

Section 8 – The Proliferation of Deity

The Mythology of Isis and Osiris

The best-known account of this story was written down by the Greek historian Plutarch, who lived from 46-120 CE. However, the story he codified had been known since at least the Middle Kingdom, which lasted from 2055 BCE to 1650 BCE.

Osiris was king of Egypt and Isis, his sister-wife, queen.¹ By marrying Osiris, Aset conferred on him the power to rule. Osiris, by the grace of the Goddess, was a good king and governed justly, and his brother Set was jealous of him.

The Great Mother was once the ruler of the Underworld and in the relationship of Nephthys to Set we see a transfer of her powers to a male god. It was probably Nephthys who originally ruled the Underworld, powers she was made to give up to Set as a result of the developing patriarchy.

In Sumer, Inanna took a husband who is in some ways similar to Osiris and about whom there are equivalent myths. Ereshkigal's husband is only mentioned in passing, as the Bull of Heaven. He has no particular association with darkness, although the bull is a symbol of unrestricted masculinity. In the Egyptian version, the two husbands are very different: Osiris is associated with light and the power of good and Set with darkness and evil. This distinction is not made in the Sumerian mythology; it contains no independent concept of 'good' and 'evil'. To a Sumerian, order and stability were good and chaos and disorder evil. The Imdugud-Bird that infests Inanna's Huluppu Tree is evil only in the sense that it brings storms and torrential rains that destroy crops and fields. It is not a focussed, wilful form of evil, just the wildness of untamed nature. The lilitu in the same story is the evil of pain and death in childbirth but once again it is random, wild, unfocused and unregulated.

The evil represented by Set is specifically malign and driven by hate.² It is not only personalised, but also directed; it is subject to will. Osiris is good because he does good things. He treats his subjects fairly and brings them the rewards of prosperity and happiness. Set is an evil king who does the opposite. Here, good and evil are not, simply, on one hand the maintenance of order

¹ The marriage of a monarch is an event of political significance and it has always been a requirement that a king's brides should be of the blood royal themselves (the limited pool of such stock makes inbreeding practically impossible to avoid, a trait which is reflected in the European royal families to this day.) The mythologies mentioning this provide a justification for the practice.

² The initial reason for this hatred was that one dark night Osiris mistook Nephthys for Aset and as a result of that illicit union she bore a son, the jackal-headed Anubis.

and on the other the chaotic forces of nature, but derive from personal intent. Good and evil are no longer abstract but are consequent on human thoughts and actions. This distinction marks an important change because it contains the essential core of modern religious morality. One may decide to be good and live a good life and reap the promised reward, or one may decide to be the opposite and spend eternity in darkness with the source of all malignant evil, the dark lord himself, in this case, Set.

Darkness was ever the place of the Goddess, from the original Great Mother through her daughters like Ereshkigal and Nephthys. In the caves that were her first temples, it was dark. It is in the darkness of night when the Moon shines its gentle silver light, and the Moon is closely associated with the Goddess through the parallel between its phases and the menstrual cycle of women. The Celts, who remained loyal to the Great Goddess longer than any other European people, always counted time in nights rather than days. In Goddess culture, darkness does not equate to evil, but to the time when the Goddess is most close.

Again and again the apologists for the patriarchy, both in political terms and in the mythologies they invent to justify their actions, portray the Great Mother Goddess as deceitful, dangerous, chaotic and manipulative. This is how real women are portrayed in these cultures and the mythology exists to justify men's treatment of them. Ascribing to darkness an association with evil and then placing a male in charge of that evil represents a double blow to the status of the Goddess and women.

In the Egyptian tale, Osiris decided to throw a great banquet and invited everyone, even his evil brother, Set. This gave Set the opportunity he had long sought and he devised a plan to kill Osiris. He secretly obtained the measurements of his brother's body and had a beautiful sarcophagus made, of precious wood and gilded, exactly to fit. At the banquet, Set boasted about the casket and Osiris asked to see this magnificent thing. Set had it brought in and said that he would give it to whichever person it fitted, knowing that it would only fit one: Osiris. When his brother tried it, Set and his accomplices slammed the lid shut, nailing it down before anyone could intervene. While his men held back the rest of the court at sword-point, Set had the coffin thrown into the Nile. Osiris was killed, and Set proclaimed himself king.

Isis was distraught: she cut her hair and tore her clothes. Overcome with grief, she set out to find Osiris' body. The sarcophagus had floated down the Nile to the land of Byblos, where it came to rest, and a tree grew up around it. Because the tree held the body of a god, it became mighty and famous, so the king of Byblos decided to have it cut down and built into his palace.

Isis, following the trail, three times came across groups of children who told her they had seen the coffin and at length she arrived at the palace of Byblos. Entering, she laid claim to the tree,

showing herself in her true form as the Goddess.³ The king, awed by her magnificence, complied and Isis had the coffin cut out, to the wonderment of everyone. Leaving the tree, Isis blessed the king and the palace and took Osiris' body back to Egypt.

She and Nephthys hid the coffin in the marshes, but Set, out hunting, found it. Enraged, he had Osiris' body dragged out and chopped into many pieces, which he had scattered all over Egypt.⁴ Boastfully he claimed that he had truly killed a god.

Isis set out to find all the parts of Osiris' body, for until they were reunited, he could not pass on to the next world. After many months she had found them all except one, his penis. But Isis took the clay of Egypt and made a penis for her husband. With all his parts together, she performed magic that brought Osiris back to life, complete with his new phallus. They made love, and she conceived a son, who would become the god Horus.⁵ Osiris could only stay on Earth as long as Isis' magic lasted, (in some versions, three days), and he then passed on to the next life.⁶

Like Dumuzi and Tammuz, Osiris is an agrarian, 'dying and rising' god. He represents the fertile land of Egypt, which is why his body is scattered into every province. His death and resurrection describe the cycle of the agricultural year. He needs Isis to bring him back to life and to ensure the continuity of the cycle of all life. At the same time, for all her magical power, Isis cannot conceive without the seed of a god, so must fashion a penis for her husband and make love with him. This emphasises the interdependence of man and woman, saying that both are needed to make life, just as the fertile land of Egypt needed the annual flooding of the Nile to bring forth its riches.

It is from Aset/Isis that Osiris derives his power. He is laid low and emasculated; his penis, always the symbolic source of male power, is lost, and so he has none. Isis, by her divine craft and using her own body, since the clay of Egypt is the body of the Goddess, gives him a functioning penis, delivering back his manhood and his power. The metaphor is clear: the Goddess gives the king all his power, including that which allows him to rule.

While the similarities between the Egyptian and Sumerian mythologies suggest a common earlier derivation, the Egyptian tale has adopted a more linear understanding of life than the Sumerian

³ It was widely held in the ancient world that no mortal could look on the true nature of a deity and live; this explains why deities adopted so many other forms, from idealised humans to pillars of fire. It is not explained how the King of Byblos survived seeing Isis. In some versions of the story Isis first appears to the Queen, in disguise.

⁴ Compare this to the story of Dumuzi/Tammuz.

⁵ Horus is one of the many models for Christ.

⁶ Egyptians believed that the celestial event which symbolised the moment that Isis conceived Horus was not the dying and rising of the sun, but the annual reappearance of the star Sirius, which disappeared below the horizon for 70 days. The moment the star appeared over the horizon again was taken as the beginning of the annual cycle of life because it coincided with the beginning of the Nile floods.

versions, consistent with the broader cultural belief. Osiris must complete his journey to the Afterlife, after the three days which the reader will have come to understand symbolically. The Goddess as Isis is unable to enter the Underworld herself. She remains behind and, within her, Osiris grows again and is reborn, as the infant god Horus, the Light of the World, the Lamb of Heaven.

This tale retains cyclical elements, despite its apparent linearity. It is derived from the agricultural model in which the god is born in spring, grows up over summer and then is cut down and scattered, and the goddess brings him back to life.

Isis is not only Queen of Heaven but also the Great Mother Goddess. In Sumer these roles were kept separate, with Inanna in one and Ki, or Ereshkigal, the other. Isis' child Horus is the Son of a god and himself a god, so she is, literally, the Mother of God. It is this form of the Goddess that would be at the heart of one of the greatest monotheisms the world has seen, and through it she would once again ascend the throne of Queen of Heaven.

The Egyptian life was not a cycle of life-death-rebirth, but of birth-life-death-afterlife. What does this shift mean and why has it occurred? The change from a cyclical to a linear understanding of life and death allows for a very important concept to be introduced: obedience. Those who obey the rules will have a better afterlife than those who don't. In Sumer, the Underworld was unpleasant for everyone, a place of cold and dread. In Egypt, this changed, and souls were tested before passing on. Testing implies judgement, and that judgement is on the performance of the individual – that is to say, her or his obedience – in this life.