

# Ancient Egyptian Religion I: General Concepts and the Heliopolitan Gods

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## 1 The nature of Egyptian religion (intro)

The Egyptian idea of “deity” is a difficult one to pin down. The most frequently used word for deity,  $\overline{\text{nt}}\text{r}$  (or *ntr*), resembles the English word *god* in that it can be used as either a common noun, referring to one of numerous divine beings, or as a proper noun, referring to the Supreme Being.

Much more problematic than the word used, however, are the details of what the gods do and even who they are. Gods become conflated with one another; most notably, there are (at least) two gods named Horus, designated “Elder” and “Younger”, and they share a number of traits, often being confused (deliberately or mistakenly). The gods usurp one another’s roles, or delegate their roles to others, with astounding frequency. It is Set’s role to protect the sun god from the serpent of chaos—except when Horus has that function. The Supreme Being is Re-Atum, except when he is Amun-Re, except when he is simply Re or simply Atum or . . .

Adding still further to the complication is the local character of Egyptian religion. Every nome had a patron god, and while some of the gods patronized more than one nome, there was plenty of variety. We have already considered this to some degree: we have noted Thebes, for example, as having Amun for a patron, and observed that the military rise of the Thebans in the Middle and New Kingdoms were responsible for the enrichment and empowerment of Amun’s cult. The Egyptians, of course, would (at least officially) argue the causality in the other direction: that Amun’s patronage is what gave the Thebans the divine “oomph” to attain their supremacy.

The patron gods of the nomes were not merely the gods believed to favor those nomes in some unified religious doctrine; the Egyptians actually asserted different things about the gods, in the form of different myths, from city to city. In some cities, Amun was merely one of the group of gods who participated in the creation of the earth; in Theban myths, however, he was the actual Supreme Being, self-created, from whom all creation proceeded and who alone would endure when all else had perished.

The Egyptian gods which are best-known to the modern student—Re, Osiris, Isis, Anubis, Horus—and the stories about them figure most prominently in the myths of Heliopolis.

## 2 The creation of the world

At the dawn of time, darkness covered the primordial ocean. From out of this ocean there arose the creator-god, and the myths are particularly vague about how this happened. The creator was called variously Re or Atum; the name  $\overline{\text{r}}\text{'}$  means “mouth” at a very early period, suggesting the magic words of creation, or the power to speak those words, and very quickly acquires the homophone  $\overline{\text{r}}\text{'}$  “sun”. This name seems to have been fairly widespread in the early Old Kingdom, possibly

even the Archaic Period, and by the Fifth Dynasty, the original Heliopolitan creator-god Atum was combined with Re, giving us Atum-Re.

The myths disagree about how the creator managed to produce the next generation of gods, but we get a glimpse into the Egyptians' mores and prudishness (or lack thereof) when we find a text in which Re is narrating the process and says: "I made a foundation in my heart, and I had union with my clenched hand . . . I sent forth issue in [the form of] Shu; I sent forth moisture in [the form of] Tefnut."

Whatever the "gory details", the first two beings created in the Heliopolitan myths were Shu and Tefnut, fraternal twins: the god of the air, and the goddess of moisture. Think of Tefnut as the clouds, and Shu as all the blue sky around them,<sup>1</sup> and you will have the idea. Then Re's two eyes shed tears; from one comes "plants and reptiles", from the other comes mankind. (The origin of the other animals does not appear explicitly in this particular text.) After mankind has been created, interestingly enough, only then do Shu and Tefnut have children of their own, Geb and Nut, the earth and the sky. Where mankind dwelt in the time between their creation and the birth of Geb is entirely ignored.

Other gods appear in the Heliopolitan myths without their creations being explicitly described, most notably Thoth and Ma'at, respectively the god of knowledge and writing, and the goddess of truth and order. *The Book of the Dead* asserts that they arose from the primeval waters at Re's side; other texts refer to them as being Re's heart and soul, or some other description which implies that they were simply extensions of his being. Once again, the fluid nature of the Egyptian conception of deity manifests itself.

### 3 The children of Geb and Nut

One day Thoth issued a prophecy: "If Geb and Nut are allowed to produce children, one of them shall usurp the power of Re." At once, the king of the gods declared that Geb and Nut would not be permitted to have children on any day of the year. Shu, the air, intervened, and standing upon Geb, the earth, he lifted Nut, the sky, high above, keeping them apart.

For reasons which are unclear, Thoth decided to assist the couple in their plight, and so he gamed with the moon god, gambling his knowledge against the moon's light.<sup>2</sup> He won enough moonlight to make five additional days, not part of any year, to append to the current 360; and on those days, the children of Geb and Nut were born. It is because of this lost light that the moon has to wax and wane each month.

The first one born was Osiris, Geb's heir; then came the Elder Horus, the warrior-god; then Set, Isis, and finally Nephthys.

### 4 The destruction of mankind

At one time in the distant past, humankind had become particularly wicked and blasphemous, and had earned the displeasure of Re. He resolved, in his anger, to destroy them all, but first he took counsel with the other gods, particularly Nun, the primordial ocean. Nun reminded Re that he was the greatest of gods, and that his majesty and position demanded that he punish those who had offended him.

The other gods concurred, saying "Let your Eye go forth; let it destroy those who blaspheme with wickedness; none can resist it when it goes forth in [the form of] Hathor." So Re sent his power into the world in the form of Hathor; or perhaps we can read this as him bestowing his power upon her. She went forth and killed many people.

Then the wording becomes unclear. We learn that Sekhmet, the lioness goddess, begins wading about in the blood of the slain mortals, drinking it. Re sees that Sekhmet is going mad with

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<sup>1</sup>Not the vault of the heavens *above* the blue sky, the vault containing the stars; that was Nut, whom we will meet shortly.

<sup>2</sup>As with Thoth himself, the creation of the moon god is given differently in different editions of the myth, or omitted altogether.

slaughter, and taking pity on mankind and seeing that those who remain are appropriately afraid and repentant, he orders that seven thousand jars of beer be made. To the beer are added mandrakes, thought to be sleep-inducing, and some of the blood from the slain. Those jars are set before her, and quickly she becomes drunk and falls asleep.

But other translations suggest that Sekhmet and Hathor are here the same being; that the same goddess is named both Sekhmet and Hathor at various points in the narrative. Goddesses who preside over both love and war, or love and destruction, are not unknown in mythology, so this is not out of the question. We see yet again the difficulties caused by the very fluid way in which the Egyptians spoke—and by extension, perhaps thought—of the gods. It may be best to consider the question of “Do we ever see Hathor and Sekhmet at the same time”, as though they were Clark Kent and Superman (as silly as that may sound). We do not see them at odds in this myth; one destroys mankind, and the other is reveling in the slaughter. We never see them conversing *with each other*, only with Re.

## 5 The secret name of Re

Thoth’s prophecy about the usurpation of Re’s power was eventually fulfilled. The power which Re had over the cosmos was facilitated by his Secret Name. None but Re knew what this name was, but it was apparently at least somewhat common knowledge among the gods that it existed and it was the key to his power.

Isis, desiring greater power, conceived a plan to obtain the secret name from Re himself through treachery. In fact, one version of the myth actually says “Isis was in [the form of] a woman skilled in words. She decided that gods and spirits were of more value than men; could she be in heaven and earth like Re, and be mistress of the earth, and a goddess, by knowing the name of the chief god?”

Whether Isis was at this stage a mortal woman or a lesser goddess, she carried out her plan. Re had become old and frail, and he dribbled at the mouth, and his saliva fell upon the earth. She took the resulting mud and formed a serpent out of it. She left it in his path the next day in his daily trek through Egypt. It bit him, and he cried out in pain. The gods came at once to his aid and asked what was wrong, but “he did not find words to answer. The poison took possession of his body as the Nile takes possession of the riverbed.” The god regained his composure—“he established his heart”—and described the problem: “I am wounded by something deadly . . . I have not tasted pain like it; nothing was ever more deadly.”

Isis arrives and innocently asks what is wrong. He replies “I am colder than water, I am hotter than fire; my limbs are sweaty, I tremble, my eyes are shaky.” Isis asks Re to tell her his name: “the person lives who has declared his name.” Re responds by reciting his titles: “. . . I am he who opens his eyes, and it is light, closes his eyes, and it is dark. The Nile flood rises when he gives the command and the gods do not know his name. I am the maker of hours, the creator of days, the opener of festivals . . . But the venom was not driven from its course; the great god was not relieved.” Isis noted that Re had not given his true name. Re then consented, in his agony: “I give myself to be searched out by Isis; my name shall come forth from my body into her body.” Isis then said “Run out, poison, come from Re . . . I cause the poison to fall on the ground in its defeat. Verily, the great god’s name was removed from him. . . . Thus said Isis, the great lady, mistress of the gods, who knew Re by his own name.”

## 6 The murder of Osiris and its aftermath

Osiris had become the king of Egypt, given that his predecessors were removed: Re had departed from Egypt for his abode in the sky following Isis’s learning his name, and Geb and Shu were preoccupied with being the earth and separating it from the sky, respectively. He was popular with his subjects, ruling wisely and well, and as Plutarch reports in his retelling of the myth, “not indeed compelling them by force of arms, but persuading them to yield to the strength of his reasons”.

His brother Set was jealous of his popularity and power, and conspired with “seventy-two other persons” to kill him. He managed to obtain the measurements of Osiris’s body, and fashioned a magnificent chest, set with jewels and precious metals, of just that size. He brought this chest to a banquet in honor of Osiris, and after all the guests admired it, he announced that he would give it to anyone whose body would fit it perfectly. They all tried, but failed; when Osiris tried last of all, he succeeded. Set and his conspirators slammed the lid shut, nailed it tight, and poured molten lead over it.

Why the other guests present did nothing has not been recorded, but Set threw the casket into the river, and it washed up at the city of Byblos, where it became caught in the branches of a tree. Isis traced it to there and divined where it was; the branches having enclosed the chest, the tree had been made into a pillar for the palace there. She disguised herself as a woman and became a nursemaid in the employ of the queen. She spent her nights putting the royal infant in her care into a fire, intended to burn away his mortal parts, and by her magic kept him alive. She assumed her other common disguise, a sparrow, and flew around the room singing sadly.

One night, the queen discovered this strange scene. Isis pulled the baby out of the fire, much to the queen’s relief, but revealed her true nature. The king gave Isis the pillar; she extracted the chest and gave the pillar back, and returned to Egypt. On her return she opened the chest and broke into more mourning, wailing for her dead husband. She then hid the body in the marshes. Unfortunately, Set found it while hunting by moonlight one night, and he tore it into fourteen pieces which he scattered up and down the Nile. Isis set out once more to find Osiris, and wherever she found a piece of him, she established a temple to him, thus explaining his popularity all over the country.

Having recovered all the pieces except the phallus, which had been eaten by fish,<sup>3</sup> Isis put the body back together (and replaced the missing member) by her magic. She received assistance in this process from Anubis, who was the son of Osiris by her sister Nephthys, who had loved Osiris and had disguised herself as Isis—an easy task, since they were identical twins. Anubis had the head of a jackal, the creature known to prowl around cemeteries, and because of his assistance in this effort, he became the god of embalming, for Osiris’s body was nothing less than the first mummy. Nephthys herself, having fled from Set, mourned Osiris’s death and helped her sister in her efforts to restore his body and defeat Set.

Then Osiris, briefly returning from the land of the dead, appeared to Horus—who in Plutarch’s account was already born, as Plutarch has conflated the two Horuses—to discuss the situation. Horus told his father that the most honorable action would be “to revenge the injuries offered to his father and mother”, and he also proved himself knowledgeable in the arts of war. He then undertook to make good on his plan of revenge.

Horus made war upon Set and brought assistance and amnesty to those of Set’s faction who were deserting the usurper daily. The battle continued for many years, until finally, Set and his remaining compatriots took the form of hippopotami, attempting to capsize Horus’s boat as he went up the Nile; but Horus took the form of a gigantic youth with golden skin and a great harpoon and chain. He struck Set in the head, incapacitating him, and bound him up. Then he was brought before the tribunal of the gods and tried for the murder of his brother and the usurpation of the throne.

Once again, the myths vary widely in the details they provide of the trial, but at the end of the day, Horus prevailed, and Set was exiled into the desert, where he howls and rages to this day, producing sandstorms and thunderstorms alike. And indeed, the annual Nile flood was said to be caused by the tears of Isis, still mourning her dead husband, although she has long since gone to the land of the dead to take her place at his side, leaving their son as the rightful ruler of Egypt. Horus was given Hathor, the daughter of Re and goddess of love (and whose name means “the house of Horus”) as his wife.

In conclusion, we have met the “expanded” Heliopolitan pantheon, broken into several generations—Re, Thoth, and Ma’at; Shu and Tefnut; Geb and Nut; Osiris, Set, Isis, and Nephthys; Horus, Anubis, and Hathor—and seen some of the most popular stories surrounding them. We will next consider some of the less well-known divine families of Egypt.

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<sup>3</sup>The particular species of fish—said to be the *Oxyrynchus* in Plutarch’s recension—was taboo to the Egyptians.

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