



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

ISIS AND OSIRIS

From Plutarch, On Isis and Osiris

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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ISIS AND OSIRIS

A retelling of the core myth from Plutarch, On Isis and Osiris.

THE FIVE DAYS

The Egyptian year once had three hundred and sixty days. Helios, the sun god, had cursed the goddess Rhea: no child of hers would be born in any month or year. But Hermes, who loved her, won light from the Moon at draughts and from it made five new days at the year's end. On the first of those days Osiris was born; on the second Arueris, whom Plutarch identifies with Apollo and says some call the elder Horus; on the third Typhon (Set); on the fourth Isis; and on the fifth Nephthys.

OSIRIS, KING OF EGYPT

When Osiris became king, he found the Egyptians living in a destitute and brutish manner. He freed them from their savage ways, showed them the fruits of cultivation, gave them laws, and taught them to honour the gods. Then he travelled over the whole earth to civilise it. He did not conquer by force of arms but won most peoples over by persuasion, reason, music, and song. Isis remained in control while he was gone, and Typhon made no move against him while she kept vigilant watch.

TYPHON'S CHEST

When Osiris returned, Typhon formed a plot with seventy-two confederates and with Aso, a queen of Ethiopia. He secretly took the measure of Osiris's body, had a beautiful chest made to match it, and brought it to a banquet. Typhon promised it as a gift to whichever guest could lie inside and fit it exactly. They tried it one by one, and it fitted none of them. Then Osiris lay down in it. At once the conspirators ran forward, slammed down the lid, fastened it with nails and molten lead, and carried the chest to the river, sending it out to sea through the Tanitic Mouth. Plutarch says the deed took place on the seventeenth day of the month Athyr.

THE SEARCH AND THE TREE

When the news reached Isis, she cut off one of her locks, put on mourning garments, and wandered through the country asking everyone she met. Children who had seen what happened told her which mouth of the river the chest had passed through. The sea carried it to Byblos, where the waves set it down among heather. The plant grew into a great and beautiful trunk around the chest until it was hidden inside. The king marvelled at the tree, cut down the part that enclosed the chest, and used it as a pillar to support the roof of his house.

ISIS AT BYBLOS

Rumour of these things brought Isis to Byblos. She sat down by a spring, weary and in tears, and spoke to no one except the queen's maidservants. She greeted them kindly, braided their hair, and imparted to them a wondrous fragrance from her own body. When the queen saw her maidservants and smelled the scent, she sent for the stranger and made her nurse to her infant

son.

At night Isis burned away with flame all that was mortal in the child, while she herself, changed into a swallow, flew about the pillar and cried out her grief. The queen spied this and screamed aloud, breaking the spell; the boy was robbed of the immortality that would have been his.

Then Isis revealed herself and asked for the pillar that supported the roof. It was given to her. She cut away the wood that surrounded the chest and laid it bare. She wrapped the wood in fine linen, poured perfume upon it, and entrusted it to the king and queen; Plutarch says the people of Byblos continued to venerate it in a shrine of Isis. Isis then threw herself upon the coffin with a terrible wail.

THE FOURTEEN PIECES

Isis returned with the chest and placed it in a hidden place while she went to Horus, who was being reared at Buto. But Typhon, hunting by night in the light of the moon, came upon it. He recognised Osiris's body, tore it into fourteen parts, and scattered them in different places.

Isis searched for the pieces through the marshes in a boat made of papyrus. Out of fear or reverence, the crocodiles did not harm those who sailed in such boats. Plutarch gives more than one explanation for the many tombs of Osiris in Egypt. According to one tradition, Isis held a funeral for each part where she found it; according to another, she distributed effigies of Osiris among different cities.

THE LOST PART

One part she never recovered. Typhon had thrown the phallus into the river, and the lepidotus, the phagrus, and the oxyrhynchus fish had fed on it; Plutarch says the Egyptians were especially careful to abstain from those fish. In place of what was lost, Isis fashioned a replica and consecrated it, and the Egyptians celebrated a festival in its honour.

HORUS AND OSIRIS

Later, Osiris came to Horus from the other world and trained him for the fight against Typhon. He asked Horus what he thought the noblest deed was, and Horus answered: to avenge one's father and mother for evil done to them. Osiris then asked what animal was most useful in battle, and Horus answered that it was the horse, because it was best for overtaking and destroying a fleeing enemy.

THE WAR WITH TYPHON

Horus fought Typhon in a battle that lasted many days, and he won. He handed Typhon over to Isis in chains, but Isis did not destroy him. She loosed his bonds and set him free. Horus, enraged, laid hands on his mother and tore the royal diadem from her head; Hermes then placed upon her a headdress shaped like the head of a cow. Typhon brought a charge against Horus, claiming that he was illegitimate. With Hermes pleading his case, the gods judged Horus legitimate, and Typhon was defeated in two further battles. Plutarch then relates that Osiris consorted with Isis after his death and that she bore Harpocrates, prematurely born and weak in his lower limbs.

OSIRIS AND ISIS

Plutarch does not present these stories as simple literal history. He urges his reader to approach the tales reverently and philosophically, and says that Isis preserved representations of her wanderings, struggles, wisdom, and courage in sacred rites so that they would not be forgotten. He also reports that the soul of Isis was associated with the Dog-star, called Sothis by the Egyptians. In Plutarch's account, the myth remains inseparable from ritual, mourning, interpretation, and the search for meaning behind the sacred story.

SOURCE NOTE

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