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Egypt's Many gods

LESSON REFERENCE:
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A RIVER OF BLOOD and mountains of frogs. Swarms of gnats and flies. Cattle dying in the fields. Boils on the skin. Hail in torrents from the sky.

Locusts devouring near-ripened crops. Darkness where daylight should shine.

Parents weeping over lifeless first-born sons. And all Egypt was left wondering why their all-powerful gods had forsaken them. The plagues unleashed prior to Israel's exodus threw Egypt into turmoil and demonstrated the helplessness of the king they believed to be god incarnate and the

weakness of their human-made gods against the living God of Israel.

A great pantheon ruled the spiritual life of the ancient kingdom, stretching itself along the length of the Nile River. Woven into the fabric of the land was an array of minor local deities, figures representing the natural forces such as sky and sun, and others personifying abstract principles like truth and wisdom. Other widely popular gods ushered the faithful through complicated rites of eternal judgment, hoping to assure the believer's spirit a peaceful existence.

To simplify the complex and multifaceted face of Egyptian religion is difficult. Often a deity was represented by more than a single image. A god might be known by the symbolic headdress he wore, an implement he carried, or by a specific animal sacred to him, such as a bull, cat, or crocodile.

Often two or more images were merged. The

Egyptians commonly depicted their gods with human bodies topped with animal heads. As the years progressed, individual gods were sometimes merged with others, changing the visible ways the gods were depicted. While such inconsistencies often confound modern students, the practice obviously appealed to the Egyptians who understood their gods as the primary forces behind all aspects of life's often confusing and complex difficulties.

Statues and carvings of the gods reveal both human and animal characteristics. Their human traits depict their kinship to all people. Their animal features linked the gods to the seemingly unalterable features of nature. Whereas humans differed from one another in face, personality, and actions, the animals seemed never-changing, constant from generation to generation. Therefore, animal-headed gods conveyed a sense of stability and consistency not found

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among mortals. No god was relegated to a single body.

Re', the sun god, might appear with a hawk's head, as the pharaoh, a hawk, or as a simple beetle. A strong bull represented Ptah, creator god and patron of craftsmen. Sobek wore a crocodile's head, and the ibis-headed Thoth, god of writing and counting, could also be embodied in the form of a baboon. Lion-headed Bastet led Egypt to war, and Hathor, goddess of women, wore the horns and ears of a cow. The goddess Taweret, a cross between a woman and a hippopotamus, protected pregnant women, and the dwarf god Bes watched over them while in childbirth. The multiform nature of the gods seems aptly to describe their greatly diverse character and power.

In earliest times, widely scattered villages eked out a livelihood by farming along the banks of the Nile River. Each village or region possessed its own local gods and goddesses. Confined to that city or region, the god was powerless outside his territory. However, he exerted total influence and control over his people. As society grew and villages melded into larger districts, the political and economic fortunes of individual cities rose and fell. When a town rose in importance, so did its patron god. If the fortunes of the cities grew, the temples and shrines to these gods also grew in prestige and power. As the influence of individual gods eclipsed lesser deities, the greater took over the symbols and characteristics of the weaker. The names of the god then reflected this merger. For example, Osiris and Apis were fused together into a greater god, Serapis—possessing the character of both.

For the Egyptians, all occurrences of life found their explanations in relation to the gods. The daily rising

Nile River at Luxor.

Right, from left to right: Baboon canopic jar from Egypt, Cartonnage cover for the mummy of a child, Colossal statue of Bes (an Egyptian god), Ivory stopper in the form of the Egyptian goddess Hathor.

and setting of the sun displayed the birth, life, death, and rebirth of the sun god Re'. Every morning his mother, the sky goddess Nut,¹ gave him birth. He sailed across the blue sea of the heavens in a boat, dying as he reached the far horizon and taking up his nightly journey through the underworld. Another tale found the simple work of the lowly dung beetle an example of the sun's heavenly progression. Thus, the beetle (scarab) became a symbol for the god of the sun.

The Egyptian myth of the world's creation recounted the rising of the sun god, Atum, from a watery chaos. He then took his stand on a small mound of earth, the first dry land. By spitting he created Shu and his wife Tefenet, the gods of air and moisture. This couple in turn brought forth the god of earth (Geb) and goddess of the sky (Nut). Geb and Nut produced the most prominent of the gods in Egyptian myth: Isis, Osiris, Seth, and Nephthys.

The myth is similar to the biblical account in that dry land was brought forth from a chaotic and dark beginning, and in successive stages the world was formed. However, rather than a purposeful and redemptive creation by God as the Hebrews believed, Egyptian mythology described earthly beginnings solely to explain the power of the god. The Egyptians believed their god created to display his strength, not to fellowship with the creation.²

The most popular of Egyptian myths told the tale of the god Osiris. The agricultural economy of the land depended solely on the annual flood-

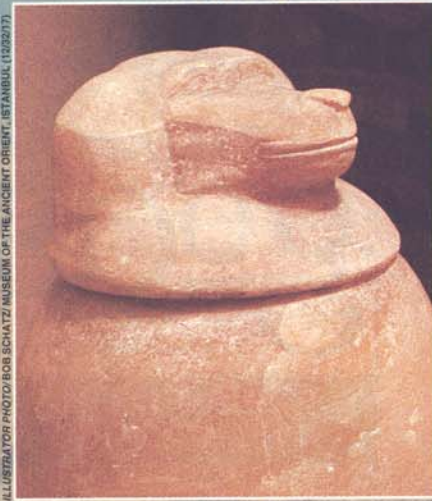


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ing of the Nile River and the silting of nutrient-rich soil on the narrow fields bordering the river. The annual fertility brought by these floods was paramount if the country was to survive. The Osiris myth revolves around the fertility cycle of the land, explaining in divine terms how the death and resurrection of this ancient god-king was repeated yearly. The story also taught how the pharaoh, the great king of Egypt, embodied the triumphant god Osiris in his own life. Thus, the life and death of the living and visible god-king visually reminded the people of the ever-present power of their gods.

The story related how Seth, the evil brother of the good king Osiris, tricked the ruler and murdered him. Seth dismembered his brother, casting the pieces across the face of the earth. However, Isis, faithful wife of Osiris, searched to gather the pieces, returning them to the embalming-god, Anubis. Magically restored, Osiris fathered a son, Horus. The

obedient son properly buried his father, establishing Osiris as ruler of the underworld. Horus then avenged his father's death and set himself up as ruler of the world.

The story of Osiris not only symbolizes the annual return of fertility to the world, but also came to explain legitimate kingly succession. The pharaoh, himself a god, was born, ruled, died, buried, went on to rule the underworld, and was to be replaced by a new god. Thus, the legitimate heir to the throne, who had been proclaimed at birth a "youthful Horus," buried his father "Osiris," and took up his rule as the new pharaoh.

One cannot overemphasize the importance of the pharaoh's position as a god before his people. His word was unalterable law.

Pampered in life, buried in richest splendor at death, the pharaoh daily carried out the religious rites necessary to insure his kingdom full prosperity by the hosts of gods and goddesses alongside whom he ruled Egypt. An intricate and huge bureaucratic network carried out his wish up and down the length of the kingdom. In his person the people saw the incarnation and strongest characteristics of all their gods. One inscription described him as:

He is the god Ra whose beams enable us to see. . . .
He makes the earth more

Left: Bronze statue of Horus from Egypt that dates from about 1000 B.C.

green than the Nile in flood. He has filled the Two Lands with strength and Life. . . . He is the god Khnum who fashions all flesh. He is the goddess Bast who defends Egypt. Whoever worships him is under his protection; but he is Sekhmet, the terrible lion-goddess, to those who disobey him. Take care not to defy him.³

Why did the God of Israel so strongly warn His people against taking other gods? Was not the evidence of His mighty power witnessed in the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, and the miraculous provision of water and food in the desert enough to convince them? Having lived as virtual slaves among the more than one hundred gods that Egypt claimed to rule over all aspects of life, Israel required constant, visible, and unmistakable signs of God's total control. Accustomed to the elaborate explanations and constantly visible reminders that the idols of the pharaoh supposedly controlled the heavens, God gave the descendants of Abraham, as the primary rule for their existence, the command of complete loyalty to Him. Coupled with His visible defeat of Egypt's gods and its king in sending the plagues through Moses, the command to have "no other gods" than the Lord gave Israel a constant reminder that God desired of His people intimate fellowship not slavish devotion.

¹For the purpose of this tale, Nut was the mother of Re'. However, the creation myth recounted how she was his granddaughter.

²A separate and competing creation tale ascribes creation to the god Ptah of the city of Memphis. This tale sought to elevate Ptah and his city above all others. See James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. with supp. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 3-4.

³Jon Manchip White, *Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1967), 118.

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