



CHAPTER 3 | EGYPTIAN POLYTHEISM AND THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

We'll be dealing with important ideas in this chapter: the gods of Egypt and the judgment of God. Egypt was a proud and powerful nation that feared no other country on earth. The people of God in their midst were despised as slaves and feared as outsiders. That all changed when Moses came to town. The pagans (an old-fashioned word for people who do not worship the God of the Bible) were impressed! God showed His power over all the gods of Egypt, began the first feast of the Passover, and freed the Israelites for Himself, all in one amazing event! The history of these Israelite slaves is especially important to us because we are like them in many ways. As Christians in a fallen world, we too are strangers in a strange land.

WORLDVIEW TERMINOLOGY

When talking about a person's worldview beliefs, it is helpful to define some terms first:

- ❑ Deity: A “deity” is a gender-neutral word for a divine being, just as “human” is a gender-neutral word for a man or a woman. The word “deity” can refer to either a god or goddess.
- ❑ Religion: “belief in, worship of, or obedience to a supernatural power or powers considered to be divine or to have control of human destiny.”¹
- ❑ Superstition: “irrational belief usually founded on ignorance or fear and characterized by obsessive reverence for omens, charms, etc.”²
- ❑ Pantheism: “Pan” is “all” and “theo” is “god,” so “pantheism” is the word for belief that all things are gods. The divine spirit is in rocks, trees, mountains, sky—indeed, in all things.
- ❑ Polytheism: “Poly” is “many” and “theo” is “god,” so “polytheism” is the word for belief in many gods. The Egyptian gods came from (and were believed to rule) nature, but because those gods were ultimately distinct from nature, the Egyptians are called polytheists rather than pantheists.
- ❑ Monotheism: “Mono” is “one” and “theo” is “god,” so “monotheism” is the word for belief in one god.
- ❑ “Truth” has been defined several ways, but its basic meaning is a statement that matches reality. Falseness, of course, is that which does not correspond to reality.

The difference between religion and superstition is interesting to consider because the two concepts both deal with the world of the supernatural, and of course one is supposed to fear one's gods as well as love them, so what difference is there, really, between reverent fear of one's god and superstitious fear? The difference is that the word “superstition” has a greater connotation of irrationality and fear whereas “religion” emphasizes faith, submission, and worship.

To most modern people, both superstition and religion are equally subjective and personal. It is hard for many non-Christian modern people to believe that supernatural powers present objective realities or truths, so the distinction between superstition and religion might not be very clear to them. Indeed, you will likely encounter many people who believe that all religions are just so much superstition—irrational beliefs founded on fear. Therefore, notice that the dictionary describes religion as an act of worship and submission, not primarily a response born of irrational fear or ignorance.

1. “religion.” Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. HarperCollins Publishers. 23 Jun. 2011. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/religion>>.

2. “superstition.” Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. HarperCollins Publishers. 23 Jun. 2011. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/superstition>>.



The Egyptians, with their polytheistic belief system, worshiped co-equal (and often competing) deities. This type of religion easily gives rise to frightened, superstitious people because there is no limit to the number of gods, known or unknown, making conflicting demands on their followers. Most scholars find it easy to believe that the Egyptians developed their myths from ignorance as non-scientific means of both calming fears and explaining life. However, Ancient Egyptians hymns and prayers reveal that at least some of them sincerely revered, worshipped, and loved their gods in a religious way rather than merely in a superstitious way.

Of course, there were still plenty of superstitious Egyptians. Their written spells bear testimony to this. For example, because the Egyptians feared the powerful malignity of an evil god such as Seth, they worshipped him so as to keep him from doing evil to them. This would have been a kind of reverence that had fear, loathing, and hypocrisy (for humans also are evil) at its core. By contrast, although some people might initially come to Yahweh (the God of the Bible) because of a fear of Hell, the proper attitude towards a God of love is worship and adoration, not fear. The One True God is good, and all loving. Once we understand that, we come to Him in love and adoration as well as reverent fear.

SUPERNATURAL STORIES

Folktales, legends, and myths were used in the ancient world to help both adults and children understand their culture's worldview beliefs. Such stories could be religious, superstitious, or both, or neither! However, they do generally point us towards the worldview beliefs of the culture that produced them, and are worth studying for that reason. Before we read them, however, it is helpful to understand where they fall on the scale of falsehood or fiction versus history or truth.

Folktales (also called "tall tales") are easy to place because, in the community that tells them, "everybody knows" that they aren't really true. Oh, there may be a kernel of truth in them originally—for instance, Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed from America's folktales might be characters based on real people. However, Paul Bunyan was supposed to have owned a giant blue ox named "Babe." While he may have owned a large ox named Babe, both the color and the size are almost certainly false. Or consider Aesop's Fables, in which animals talk and plan and manipulate just as people do. These stories are obviously fictional. Thus, although folktales can often teach us something, they are mostly "just for fun," and everyone knows it.

Legends are usually stories about important events or people. Some of the details might be different than what actually happened, but the important part is remembered as we tell the story. George Washington cutting down the cherry tree is a famous example, or the legend of Menes uniting Upper and Lower Egypt. Both could have happened, and perhaps *did* happen, but might just as easily have been false. For instance, historians are still arguing about whether the man named "Menes" was really "Menes" or actually named "Narmer," and whether he lived at all, or whether he was made up to simplify a long, slow unification process. Legends like these might teach us to always tell the truth (like Washington) or work to serve a united Egypt (like Menes), but again, their perfect truthfulness is questionable. They are often *more* truthful

Myths can be the trickiest to place on the scale between falsehood and truth. Myths are the stories that people tell about gods and goddesses, about magic, or about something supernatural. Creation myths, for example, tell about the beginning of the world, how it was made and why. Often, there are multiple versions of a given myth.



From a biblical perspective, it is not surprising that the Egyptians had at least three or four conflicting accounts of creation because none of them come from God or match reality. Men made up these stories, so it is not surprising that several versions exist. Of course, an Egyptian might just as easily say to a Christian, “how do you know *your* account of creation isn’t the made-up one, and that *your* god isn’t the false one?” It was just this kind of question that we see set up between the gods of Egypt and Yahweh in the book of Exodus.

Those who believe in the supernatural beings or magic represented in myths generally believe them to be at least partly true. To them, these are the stories of reality and of history. Meanwhile, those who don’t believe in those gods or magic represented in the story usually think of them as “only myths.”

Today, “myth” has come to mean a story about gods or magic that isn’t real, but some people believe in it. The Ancient Egyptians had many such stories that we regard to day as myths. Mythology is often valuable to study and understand, but it does raise interesting questions. Christians believe that only the Bible is true and that every other story about a god, goddess, power, or magical event is ultimately false. However, those who aren’t Christians believe that the Bible is no different than any other myth. Christians then begin to wonder, “Why do we believe the stories in the Bible but not these mythological stories?”

Over time, you will see the differences for yourself, by really looking at the Bible and the myths. My youngest sister said this about reading myths: “The myths tell stories about gods who act like people. They get jealous, angry, or selfish. The Bible tells about a holy and perfect God who loved the world so much He sent His only son to save them from their sins. That’s a story unlike anything anybody would have made up. The gods of mythology are made in man’s image. The God of the Bible made us in His image!”

In Romans 1:23, Paul explains how ungrateful humans exchanged the glory of the immortal God for “images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” He may have had the Egyptian idols specifically in mind! The Egyptians may have often painted or carved images of idols with animal heads, but the stories they told show how entirely they modeled their gods’ hearts after human hearts. Nowhere in their stories is there any such perfect integrity, total majesty, fullness of justice, or vastness of love for mankind as we see displayed in the God of the Bible.

EGYPTIAN THEOLOGY¹

Men tend to fight, conquer, and rule with despotism, not mercy. They are limited by and subject to human passions and frustrations. Egyptian gods mirror human characteristics. In the Egyptian worldview, gods are made in the image of man, and not vice versa. Therefore, they are often selfish, fallible, capable of being tricked, and may lose their own self-control or enter conflict with one another. Egyptian gods marry and give birth to other gods as humans do. They feel jealous, fight wars, and even get old or get killed. For example, Set envies Osiris his throne, so he kills him and cuts him up into little pieces, which his wife Isis has to reassemble. Again, Isis tricks Hathor, getting her drunk to divert her from her divinely-appointed mission because Hathor has gotten out of control in her execution of the mission. They are neither morally pure nor, for deities, mightily purposeful and powerful.

The Egyptian gods’ relationship to humans also mirrors human attitudes towards inferiors. First, Egypt’s gods are tribal gods. They may be generally benevolent to Egyptians, but *not* to foreigners or humanity in general. Also, even with respect to Egyptians, the gods pay attention to their inferiors mostly to demand

1. Some background historical information and all quotes in this section are taken from pages xvi-xvii of *Ancient Egyptian Literature: An Anthology*, translated by John L. Foster.



things from them. Egyptians exist to serve the gods, building their temples, feeding and clothing their idols, and providing glory and obedience. The gods' specific tenderness is generally reserved for Pharaoh. Men, for their part, attempt to placate the gods in order to get (or get away with) as much as they can. Salvation, in this scheme of things, comes by works. If an Egyptian does enough good works, he has a right to expect his gods' favors (unless they are in "one of their moods" or simply not paying attention). We call this kind of transactional relationship a "works-based" religion; it is extremely common among humans.

Yahweh (the personal name of God in the Bible), by contrast, displays truly divine character, actions, and priorities that no man would have invented. He is consistent, never turning from His plans. He is holy, righteous, just, merciful, omniscient, and omnipotent. He is never capricious or impetuous. He creates the world intentionally and beautifully, giving humans a special place of honor because of His great and particular love for *each* of them, and for *all* of them (not only for the people of one ethnicity). He is God of all peoples and nations (see for instance Isaiah 19:21-25). Yahweh chooses to judge justly, but also to show free mercy in redeeming a people for His own, at great personal cost to Himself. God's relationship to man is one of a divinity whose character is vastly different from humankind's. Yet, God cares about people, and seeks to restore them from the sinfulness that comes so naturally to them, and that is often directed at Him!

Egyptian Beliefs about Reality

The Egyptian worldview is basically a polytheistic ("many gods") religion, which means that Egyptians believed their multiple gods were the ultimate reality. Like most other ancient polytheists, they practiced animism (meaning they believed that many of the natural elements we see around us, such as rivers, wind, the sky, etc., are actually divine personalities: gods and goddesses).

In personality, the Egyptian gods and goddesses were believed to be like "human beings writ large," with human personalities and human-style relationships mostly made up of family groups. Egyptians thought their gods and goddesses were immortal and had great powers, ruling over different parts of nature and humanity according to their different natures (i.e. the god of the Nile rules over the Nile and perhaps over fishermen). However, the gods were also believed to need housing, clothing, and feeding by humans. They were also capable of making mistakes and losing control over their creation: there is a story, for instance, that Ra lost control of a great lioness that he made to punish mankind (Sekhmet), and had to appease her by making her the goddess of love and beauty, so that she could cause still greater pain in human hearts.

Like people, the Egyptians gods were believed to have qualities of wisdom, mercy, love, and benevolence at times, but that they could also (again, like humans) be vindictive, arbitrary, and cruel. In the stories, most Egyptian gods have both good and bad traits. Most Egyptian gods were also thought to have pet cities (often called "cult" cities) that each one cared for especially. The Egyptians believed that their gods were willing to bestow care and rewards on certain select human beings (mostly the Pharaohs), and through them bless the nation of Egypt.

Egyptians had at least two other important beliefs about what is real that concern the gods. First, they believed that magic (the ability to make things happen in the natural world that are outside of its usual operations) is real. They also believed firmly that magic was used by the gods (as well as mortals). Second,



Egyptians believed that there exists separate from the gods' (though sometimes personified as a goddess) the idea of *ma'at* (a concept that combines truth, justice, goodness, and harmony). *Ma'at* is the opposite of chaos (*isfet*). It is also the standard that human beings must meet, with the gods (especially Osiris) as judges of how well they have measured up to it.

Egyptians believe that the natural universe is a creation of the gods, though there are at least five different accounts about how this happened. Usually, water figures in these stories as an element of both chaos and the beginning of life, and some sort of a sun god is often involved:

1. The world was created through eight couples of gods and goddesses out of a watery chaotic nothing. One account says that he created his own human form by gathering together the waters of chaos.
2. The sun god (called by different names) created lesser gods and goddesses first because he was lonely, and then he created the earth. Human beings resulted from his tears of joy striking the earth.
3. Earth was created through the craftsmanship of the god Ptah by the spoken word of a god named Atum or Amun (who is self-created and hidden—all the other gods are incarnations of him).
4. A divine couple named Shu and Tefnut gave birth to Geb (earth) and Nut (sky). The other gods came later.
5. A god named Atum created the world through a process like evolution as Ra rose out of the primordial waters and then spoke the world into being. (However, another story says that Ra was born from a great goose's egg or lotus flower.)
6. The pharaoh Akhenaten taught that the Aten (the one god of the sun whom he insisted should alone be worshipped) had created all things.

One Egyptian story says that human beings were invented as part of the general creation process of the gods. Another story says that they were shaped out of Nile mud by the potter-god Khnum, but not as a loving, purposeful act of grace filled with the promise of bliss. There is some evidence Egyptians believed that Earth was created by the gods for mankind, but the gods have not given humans a specific purpose other than to serve the gods by feeding, clothing, and glorifying them.

To the Egyptians, humans were sometimes seen as beloved children of a god who shaped a land of safety and plenty specifically for them, but at other times they were seen as simply by-products of a general creative process, and of course the possibilities multiplied as more gods and more different accounts of creation were incorporated into the Egyptian worldview. The one consistency seems to be that the Pharaoh, who was believed to be a descendent of the god Horus, was supposedly dear to the gods.

According to Egyptian belief, humans have a soul and a physical body. The soul lodges in the body, but it is a separate and immortal spirit. Body and soul will be united in death. They also believe that man is currently as he has always been—there was no fall from an original perfect state, though man is flawed: his heart is set against *ma'at*. This was recognized by Egyptians as the main source of trouble in the world, but it was not seen as an impossible obstacle to salvation.

Egyptians buried dead human bodies with many grave goods to sustain them in the next life. They believed that, after death, each soul will be judged by Osiris, god of the dead. A soul's past life and deeds are weighed against the Feather of Truth and judged according to *ma'at*. The soul is either found guilty and sentenced (to be swallowed by a monstrous goddess or possibly also cast into the Duat), or else judged righteous and allowed to become a part of the god Osiris. So, essentially, they believe that the reality of salvation is only to be achieved by human works.



Egyptian Beliefs about Morality

Ma'at provides a standard of justice, goodness, truth, and harmony by which people know what is right and wrong. Thus, justice, goodness, truth, and harmony are right, while injustice, wickedness, falsehood, disharmony, and chaos are wrong. Part of upright living means honoring the gods with devotion, prayer, and sacrifices of animals. Ancient Egyptians also believed that it is right and good to reverence the Pharaoh as a god on earth.

Egyptian Beliefs about Values

The gods (including Pharaoh) were valuable to ancient Egyptians, because they were believed to provide everything and have at least some benevolence towards mankind. Serving the gods was a valuable thing for an ancient Egyptian to do, because that is how they believed they could persuade the gods to bless them.

To the ancient Egyptian, the soul was valuable, and so was its life in the world after this one, and so was resurrection. All Egyptians hoped and longed that their souls would be resurrected after death like those of the god Osiris. Towards that end, it was thought valuable to live one's life in harmony with *ma'at*, so that one would be judged righteous when his heart was weighed against the Feather of Truth. Similarly, a proper funeral (and proper religious behavior in general) was seen as valuable, so that one's soul might enter a blissful afterlife. Also, to the Egyptian, a person's name was valuable as the seat of his personality (it can be invoked in spells or curses) and reputation (i.e. his "good name").

Egypt as a country and as a homeland was greatly valued by its people. Egyptians also valued themselves: they considered themselves blessed by their gods, superior to other nations in war and in culture. One of their poets spoke of Egyptians as the "sunfolk"—people of the sun god—and that is a good way to describe their value for the idea of being Egyptian.

Good relationships between Egyptians were valuable to them, especially between master (or lord), and servant. Faithfulness from subordinates to their superiors was valuable. Foreigners and relationships with them, however were *not* seen as valuable; in fact, they were viewed as disgusting, and relationships with them were based only on trade or politics.

THE POLYTHEISTIC EGYPTIAN PANTHEON

A "pantheon" includes all the gods that a particular culture worships. Egyptians worshipped the sun, the Nile, cats, cobras, and a host of other idols, but that wasn't all. Pharaoh was one of the "gods" of Egypt, too—each living Pharaoh was supposed to be an earthly incarnation of Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris, and when he died, he supposedly turned into Osiris. He was considered a "god on earth."

Some scholars estimate that the Ancient Egyptians may have had over two thousand gods and goddesses in all, but it is difficult to be specific about the total number because the ancient Egyptians themselves were not specific. In the mythology and theology of ancient Egypt, the gods and goddesses were not static, but dynamic. They had changing roles, identities, stories, and places within the overall hierarchy of their pantheon.



Scholars love to speculate about Egyptian gods and goddesses. For example, some think that the Egyptian pantheon is so large partly because the conservative, tradition-loving Egyptians were afraid to give up older gods even when newer deities were introduced. Does that explanation make sense to you? How would you try to explain the multiplying of gods in a worldview?

Adding to the complexity is the fact that it appears that minor spirits (for example, demons) and even the dead relatives of ancient Egyptians may have also been considered to be gods or goddesses. It seems the ancient Egyptians were fairly fluid about assigning divine status. There are many examples of gods and goddesses who overlapped with each other in terms of their roles or power or relationships. Two gods or goddesses were often combined to create a third deity, who embodied aspects of both. Yet the original two still remained as distinct persons and might combine with still other gods or goddesses. In such cases, male gods would be combined, or female goddesses—rarely if ever were male and female deities combined.

With a handful of exceptions, all ancient Egyptian deities were clearly either male or female, and each one had to have a spouse, even if that meant inventing a new god or goddess as a spouse for a lone deity. Certain gods, such as Ra or Osiris, had associated female goddesses who were considered to be a part of them—a feminine manifestation of their power—but this was relatively rare. Even in such cases, they were a feminine side that did not detract from the essential masculinity of the god.

As you study the centuries of ancient Egyptian theology, it is important to remember that the Egyptians were comfortable with a good deal of apparent contradiction. For example, they had at least four major creation accounts, each of which was considered to be as truthful, or not, as the others. Likewise, their gods and goddesses could play a variety of roles within a given myth. Ra, for example, was combined at various times with three major gods—Amun, Atum, and Horus—and two minor gods (Khepri and Khnum), who were the morning and evening manifestations of Ra, respectively. Hathor was believed to be Ra's mother, wife, and daughter at various points in the day. She gave birth to him in the morning, married him at noon, and was born to him in the evening, so that she could give birth to him again the next morning. The Egyptian pantheon was incredibly complex!

Now it's time to learn about some of the important gods and goddesses in the Egyptian pantheon. As you read, note that the strongest gods were those associated with the strongest forces of nature in the Egyptians' environment: sun, water, sky, etc. There were not, for instance, any mighty gods associated with mountains or snow. The Egyptians did not believe that a spirit was resident in all things equally (pantheism), but rather that various different deities controlled different aspects of their world and lives. Scholars often refer to such nature-ruling deities of ancient cultures as "nature gods." Below are ten of the most important:

- Re (Ra), god of the sun
- Hathor, goddess of women and motherhood, represented by the cow
- Ptah, creator-god represented by the Apis bull
- Horus, first divine Pharaoh
- Thoth, god of magic
- Isis, goddess of magic and healing
- Osiris, god of crops
- Hapi, god of the Nile
- Khnum, creator-god of the Nile, represented by the ram
- Heqet, goddess of fertility, represented by the frog



You will notice, as you begin to read about the gods and goddesses of Egypt, that some of them have animal heads. Suzanne Strauss Art theorizes that perhaps "...the priests wore masks of the animal gods to whom they were appealing when they performed religious ceremonies. Paintings were made of the masked priests, and these images became identified with the gods themselves".¹ Was that the way it happened, or not? We don't know!

What we do know is that Egyptian art was intended to be clear and informative. This was important enough that the ancient Egyptians routinely labeled much of their artwork so that those who could read would have no doubt about what was being represented. Thus, gods and goddesses that were "human"—such as Isis or Hathor—were often depicted with symbols upon their heads that identified them and their roles. Hathor was a sky goddess associated with cattle, and as such she often had cow horns with a golden sun disc between them as her headdress. When Isis and Hathor began to be combined in later Egyptian history, Isis too wore the same sort of headdress, since she shared Hathor's powers and roles.

When gods or goddesses were associated with animals, such as Anubis, Horus, or Taweret, their associated animal quality was indicated by their head. Thus, the jackal god, Anubis, was a protector of graves, who kept off the real-life jackals that dug for corpses buried in the sand. Horus, a sky god, had the head of a falcon when this role was being emphasized. Otherwise, he had the form of a human child when his relationship with Osiris and Isis as their son was the focus. The fiercely maternal protector goddess, Taweret, was part hippo, crocodile, lion, and woman, all creatures who cared for and protected their young.

All this being said, it is important to remember that the Egyptian hieroglyphic language used pictures as symbols to communicate meaning. Additionally, the fluid nature of the gods and goddesses themselves meant that they were not confined to any one form or even identity. Some ancient Egyptians may have believed that their deities literally had animal heads, but it is just as likely that they understood quite well that these were symbolic or iconographic representations. Christians have a similar concept when we refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God and the Lion of Judah—we don't believe that he is either a lion or lamb, literally.

1. *Early Times: The Story of Ancient Egypt* *Early Times: The Story of Ancient Egypt, 4th ed.*, by Suzanne Strauss Art (Wayside Publishing, 2013), p. 62.

Ogdoad

This group of deities were eight in number, four matching pairs of gods and goddesses. The males had heads of frogs, and the females had heads of snakes. Each pair—god and goddess—had similar names, only the endings changed. They were the male and female sides of the attribute of chaos that they embodied. The ancient Egyptians themselves, even the priests of the Ogdoad, were not clear as to the true nature of this group of deities. As best we can tell, Nu and Naunet represented the primordial waters. Hehu and Hehut likely represented the void or space over the waters. Kekui and Kekuit represented darkness. Qerh and Qerhet, who were later known as Amun and Amunet, represented either invisibility or the unknown.



According to this creation myth, the eight gods and goddesses created the first mound of something – earth—when they swam together into a clump of bodies. From out of their midst, the sun rose over the mound. That was the beginning of Ra, who then began to create the rest of the world, humans, and even some of the gods and goddesses. At this point, the Ogdoad myth merges with the typical Ra myths concerning the general creation of the world.

This was the oldest of the ancient Egyptian creation myths. The Ogdoad was being displaced by other myths or else forgotten by most Egyptians during the Old Kingdom era. Worship of the Ogdoad was centered in the city of Hermopolis, which was located in the fifteenth nome of Upper Egypt, near the border between Lower and Upper Egypt. This was also the holy city of Thoth, where his major temple was built. During the Middle Kingdom, there were mentions of the Ogdoad deities among the spells that people had written on their coffins. Eventually, during the New Kingdom, the priests of Hermopolis revived the Ogdoad as a creation account – probably in an attempt to increase the importance of their city. Other creation myths were more popular overall throughout most of ancient Egypt’s long history.

Ennead

The Great Ennead—ennead meaning nine—was a group of gods and goddesses that created and personified the world, according to their myth. Atum was the original creator god who brought forth Shu and Tefnut. They in turn produced Geb and Nut. These were the parents of Osiris, Isis, Set, and Nephthys. From these rose the Osiris myth, which played a central role in upholding the divine inspiration and legitimacy of the pharaohs. The priesthood of Heliopolis, capital city of the thirteenth nome of Lower Egypt, were the chief promoters of the myth and worship of the Great Ennead. (Heliopolis was located north of ancient Memphis, in the north-eastern part of modern Cairo.)

Aten

Aten was represented by the solar disc. Originally an aspect of Ra, the Pharaoh Akhenaten proclaimed him the sole god to be worshipped throughout the land of Egypt, forbidding all other gods and goddesses. Moreover, Aten could only actually be worshipped by Akhenaten and his queen, Nefertiti. The ancient Egyptians had to worship and pray to Akhenaten and then he would pray to Aten on their behalf. After Akhenaten’s death, regular worship of the Egyptian pantheon was resumed, and Aten worship was systematically eradicated as a heresy by subsequent pharaohs.

Aten made all things and loved all things and sustained all things, according to Akhenaten’s theology. The night was a time to be feared since the light of Aten was no longer present. Temples built to honor Aten were made without ceilings, so that worshippers could bask in Aten’s rays. Having made all things there was nothing that could accurately represent Aten, so there were no statues made of him. As the sole god, Aten had no family, no goddess-wife, and Akhenaten was his only child. Aten was responsible for order – he held the roles and powers of Ma’at.

Amun

Amun was represented as a man, crowned with the Red Crown of Lower Egypt, topped with two plumes; in later eras, he had blue skin; he was also known as Amon.

The worship of Amun as a distinct god began in Thebes. The capital of Upper Egypt’s fourth nome, Thebes was also the seat of power for Dynasty XI, which contended with Dynasties IX and X of Lower Egypt during the last years of the First Intermediate Period. When Dynasty XI overthrew Dynasties X, begin-



ning the Middle Kingdom era, their chief god – Amun – became a national god over the whole land of Egypt. This position was reinforced and strengthened at the beginning of the New Kingdom era when Thebes based Dynasty XVIII reunited Egypt once more. Amun, as their patron god, was credited by Dynasty XVIII pharaohs with giving them strength and victory over the hated Hyksos invaders.

Originally, Amun was one of the eight gods and goddesses of the Ogdoad, representing mystery. Over time, his priests at Thebes developed an ever more comprehensive and complex theology for him. He was said to be creator of all other gods, the mysterious beginning of everything. At the height of his power and prestige, Amun was essentially believed to be the only god – for all other gods and goddesses were said to be extensions of his self and nature. As Amun rose in popularity and power, he was merged with other gods. As Amun-Ra (or Amon-Re) he was merged with Ra to become a sun god. Later he was also merged with Min, a fertility god, and these three aspects – Amun, Ra, and Min – made him the creator, sustainer, and giver of life.

When worship of Amun was brought south to Nubia, they merged him with their sun god, who had the form of a ram. This also played into his fertility god persona since rams were considered masculine and fertile. Sometimes he was worshipped as a bull, another symbol of strength, fertility, and power. The Nubians adopted Amun as a national god and continued to worship him throughout their history.

Egypt fell once more into division and strife at the beginning of the Third Intermediate Period. The end of Dynasty XX allowed the powerful high priests of Amun in Thebes to rule most of Upper Egypt. However, the national worship of Amun began to decline during this era. The rulers of Lower Egypt were foreigners and other gods rose to prominence. When Dynasty XXV, which was Nubian in origin, reunited Egypt, they revived the worship of Amun for a time. With their downfall, he once more fell back into relative obscurity.

The Great Honker was a male Nilegoose who swam on the waters of chaos. He suddenly honked loudly, which was the beginning of time. He then laid an egg from which hatched the sun. From there, Ra apparently took over and started creating everything else, with the help of various subsequent gods and goddesses. Some variations of this story give credit to Thoth in the form of ibis, rather than the Great Honker. The ancient Egyptians took this myth seriously enough that they merged Amun with the Nilegoose on occasion. It wasn't his primary form, but Amun doesn't seem to have objected to the idea – or at least his priests didn't do so.

Ra

Ra (or Re) was the god of the sun. He was definitely one of the oldest and most important gods in ancient Egypt. There were several other gods and goddesses who helped Ra move and protect the sun. His animal forms included a scarab beetle, a falcon, and a ram. As a man, he is shown with falcon head crowned with a sun disc.

Ra was often considered to be the creator of life and the world, rising from the sea of chaos (personified as Nun). Ra's importance was so central that he was commonly combined with other important gods from time to time. In addition, he was joined with minor gods who helped differentiate his being in the morning, at noon, in the evening, and through the night. The Eye of Ra was such an aspect, envisioned



as daughters of Ra, and commonly included three or more goddesses: Hathor, Sekhmet, and Bastet. The Eye of Ra was his fierce and protective or vengeful power made manifest. Sometimes, as in one story when he sent out Hathor, that power was destructive—so much so that Ra had to intervene lest all mankind be destroyed by her wrath.

Ra carried the sun on a barge—a boat—across the sky, and he was assisted by several other gods and goddesses on this daily journey. At night, he was believed to descend into the underworld, where he met with Osiris, the god of death and the afterlife. Osiris restored and renewed Ra, who was reborn through his mother-wife-daughter Hathor. This cycle repeated daily and was crucial for the survival of all life since the sun is needed for plants to grow. The ancient Egyptians worshipped multiple gods and goddesses who were responsible for the sun in some way, but Ra was the chief among them.

Ra was also credited with defeating Apep (a giant snake of chaos) and for being the father of Ma'at, the goddess of order, harmony, justice, and truth. He and his companions battled Apep and other chaos monsters each night as the barge that carried the sun descended into the underworld. According to some legends, this battle occurred in the west, as he first entered Duat, and by other accounts he fought Apep near dawn in order to be reborn each morning. Each sunrise, for the ancient Egyptians, was a manifestation of the triumph of life and order over death and chaos.

Hapi

Next in importance was the Nile itself, which was also worshipped as a god. This isn't surprising, given its importance to Egypt. Portrayed as a man with a large belly and drooping chest, who wore a fake beard, he was associated particularly with the flooding of the Nile River. Frogs were associated with him as well since they flourished during the flood season. He often had blue or green skin, which was symbolic of water. Most of his worshippers were at Elephantine, which was the city at the First Cataract, where the floodwaters first entered Egypt. The floodwaters brought fertile soil, so he was also associated with fertility. Sometimes he was depicted as binding the papyrus and lotus plants together, which was symbolic of uniting Lower and Upper Egypt.

Atum

Atum, represented as a man wearing either a royal headdress or else the double crown of Egypt, was associated with the setting of the sun. He was the first god of the Ennead, a self-created god who made the world and eventually people also. He was linked closely to Ra, in some variations he was Ra, the sun god, and it was believed that he and Ra combined as the sun set each evening. This was part of the daily cycle of rebirth, and each morning, as the sun rose, it replayed the mythical emergence of Atum from the sea of darkness. Eventually Atum created two children, by some accounts because he was lonely. The first, Shu, he sneezed into being. The second, Tefnut, he spat into existence. These names were apparently (in part) a pun on the ancient Egyptian words for sneezing and spitting.

Osiris (Younger)

Osiris was originally the god of plants. But he was murdered by his brother Set and hacked into pieces. His wife, Isis, found the pieces and sewed him back together again – preserving his body as the first mummy. Osiris then ruled the underworld, where people went after they died.

a man crowned with the White Crown of Upper Egypt, which was flanked by two ostrich feathers, his skin was usually green or black – signifying rebirth or fertility, respectively – and his body was wrapped in bandages like a mummy.



He was originally the god of fertility, vegetation, and agriculture. In keeping with the myth of his murder by Set and brief resurrection by Isis, he became the chief god of the dead, resurrection, and afterlife. In doing so, he displaced Anubis from that role. As a vegetation god, Osiris was further linked to the natural cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Plants grow, die, and are 'reborn' through their seeds to grow again.

According to the myth, Osiris – as the son of Geb – inherited the role of king. Isis was his queen. But Set desired the throne, so he conspired to murder Osiris. There are several versions of him doing so. Isis recovered the body of her husband, Osiris, and tried to hide it from Set. Many gods and goddesses are brought into the storyline here, trying to defend the body of Osiris from Set. But in the end, he found it and hacked it into pieces, which he scattered and hid throughout Egypt. Isis then searched for the parts of her husband, finding them and uniting them together. With the magical aid of Thoth and Anubis, she manages to briefly bring him back to life and then preserve his body once he dies again. While Osiris is resurrected and alive, Isis conceives Horus. She is then forced to flee from Set, while Osiris dies again, taking up his place in the underworld as its ruler.

Ancient Egyptians hoped to live on in the afterlife, so the death, resurrection, and preservation of Osiris gave them hope that they could do the same. Starting with the pharaohs, then extending to the nobles, and finally including the common people, Osiris was worshipped by everyone who hoped to find peace in the afterlife. After they died, the dead were sometimes given new names that merged their personal name with that of Osiris, in the hope that they could share his power over death.

Politically, Osiris was associated with the deceased pharaoh. Even though a pharaoh had died, he still lived on in the afterlife. The transition of lawful kingship from Osiris to Horus in the myth supported the new pharaoh's reign. When the new pharaoh buried the dead pharaoh, he was symbolically identifying with the Osiris myth – strengthening his claim to the throne. Those who might resist the new pharaoh were thus associated with Set, the god of storms, deserts, foreigners, and chaos. Only the pharaohs of Dynasty XIX ever embraced Set and went against this pattern.

Isis

Isis was married to Osiris, and the two of them reigned as the first King and Queen of Egypt. Horus was their son. As a wife, mother, and queen, Isis was very popular—especially with women, who often prayed to her. Not only was she worshipped in ancient Egypt, but eventually she was worshipped all across the Roman Empire. Originally, she was portrayed as a woman with the hieroglyph for a throne on her head.

Isis was a goddess of magic, healing, and fertility; as the wife of Osiris and mother of Horus, she became strongly associated with queens—the wives and mothers of pharaohs. Over the centuries, as she took over elements of Hathor's persona, she also was given the aspect of a woman with the solar disc between two cow horns, identical to Hathor. She was believed to have the strongest magic of all the gods and a great deal of cunning as well—she even tricked both Ra and Set.

The role of Isis in the Osiris myth was first that of the faithful wife and grieving widow. Together with her sister Nephthys, she searched the land for the body of her husband Osiris, which Set had cut into pieces and hidden throughout the land. In part, this portion of the myth connected all the nomes of Egypt together as hiding places for the body of Osiris, bringing them into the story. By her persistence, with the aid of various gods and goddesses, and her magic power she was able to restore her husband to life for a little while. With the help of Anubis, she then preserved his body as the first mummy. Osiris lived on in the Duat from then on, which gave Isis—and Nephthys—significant roles in the funeral rites of ancient



Egyptians, who prayed to them to invoke their aid in seeking an immortal afterlife for themselves.

During the short time that Osiris returned to life, Isis became pregnant with their son, Horus the younger. This portion of the myth focused on her role as a mother, healer, and protector. She was forced to hide from a wrathful Set and gave birth to Horus in a papyrus thicket in the Nile Delta region of Lower Egypt. While Horus was growing up, Isis had to protect him from dangers such as sickness, snakes, and Set – who was the god of chaos. Ancient Egyptians often worshipped Isis and prayed to her for healing and protection in keeping with these stories from the myth.

As the Osiris myth grew and developed, Isis played an increasingly prominent role in the Egyptian pantheon. As the mother of Horus, who was identified with the living pharaoh, she then began to be more and more identified with the royal queens, who were wives of the deceased pharaohs (like Osiris) and mothers of the living pharaohs or their heirs. Hathor had originally held this place of honor, so as the popularity of Isis increased, she began to take on many of Hathor's roles and attributes. This trend of taking other goddesses' roles and powers continued throughout the rest of ancient Egyptian history, down through the Greek and Roman periods, until Christianity replaced the ancient Egyptian religion entirely.

Particularly during the Greek period, Isis was viewed as one of the most important goddesses, almost independent of male gods. She was linked with many of them as a wife or mother, but her popularity made her the more beloved partner. Worship of her spread beyond Egypt and throughout the Greek-speaking world in a way that never occurred for Osiris or even Horus.

Horus the Elder

Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, took the shape of a falcon or hawk with the sun and moon as his eyes. He was god of the sky and the ruler of the day. After defeating Set, Horus reigned as the king of Egypt. The pharaohs believed that they were the successors of Horus once he left earth. He is represented as a man with falcon head crowned with the double-crown of Egypt

Like Ra, Horus was a sky god, and in some myths the sun and moon were thought to be his eyes that moved as he flew. As he grew in power and reputation, Horus absorbed many local hawk or falcon or sun gods into his identity. By the time of the Old Kingdom, Horus had become that patron god of the pharaohs and kingship – and by extension the ruling god of all Egypt. Unlike Zeus of the Greeks or Odin of the Vikings, Horus didn't rule Egypt because he was the most powerful of the gods. Rather, he had inherited – and fought against Set for – his position from either Ra or Osiris. And in turn, he had given earthly rule over Egypt to the pharaohs who were human heirs of his divine position as king.

As the national god of Egypt, patron of the pharaohs, it is important to remember that, while Horus played several roles, most of these were tied to the Egypt's relationship with the pharaohs. As a sky god, united with Ra, he ruled over everything. As a son of Osiris, Horus embodied the living pharaoh, while Osiris embodied the deceased pharaoh – who was typically the current pharaoh's father. His child-form and association with the currently living pharaoh were intended to theologically link the human pharaoh with the gods – as being descended from them and their direct heirs. As the enemy of Set – who was the god of deserts, storms, violence, and foreigners – Horus defended Egypt from the dangers that surrounded her. As an avenger of his murdered father and as the rightful king, Horus upheld Ma'at, maintaining order throughout the land. As the son or husband of Hathor, he was the son or husband of the queen of goddesses, and similarly as a son of Isis he was again the son of a preeminent goddess.



Horus was not only strong but also cunning. Many of his victories over Set came from outwitting his enemy rather than simply overcoming him physically. In one story, after eighty years of conflict, Set and Horus agreed to a boat race to resolve the struggle for kingship. They agreed that their boats would be made of stone. Horus then built a boat of wood and painted it to look like stone. Set's boat, which was actually stone, naturally sank, while Horus easily sailed to victory – thereby becoming the king of Egypt.

Many scholars have tried to discover a connection between the battles of Set and Horus for kingship. These stories come from the earliest eras of ancient Egyptian history when the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt were being united. While there is some evidence for Horus and Set being the representative gods of major cities involved in the struggle for unification, we don't have irrefutable proof that this was the origin of their story. What is certain is that the myths surrounding Horus as the son of Osiris and Isis arose at a later date, and these were clearly intended to bolster the power and prestige of the pharaohs as human successors of the divine rulers, Osiris and his heir, Horus.

Horus the Younger

As the child of Osiris, the dead pharaoh, Horus embodied the living pharaoh. He was protected and nurtured by Isis and Hathor and Nephthys in his childhood. The pharaohs often had themselves painted or carved in statues with Isis or Nephthys or Hathor as their mothers or nurses in imitation of this myth. Their milk was a divine sign royalty—only the heir of the pharaoh could drink it. Like Horus the Elder, Horus the Younger would be depicted wearing the Red and White Crowns, or was represented by a naked child with a sidelock of hair.

Pharaoh

Pharaoh was believed to be a “god on earth.” He was the god-like human descendant of Horus (and therefore of Ra as well) a substitute for Horus in life, and a substitute for Osiris (the father of Horus) when he died. That's important because it means that, from the Egyptian's perspective, Moses's quarrel with Pharaoh wasn't just a personality clash. When Moses went head-to-head with Pharaoh, his battle was not just against flesh and blood. To use Paul's words in Ephesians 6:12, Moses wrestled against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Moses and Pharaoh were the visible faces of an invisible war.

Wadjet and Nekhbet

Wadjet is a woman with a snake head or a uraeus—a rearing cobra with tail circled around a sun disc. Beginning as a local goddess of the Nile Delta region city of Dep, Wadjet was a cobra goddess of protection. Her popularity grew over time until she became all of Lower Egypt's matron – meaning mother – and protector. Eventually, with the rise of the Osiris myth, it was told that she cared for Horus the Younger while he was a baby in hiding from Set. As mother, she protected Egyptian mothers during childbirth, which was a dangerous and difficult experience.

Wadjet's importance grew to the point that the kings of Lower Egypt included her symbol – the uraeus – as a part of their crowns. Originally, the uraeus was a sun disc with a cobra coiled around it, her head upright to defend the sun from danger. When Upper and Lower Egypt were united, the uraeus was expanded to include Nekhbet – a vulture goddess who played a similar role for Upper Egypt. While Hathor and Isis were national goddesses, Wadjet remained closely associated with Lower Egypt.



Wadjet – as the eye of a cobra – was incorporated into the mythic powers of several other gods and goddesses. The Eye of Ra is her most famous manifestation, but she was also believed to be the Eye of the Moon, Hathor, and Horus at various times. Even Isis was associated with Wadjet as the Eye. In one story, she created the Eye for Ra. Common Egyptians wore amulets shaped like the Eye of Ra or the Eye of Horus for protection in their daily lives.

Nekhbet is a white vulture crowned with White Crown of Upper Egypt

It seems that the Upper Egyptians were determined not to be outdone by the Lower Egyptians. Much less is known about the roles and mythology of Nekhbet than Wadjet. She was, however, strongly identified with Upper Egypt and personified that region's identity. Throughout ancient Egyptian history, Nekhbet and Wadjet remained equal but separate goddesses, each caring for their portion of the nation. This is significant, politically and culturally, since it was common for the ancient Egyptians to merge gods or goddesses with common attributes. In other cases, such as Ra or Horus, local sun and falcon gods were usually absorbed or merged.

Together, Nekhbet and Wadjet were called the Two Ladies. They represented the two halves of Egypt to the extent that one of the pharaohs' five major titles was his *Nebty* – meaning Two Ladies – name. A vulture's head was often placed alongside the rearing cobra on the uraeus, symbolizing protection from the goddesses of both Upper and Lower Egypt. One of the crowns worn by Egyptian queens – the wives of pharaohs – was in the form of a vulture. The wings came down on either side, covering the ears, while the head and neck rose up above the brow.

Thoth

Thoth was an ibis – a kind of stork (also a baboon), the god of sacred writings and wisdom. He and Isis were the gods of magicians. Thoth was the scribe of the gods and believed to be the inventor of writing and hieroglyphs. As such he was the patron god of scribes throughout ancient Egyptian history. Knowledge, magic, religion, law, science, and history were all credited in large measure to Thoth.

Originally associated with the moon in the earliest eras of ancient Egypt, Thoth was generally a counselor or advisor, rather than a primary actor, in the various mythologies. He was also the husband of Ma'at and was sometimes pictured as recording the results of her 'weighing of the heart' judgements. Together with her, he rode the solar barge and assisted Ra each day.

Although he may not have been a mighty hero in the myths and theology of ancient Egypt, the influence of Thoth was extensive. For example, as the husband of Ma'at, he was supposed to be able to rightly handle her powers. Scribes, of whom he was the universally acknowledged patron god, were the backbone of ancient Egyptian society. They were present everywhere in the civil administration and in the religious temple infrastructure. Not only did scribes record the daily affairs of Egyptian society, but they also were able to write the many spells and prayers that people depended upon to access the power of the gods.

One myth illustrates Thoth's subtle influence. Originally, there were only 360 days in the year. Nut, the sky goddess, was forbidden by Ra to have children during any of the days of the year. Thoth then gambled with the moon for some of her light, winning enough to add five extra days. Since those days were not part of the original year, Nut could bear children: Osiris, Isis, Set, and Nephthys.



Hathor

Hathor was the goddess of love, dance, and alcohol. She was represented by a cow or by a woman crowned with cow horns and holding a sun disc. One of the earliest major goddesses, Hathor was widely worshipped throughout the entirety of ancient Egyptian history – all the way through until Christianity finally displaced the last remnants of the religion. She had more temples built for her than any other deity in the pantheon, and by some accounts there were more than 350 lesser or local goddesses identified as manifestations of Hathor. Her prestige and power were shared by later goddesses, such as Isis, but Hathor remained an important figure in her own right.

As noted previously, she was the mother, wife, and daughter of Ra in some myths. She was also sometimes portrayed as the mother or wife of Horus. Osiris and Isis were invented during the Old Kingdom era, so Horus as their child was a new development. Hathor was originally his mother, and since Horus was the patron of the pharaohs she was identified with ancient Egyptian queens. Children were eagerly desired by the Egyptian people, but motherhood – especially pregnancy – was a dangerous undertaking. As a maternal goddess, Hathor held a place of high honor among the common people. Many of her lesser identities were portrayed as wives and mothers to other local gods and goddesses.

But Hathor had a violent and dangerous side as well. She was a daughter of Ra and as the Eye of Ra she once transformed into Sekhmet – a lioness goddess of war and wrath. She began to slaughter all the people in the world, so Ra was forced to dye a river of beer red and get her drunk. When she woke, she was once more the calm and gentle Hathor. Drinking beer, dancing, and playing a musical instrument called the sistrum – a sort of rattle – were common features of festivals in Hathor's honor, which were meant to keep her wrath appeased and invoke her favor.

Some scholars believe that Hathor best embodied the essentials and ideals of ancient Egyptian femininity. From her hair, which was praised for its great beauty, to her many roles as daughter, queen, wife, and mother, to her fierce and protective power as the Eye of Ra – she personified a broad range of female qualities. Only Isis could truly claim to be her rival in importance, yet Hathor was more often worshipped than her by ancient Egyptians from lofty pharaohs down to common housewives.

Heqet

Heqet, goddess of childbirth, was a frog. She was usually depicted in the form of a frog, which was a longstanding symbol of fertility. As Hapi was the god of the flood of the Nile, so Heqet was the goddess of the final stages of the flood cycle. This was the point in the year when the corn began to sprout. Eventually, the ancient Egyptians came to associate her with the last stages of childbirth – combining the fertility of newly growing corn and the final stage of the flood. She was also part of the Osiris myth where she breathed life into Horus at the time of his birth. Midwives were sometimes referred to as the servants of Heqet since they helped a child to be born into the world. It was common for expecting mothers to wear amulets that had a frog sitting on a lotus to invoke her aid and protection during childbirth.

Anubis

Anubis, often described as the jackal-headed god of the dead, was represented as a man with a wolf head. In early ancient Egyptian history, Anubis was the primary god of the dead, and the African golden wolf was known for digging up shallow desert graves and feeding on corpses. The ancient Egyptians began to invoke Anubis as a protector against his own kind, giving him the power of wolves to fight wolves and jackals.



In reading books or articles about Anubis, you will commonly find that he is said to have a jackal's head. This is because, until as recently as 2015 A.D, the African golden wolf was believed to be a local sub-species of the golden jackal, which typically lives in Europe and Asia. DNA testing has confirmed that gray wolves and coyotes are actually its closer relatives, although the golden wolf can crossbreed with golden jackals..

Regardless of whether he had the head of a jackal or a wolf, Anubis remained one of the most popular ancient Egyptian gods. Part of this is due to the fact that much of our knowledge of ancient Egypt comes from the discoveries made in tombs and pyramids. As a god of the dead, most tombs included him in some way. Although his roles changed over the centuries, his presence was constant. However, he was almost never an active character in ancient Egyptian mythology – he rarely had a role their stories.

Anubis was believed to rule the underworld until he was displaced from this role by Osiris. This shift seems to have started towards the end of the Old Kingdom, during Dynasty V, where hieroglyphs inscribed on the pyramid walls mention the deceased pharaoh sitting on Osiris' throne. Eventually, Anubis became the god of embalming, and was believed to guide souls through the underworld to the 'weighing of the heart' ceremony. In that ritual, he was the god who held the scales, weighing the heart of each Egyptian against the feather of Ma'at.

As the Osiris myth developed and grew in popularity, Anubis' part in the story became that of protector and preserver. Anubis helped to mummify Osiris' body and was gifted with his organs afterwards. In this way, he became the patron god of embalming. Another part of the Osiris myth tells how Anubis fought with Set to protect the body of Osiris from being taken. In order to fight, Set transformed himself into a leopard, but Anubis overcame him with a red-hot iron branding rod. After defeating Set, Anubis skinned him and wore his pelt as a warning against tomb-robbers. This account explains why leopards have spots; they are the burn marks from Anubis' branding rod. Priests who ministered to the dead would traditionally wear leopard skins in honor of Anubis' victory.

Ma'at

Ma'at, goddess of law and justice, was represented as a woman crowned with a feather. She represented order, harmony, law, justice, truth, and right living. Ma'at was a goal to be strived towards, an action to be done, and a standard to be judged by. As goal, she represented that which was good and proper in the world: balance among nature, man, and the gods. As an action, someone who behaved rightly was said to be a 'doer of Ma'at'. As a standard, Ma'at judged the heart of an Egyptian after death. If the weight of their heart was lighter than a feather, they were allowed to enter the afterlife. However, if they had sinned according to the standards of Ma'at, their hearts would be too heavy and they would remain trapped in the underworld, Duat. The

symbol of Ma'at is a feather because of this "weighing of the heart."

There were typically forty-two 'confessions' – along the lines of 'I have not stolen grain' or 'I have made none to weep' – that an ancient Egyptian soul was supposed to make in the presence of Ma'at. This number corresponds to the forty-two nomes – administrative states – of Egypt and represent the whole country. There were supposedly a jury of gods and goddesses, the patrons of each nome, who heard these



confessions along with Ma'at. From this, you can see how the ancient Egyptians believed that their actions throughout their lives mattered to the whole society and were judged by the deities that represented Egypt as a whole. This stands in contrast to Western cultures where the individual is commonly held responsible to either God or him/her-self, not to society, for their life choices.

The whole Egyptian cosmos depended on maintaining and strengthening Ma'at. She rode the solar barge with Ra and supported him on his daily journey. Surrounding the cosmos was a sea of chaos, which the gods held back by their power. Worship of the gods and goddesses by humans gave them the strength to prevail in this great struggle. The role of the pharaoh as the chief priest overseeing religion, the worship of gods by men – and the human primarily responsible for maintaining Ma'at – was therefore a critically essential position. Without pharaoh to guide them the world could be overwhelmed by chaos, and all would be lost. Therefore, Ma'at may be said, in some senses, to be the foundation or purpose for the entire ancient Egyptian civilization and religion.

Nut

Nut, goddess of the sky, was pictured as a woman with a rounded water-pot atop her head. She was originally the goddess of the nighttime sky, so the stars also belonged to her. She was often shown as a naked woman, sometimes covered with stars, arched over the earth on her fingertips and tiptoes. Her hands and feet touched the earth at the major compass points: north, south, east, and west. Ra's solar barge sailed across her back each day and she swallowed him at night. He then passed through her belly before being born the next day at dawn.

Many ancient Egyptians believed that Nut was a friend and helper for dead souls. She played a role in the Osiris myth that associated her with protecting the dead. It was common for the roof of tombs or inner surface of coffin lids to be painted with pictures of her, or else deep blue with stars, imagery that was linked to her role. These invoked her aid and protection for the soul of the deceased.

Together, Nut and Geb formed the boundaries of the world, separating everything that existed from the surrounding forces of chaos. The sky above and earth below were the parents of Osiris, Isis, Set, and Nephthys. The pharaohs traced their descent and kingship from Osiris and his son Horus. As they maintained and upheld Ma'at, they sustained the earth and sky and the good order of all things. Each of these elements served to reinforce the power of the pharaohs and their centrality as chief priests of the nation's worship of the gods.

Geb

Represented as a man with a goose atop his head, Geb was the god of earth, and his laughter was believed to cause earthquakes. He fathered or created snakes, which slither upon the earth and into holes in the ground. Crops needed his blessing in order to grow. When pictured with his wife, Nut, he was usually shown as lying down, while she arched over him on her tiptoes and fingertips.

The links between kingship and the gods begin to be clearly seen through the myths associated with Geb. He personifies the earth, receiving his being and authority from his father, Shu, and grandfather, Atum. In turn, he then later grants kingship and authority over the land to Osiris and Horus, his son and grandson. They then give the throne to human pharaohs, who are descended from them.



As near as we can tell, the goose on Geb's head was simply there to communicate the G sound in his name. This type of goose, a Whitefronted Goose, was apparently known for walking like a drunk. There is no known record of Geb having the appearance or aspect of a goose. Later in ancient Egyptian history, the god Amun was associated with a different breed of goose, the Nilegoose. This was because the Egyptians had a creation myth involving a Nilegoose.

Shu

Represented as a man wearing an ostrich feather in a simple headband, Shu was the god of the air, of the space between the sky and earth, and of winds. His. By separating the sky and earth—Nut and Geb—he made a space for material things to exist, including people. If he ever failed to hold Nut up, then everything would be crushed out of existence. One myth says that Ra ordered Shu to keep Nut separated from Geb, since she had defied his order to not bear children with the help of Thoth, who gambled with the moon.

Set

Set, god of the desert and the enemy, who killed his brother Osiris. He had a human body and the head of an animal nobody has been able to identify. Perhaps it was an aardvark or a giraffe, or even a donkey or a hippo! As a god of storms, deserts, violence, and foreigners, Set played a prominent role in various myths of ancient Egypt.

In earlier eras, Set was believed to be a violent but generally benevolent god. He supported Ra, riding with him on the solar barge and fighting Apep – the chaos serpent. Many Egyptians looked to him as a strong protector and patron, including pharaohs from Dynasties II, XVI, and XIX. His attributes served to provide a sense of balance – the desert Red Land with the fertile Black Land, Upper Egypt with Lower Egypt, order with chaos, and peace with violence. Civilized people may not always long to live in the wilderness, but they can accept and appreciate that there are positive aspects of the wild. Similarly, many ancient Egyptians saw Set as representative of the untamed, yet important, parts of the whole cosmos – especially his strength.

The mysterious nature of Set extends to his aspect – what is known to scholars as the set animal. Thus far, no known living creature corresponds to the set animal. It appears to have the snout of an aardvark, the ears or horns of a giraffe, the body of a canine – perhaps a fox or jackal – and a stiff, straight, forked tail. Many of the gods and goddesses carried a scepter, called a was-scepter, which symbolized their power over the forces of chaos. The scepter had a forked bottom, like the tail of a set animal, and a curved head that resembled the snout and ears of a set animal.

As the villain who murdered Osiris, and also the god of foreigners, the positive traits of Set were eventually eclipsed by his association with violence and chaos. Particularly after periods of foreign domination – such as the Third Intermediate Period – the national mood against foreigners fostered hostility towards Set. He remained popular in outflung regions and in oasis settlements where, as god of the desert, he held more power over the environment. But overall, he became the true villain in myths, the bringer of chaos, and was therefore reviled. He served as a foil to the glory and triumph of Horus, thereby representing in part how Egypt overcame her foreign conquerors.



Nephthys

Nephthys was represented by a woman with the combined hieroglyphs for house and basket on her head. She was a goddess of darkness, mourning, healing, and nursing. As the sister of Osiris, she helped Isis to find and mourn Osiris after Set murdered him. In this capacity, she was closely associated with death and mourning. Like Isis and Nut, she was believed to have special powers to help the dead souls on their journey to the afterlife. The mysteries and darkness associated with death were commonly linked to her, so that she remained a shadowy figure – a mourning priestess – unlike Isis.

In later portions of the Osiris myth, she was the nurse and protector of Horus the younger during his childhood. As such she was associated with healing and protection and seen as an approachable goddess by many of the common people of ancient Egypt.

Even her marriage to Set did not detract from her popularity. Set had been originally a powerful protector of Ra and one who governed the storms, deserts, and chaos. In those myths, he was a hero, and she was his honored wife. It wasn't until successive waves of foreigners conquered Egypt that he truly became the reviled villain of the Osiris myth. And to her further credit, in the Osiris myths, Nephthys helps Isis and safeguards Horus, clearly choosing them over her own husband, Set.

Ptah

This god was represented by a man with green skin, wrapped like a mummy, bearded, wearing a blue hat, and holding a staff with both hands.

The primary temple of Ptah was located in Memphis, which is on the southern side of modern-day Cairo, in the first nome of Lower Egypt. In the Old Kingdom, Memphis was sometimes used as the capital city, and the priests of Ptah played an important role in the major building projects, such as the pyramids, of that era. The creation myths involving Ptah were considered to be complimentary rather than contradictory to those of the Great Ennead. No records of theological conflicts between the two priesthoods exist. This example illustrates again how the ancient Egyptians were flexible when thinking about religion – both versions could be true – to whatever degree suited the worshipper.

Ptah was the patron god of craftsmen. A skilled craftsman can see the finished product in his mind before beginning to work with the raw materials. Similarly, the priesthood taught that Ptah created the world with his mind – he pictured everything and then spoke it into being with magic words. Magical power and intelligence were the primary forces behind creation in this myth. The pharaohs of the Old Kingdom dynasties were crowned at Ptah's temple in Memphis, which signifies his importance during that era.

Anyone who has tried to make something and found that doing so is much harder than it appears can appreciate how the act of creating something seems magical. This myth undoubtedly appealed to many of the ancient Egyptian artisans who labored to create beautiful and useful objects. Ptah was particularly honored by the craftsmen who worked to build the tombs, judging by the shrine they built for him at one of their worksites.

Ptah was also one of the approachable gods, one that the common people often prayed to for help. In fact, large ears were carved or painted on the walls of some of his temples to represent this belief. One of Ptah's titles was: Ptah who listens to prayers. He was also combined with numerous other gods, which reflected his popularity throughout the centuries.



Tefnut

Tefnut is represented as a woman with a lion's head. She was the goddess of moisture, rain, and dew. Her aspect reflected an ancient Egyptian perception of women—that they could be kind and gentle, or fierce and wrathful. One story tells of a time that Shu and Tefnut argued, so she transformed into a fierce lioness, who attacked anyone that came near her. Only Thoth was wise enough to find a way to calm her, whereupon she returned to Egypt from Nubia. Tefnut and Shu married, and she later gave birth to Geb and Nut.

Khnum

Khnum was represented by a man with a ram's head. As the god who guarded the source of the Nile River, Khnum was held in high esteem. With the flooding of the Nile came deposits of clay and silt. The mythology of Khnum held that he was a potter, who formed the bodies of children before placing them in their mother's wombs. Certain mythological traditions held that he was the father of Ra. Heqet was sometimes believed to be his consort.

Serapis

Serapis was represented by a Greek (not Egyptian) man, bearded and long haired, with a modius (basket-shaped hat) on his head.

Arriving late on the scene of the ancient Egyptian pantheon, Serapis was introduced by the first Greek ruler of Egypt, Ptolemy I. After the death of Alexander the Great, his general, Ptolemy I, took his forces to the wealthy province of Egypt to establish his own kingdom. Along the way, he stole a statue of a god from a temple in the city of Sinope in northern Turkey. When he arrived in Egypt, it was examined by priests and declared to be the god Serapis. From that point forward, he was worshipped as the patron god of the Greek dynasty that ruled Egypt until the Romans conquered. And after their conquest, as was their custom with Greek gods, the Romans adopted Serapis into their own pantheon.

In the context of the Egyptian pantheon, Serapis combined the personas of Osiris and Apis – the bull god of Memphis, who was believed to be connected with Ptah or Osiris depending on the myth. Apis had been identified as a son of Hathor since the earliest eras of ancient Egyptian history. As a manifestation of Osiris, he was the husband of Isis. Therefore, Serapis combined in himself the roles of son and husband to two of the most important goddesses – Hathor and Isis. For the Greek citizens living in Egypt, the modius was a symbol of death and the underworld, which helped link Serapis to Osiris in their minds.

Essentially, Serapis was a god created or worshipped for political reasons – to expand and legitimize the power of the Greeks as they ruled over Egypt. The ancient Egyptians' longstanding belief that gods could have many forms or aspects allowed the Greeks to promote Serapis to national prominence. As the popularity of Serapis among the Greeks rose, Isis became the most important deity of Egyptian origin during this period. Her original role as wife of Osiris was reprised as the wife of Serapis. She had both Egyptian and Greek worshippers, and as Greek culture dominated the Mediterranean cultures for the next few centuries, her worship spread far and wide.

Minor Deities

- Tawaret, the hippopotamus goddess, was another goddess of childbirth.
- Wepwawet was the jackal god of war and funerals.
- Selket, the scorpion-goddess, was the helper of women in childbirth.



- ❑ Bast was the cat goddess of the home.
- ❑ Chons was the moon god who lost his light while gambling with Thoth.
- ❑ Sobek was a crocodile who was worshipped as an ancient creator god.
- ❑ Apis was a real live bull that was supposed to be an incarnation of the creator-god Ptah, just as the Pharaoh was supposed to be an incarnation of Ra. There were dozens of Apis bulls over the centuries.
- ❑ Sekmet, associated with war, destruction, healing, and protection, was represented by a lioness-headed woman.

JUDGMENT OF GOD

The story of Exodus pits a bunch of helpless slaves against the mighty Egyptian empire. Moses, the son of a slave woman, goes up against the god-king of the greatest nation on Earth. Pharaoh had an army of chariots at his command. Moses had a shepherd's staff. Moses defied Pharaoh and all the other gods of Egypt. Moses said that a God that the Egyptians had never heard of had demanded the release of His people. You know the rest of the story, but here's a quick review!

The first plague struck the Nile, turning it to blood, and it judged Hapi and Khnum (or Sothis), god of floodwaters. The Nile formed the life blood of Egyptian civilization (the Egyptians dug near the Nile for drinking water), so naturally the Egyptians worshipped it as a god. For Yahweh to turn the Nile into blood was to jeopardize all of Egyptian society as their main source of life became defiled and deadly. To save the river, they would have had to pray to its waters to heal themselves, but obviously the Nile was helpless to do so. This demonstrated the power of Moses' God right from the beginning.

The second plague drove all the frogs out of the river. The Egyptians might have considered praying to Heqet, frog goddess of childbirth. It didn't do any good, though. Pharaoh had to ask Moses to get rid of them all. Moses spoke, and the frogs all died. The Egyptians piled them up in heaps where they rotted. When the frogs died, the Egyptians had to burn whole piles of these sacred animals. Heqet was shown to have no power even over her own sacred symbol.

The third plague filled the land with gnats, and it (along with the plagues of flies, livestock, boils, hail, and locusts) judged Thoth and Isis, god and goddess and god of magic. The magicians of Egypt were able to duplicate the first two plagues, somehow, but they could not conjure up gnats or any of the later plagues. They probably prayed to Thoth, god of magicians. It didn't do much good. Even the magicians had to admit that this was the finger of God.

The fourth plague filled the land with swarms of flies. This was the first plague where only the Egyptians were troubled. The land of Goshen was protected by God – no flies! The Egyptian gods couldn't protect Egyptians, while God clearly protected the Israelites. The Bible says that “the land was laid waste” by unknown insects harmful to vegetation and humans. Probably little normal work could go on; perhaps they brought diseases. The idols of health (principally Isis) and crops (Osiris) were made to look foolish.

The fifth plague struck all the livestock of Egypt with disease, and it judged Ptah (represented by the Apis bull), Hathor (represented by the cow), or Khnum (represented by the ram). Hathor's and Khnum's sacred symbols, cows and rams, died in large numbers, reflecting dishonor on these deities and proving their helplessness. This was a severe blow to the wealth and prestige of Egyptian culture as well, for animals were very valuable. The priests may have cried out to Hathor or Apis or Khnum, the bull god, but it did no good.



When the sixth plague brought boils on all the Egyptians, Pharaoh's magicians could not even stand up because of their painful sores. It judged Isis, goddess of healing.

The seventh plague devastated the land with hail. Together with the plague of locusts, it judged Osiris, god of crops. The people may also have begged for protection from Horus, god of the sky, or from his evil uncle Set, who was supposed to be responsible for stormy weather. Nothing worked. Again, this is a blow to the wealth of Egypt: valuable crops are destroyed.

The eighth plague, locusts, again demonstrated how powerless Osiris was. He could not save their farms, not even the important crops of wheat and spelt.

Ra, the sun god, and all his helper gods and goddesses could not overcome the three days of darkness when God sent the ninth plague. Amon-Re, the sun god, was one of their chief deities, and the pharaoh himself was supposed to be the sun god incarnate. By inflicting darkness on the Egyptians, God proved that neither Amon-Re nor the pharaoh had any power over the sun. The sun-god was no god at all. Also affected would be Mut (eye of the sun) and Nut (sky goddess). Also, in a land where the sun shone so brightly day after week after month after season after year after decade after century, this must have been truly terrifying plague for the ancient Egyptians!

Even Pharaoh could not save his firstborn child from the power of the angel of death, which devastated Egypt in the final (tenth) plague. The plague resulted in the deaths of both firstborn sons and cattle. In the Ancient World, the firstborn male child represented the first strength of the father. Oldest sons inherited all of their father's estate and were the leaders of their clans. To kill a man's firstborn was to kill his best hope for the future. This was a huge blow to human pride, and also to family emotions and relationships. It judged Horus, first divine Pharaoh, and the son and heir of Osiris. Likewise, the son of Pharaoh, who would have become the next pharaoh and so the next "Horus incarnate," was killed. The first sign of Pharaoh's strength and the pride of his house was torn from him.

All these plagues demonstrate God's power. The gods of Egypt were helpless before the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Pharaoh—though they called him divine—could not protect his first-born son from the wrath of the Almighty. The last plague led to the Passover meal, which points ahead to a power even greater: God's triumph over our sin on the Cross. When God delivered His people out of bondage, He put every power of Egypt to shame. Not only did His people go free; they took the treasures of Egypt with them.

Conclusion

All these things took place as examples for us. We live in a different world today, but the human craving for idols hasn't changed. We don't worship statues anymore, but our hearts are still longing for something bigger than we are that we can turn to for meaning and control. The Egyptians bowed themselves down to frogs and dung beetles. What is it that you are tempted to worship? Video games? Popularity? Money?