

Chapter 5

The Divine Family: Osiris, Isis and Horus

Objectives

To familiarize your students with the myth of the divine family and to understand the role these gods played in the Egyptian religion.

Mystery

The Egyptian pharaohs believed they were descended from the gods. Where did this idea come from?

Discussion and Research Projects

1. What are the names of the three members of the divine Egyptian family?
2. What was the parents' mission on earth?
3. What did they teach humanity?
4. How did Seth murder his brother Osiris?
5. Where did Isis find her husband's coffin and how did she bring it back?
6. What form did Isis take when she magically conceived her son Horus?
7. What did Seth do when he found Osiris's coffin after it was returned to Egypt?
8. What did Isis do to restore Osiris to eternal life?
9. Where did Isis go to protect her child? What powers did she have to protect him from danger?
10. What did Seth do to try to kill the infant Horus?



11. How did the god Thoth cure Horus? What happened to the sun when Horus was bitten by a poisonous snake?
12. Horus became the first pharaoh god of the Egyptian people. What would happen to the earth if the people did not continue to love and care for Horus?
13. What did Isis do to gain the power of the sun god, Re? What secrets do you think she got from him?
14. How did Horus learn the secret name of the sun god?
15. Why did Seth and Horus quarrel? Who won the fight?
16. What was Horus given that elevated him to the position of king of all Egypt?
17. Why do you think the gods intermarried with their siblings? Example: Osiris married his sister Isis, and Seth married his sister Nephthys.
18. Unbelievable events often happen in myths. Point out the ones in this myth.
19. In many ancient cultures, kings and queens were thought to be descended from the gods. Can you explain why kings and queens would want to be associated with the gods?
20. What qualities did Horus have that made him a model for the pharaohs to follow?

Understanding the Symbolic Meaning of the Myth

1. Osiris's family represents an ideal family. What family values do their relationships imply?
2. Myths express human hopes and dreams. What are some of the hopes and dreams found in this myth?
3. Myths often express dualities (opposites). What are some of the dualities found in this myth?
4. Given all the events in this myth, what do you think the lesson or moral of the story is?

Creative Projects

1. Use **Activity Sheet 11** to identify the gods and goddesses in the story of the divine family.
2. Use **Activity Sheet 12** to create the family tree of the characters in the divine family.
3. Write a script for the story of the divine family. Divide your class into small groups and ask each group to perform one of the sequences in the story.
4. Make a sequence of drawings illustrating the major events in the story of the divine family. The drawings could be put into cartoon format.

FACT SHEET: The Divine Family — Osiris, Isis and Horus¹⁰

Introduction

The pharaohs of Egypt traced their lineage to the god Horus. Horus was the son of Osiris and Isis, two of the nine primeval gods of the Egyptian Ennead.

The story begins when Osiris reigned on earth and married his sister Isis. Their mission was to bring civilization to humanity, to teach people about the practice of government, religion and marriage. Isis's magical healing powers, and her knowledge of weaving, crop growing, corn grinding and flax spinning were also passed on to the Egyptian people.

Murder

One day, disaster struck. Seth, the god of disorder, murdered his brother Osiris, the god of order. Seth was furious because his wife, Nephthys, had conceived a child, named Anubis, by Osiris. The murder happened at a banquet when Seth invited guests to lie down in a coffin he had made for the king. Several guests tried unsuccessfully. When Osiris climbed in, Seth and his conspirators nailed down the lid, weighed the coffin down with lead and cast it into the Nile.

This happened in July when the waters of the Nile were rising. Nun (the primeval sea) took Osiris away to hide his secrets. The death of Osiris threw the cosmos into chaos and made the gods weep. Isis, greatly distraught, wandered throughout the land in search of her husband, asking everyone if they had seen him.

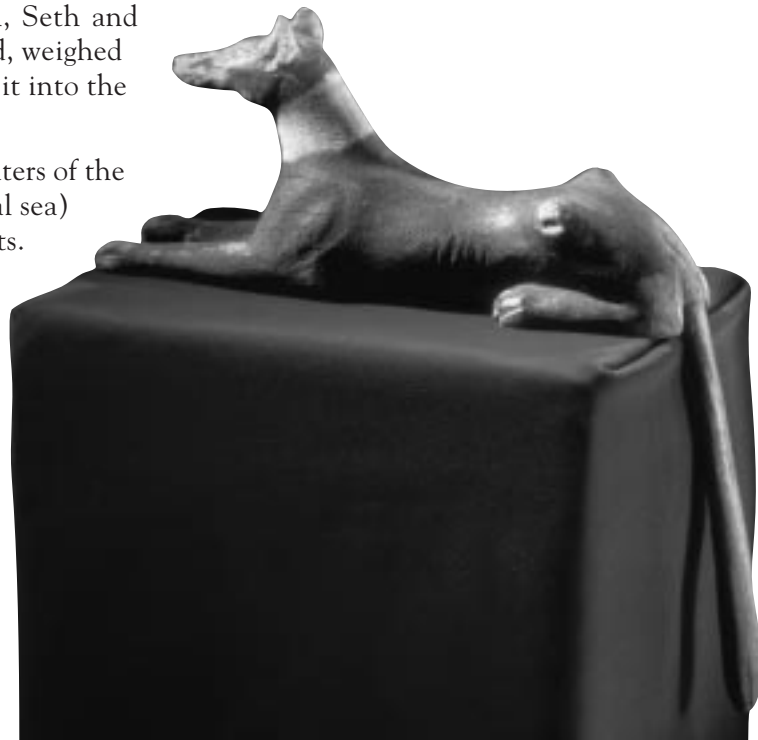
A Child Is Conceived

Through divine revelation, Isis found out that the coffin had



Osiris sitting on his throne. His wife, Isis (left), and his sister Nephthys stand behind him.

Photo: Harry Foster (CMC S98 3565)



Anubis, the jackal-headed god

Photo: Royal Ontario Museum (CMC ECD-040 #49)

drifted down to the sea and washed ashore at Byblos, in Phoenicia. A tamarisk tree had grown up around the coffin, completely enclosing it in its trunk. When Isis found the tree, she released the coffin from it and shipped it back to Egypt. While grieving over her husband's body, she transformed herself into a kite. As she flew over the body, she miraculously conceived a child.

Hiding in the Marshes

When Isis returned to Egypt, she hid from Seth in the delta marshes. One day, Seth discovered Osiris's coffin and dismembered his body into fourteen parts that he scattered throughout the land. Isis managed to find all the parts, except the phallus, which she reconstituted. She anointed his body with precious oils and performed the rites of embalment for the first time. In so doing, she restored Osiris to eternal life. Osiris went on to live in the land of the deceased, presiding over the judgement of the dead.

Isis tried to hide her pregnancy from Seth. Thoth, the god of wisdom, advised her to flee because Seth would try to kill her child. She went to the marshes, where she gave birth to her son, Horus. Isis hid the child in the marshes, where she cured him from scorpion, snake and crocodile bites. One day, she left her son to search for food, and upon her return, she found him half dead. Seth had entered the marsh, transformed himself into a poisonous snake and bit the child.



Horus the child sits with his finger to his mouth. He appears to be born out of the lotus flower that rose from the primeval waters.

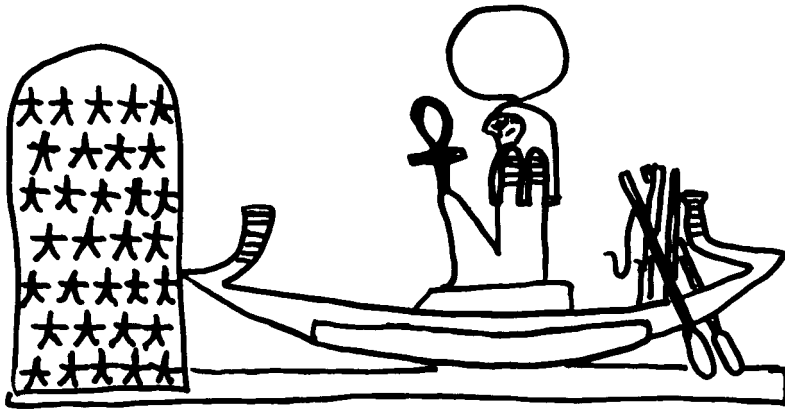


Wild ducks fly over a papyrus thicket in the Nile marshlands. This painting comes from Amarna, the city built by the pharaoh Akhenaten (probably Tutankhamun's father).

Photo: Harry Foster (CMC S98 3531)

Healing Horus

Isis called for help from the high gods. Her pleas were heard by the gods in the Bark of Millions of Years (the solar bark). Thoth descended to talk to her. He told her that the powers of Re would set things right and that good would triumph over evil. Then the solar bark stopped and the earth fell into darkness. Thoth assured Isis that the earth would remain in



The sun god travels through the darkness of night in his solar bark.

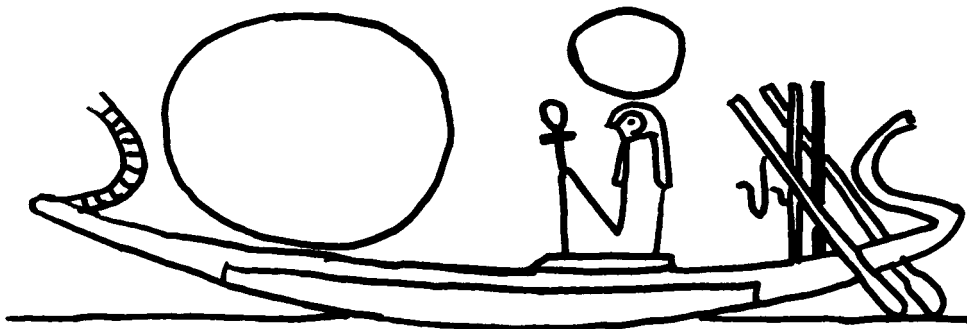
darkness, that wells would dry up and that crops would fail until Horus was cured. Then, in the name of the sun, he exorcised the poison from Horus's body and cured the child.

The people of the marshland rejoiced with Isis at the recovery of her son. Horus became the archetype of the pharaohs, the sun god's representative on earth. It was now the duty of the people to protect the pharaohs from harm, to love and respect them. If they did not, world order would collapse and the people would perish. Isis kept her young son hidden until he became an adolescent and could face Seth to claim his rightful inheritance, the throne of Egypt.

The Sun God's Secret

While Horus was growing up, the sun god, Re, grew old and started drooling. Isis took the saliva that fell to the ground and modelled it into a serpent. She placed the serpent across Re's daily path in the sky, and it bit the sun. Since the sun had not made the serpent, he could not cure himself. He turned to Isis for help. She said she could do nothing unless he revealed his secret name to her. By learning his name, she would gain knowledge of his power.

Re realized this was the only way he could be cured. He hid from the other gods and allowed his secret name to be passed from his bosom directly to hers. Isis was forbidden from revealing it to anyone except her son Horus. The Eye of Re — the supreme power of the creator — was thus given to Horus, and subsequently to all the pharaohs down through the ages. It then became known as the Eye of Horus.

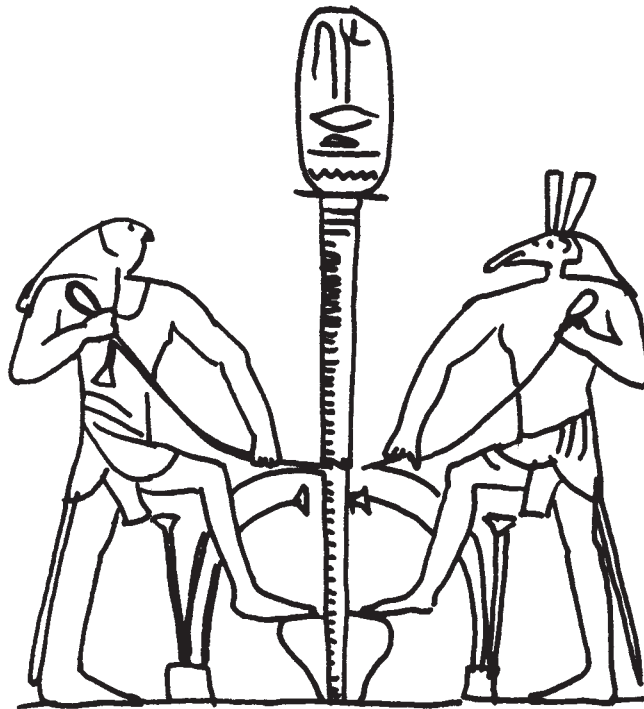


The sun god travels through the light of day in his solar bark.

Horus, King of the Two Lands

When Horus was a young man, he and his uncle Seth quarrelled over who was the legitimate divinely appointed ruler of Egypt. During the fierce battle that ensued, Horus castrated Seth, and Seth tore out Horus's weak eye, the moon. A tribunal of the gods was held to settle the dispute.

It was decided that Horus should rule over Lower Egypt and Seth should rule over Upper Egypt. This was later considered unworkable, so Horus was made king of the Two Lands of Egypt, and Seth took on the role of defender of Re by standing at the prow of the solar bark. Horus became the god of kingship, and the pharaohs traced their lineage to him, the god who triumphed over evil.



Horus (left) and Seth fought a fierce battle that ended with no clear victor. They are binding lotus and papyrus plants together as a symbol of the unification of Egypt.