon to full moon and back again, it appeared to go through the same processes of life and death that are characteristic of all nature. Thus the

moon, like Osiris, and like all life, was seen as going through periodic cycles of dismemberment.

There were other reasons, as well, for Osiris to be associated with the moon. In the pre-patriarchal period, the moon was emphasized even more than the sun as a celestial companion of the earth and the earth Goddess. Thus, as the consort of an earth Goddess, Osiris was closely connected with these fertile and fallow cycles of the moon. And just as the full moon is dismembered fourteen times as it moves toward becoming a new moon, so the god Osiris is dismembered on the night of a full moon into fourteen pieces.

Isis then takes up the task of remembering Osiris. She travels the land gathering up thirteen of the dismembered parts of his body, all excepting the phallus that had been consumed by a fish. Here again, Mother Isis is truly representative of the higher feminine, the conscious feminine, or even soul self, helping to restore her brother and spouse to unity and wholeness once more. It is not accidental that the restored Osiris is lacking a phallic member. The resurrected Osiris has been healed and made whole; it has no need of a phallus, which, after all, is appropriate only in the physical world of duality.

The conflict between Horus and Set also reflects these issues of unity versus duality, especially given the symbolism that is employed in their battle. Each of them loses a part of the self that represents duality. Set loses a testicle, a symbol of sexuality, and Horus loses his left, or lunar, eye. The left eye is symbolic of the unconscious feminine; the right eye, the masculine eye of the conscious self. When these dual eyes merge they produce an inner spiritual eye. Thus Horus's left eye is replaced by the Wedjat eye, the single eye of wisdom and enlightenment. He offers this same eye of wisdom and wholeness to his father as well. In this myth neither Set nor Horus completely win or lose the battle. This, of course, reflects the wisdom of the Goddess, that the dark and the light must both be

honored and, ultimately, brought together. In this myth, then, we see the vision of the hero's journey, embodied in the figure of Horus, making what may be its first appearance. But here it appears primarily as an ideal, for it is still within the realm of the gods and goddesses. It takes a later hero to bring the vision down to the realm of the human.

### End Notes

1. This account of the myth is condensed from Plutarch, as quoted in *The Gods of the Egyptians* by E.A. Wallis Budge, v.2, New York, Dover, 1969, p. 186-194.
2. Plutarch indicates he is not certain whether Byblos refers to an Egyptian city in the Delta area, or a city on the Phoenician coast. Since the queen there is named Astarte, another form of the name Ishtar, it seems highly likely that it was the Phoenician city of Byblos.
3. Rundle Clark, R. T. *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt*, New York, Grove Press, 1959, p.200.
4. Thompson, William Irwin. *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1981, p. 213.
5. The Holy Bible (Scofield). Gospel of John, I.1
6. See E. A. Wallis Budge. *The Gods of the Egyptians*, New York, Dover, 1969, p. 206-208.

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