

THE GREAT MOTHER – GODDESS ISIS

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Mythology

Isis is the Daughter of Nut and Geb, sister and wife to her beloved Osiris and sister to Nephthys and Set. Horus is son to Isis & Osiris. Theirs is a tempestuous family relationship with power struggles and destruction at its heart. This sets the story for Isis to enter into the depths of despair and pain as she journeys to right the recovery and rebirth of her dead husband and enter into battle with her brother Set. This mythology full of emotion, fertility, magic and rebirth set the stage for one of the truly great goddesses of human history to weave her story upon the world. Revered in her own beloved Egypt and worshipped throughout the world, Isis is one of the first, most ancient of Great Goddesses we know who set the mythology of great mother, fertility goddess and protector of women for many others to follow.

The myths of ISIS and Osiris are well known. Told in different cultures with different versions of the story, the Hellenized myth is as follows.

Isis and Osiris, brother and sister of parents Nut and Geb, had a great love for each other. So great was their love, it is said that they made love within their mother's womb. They married and Osiris became king and Isis the Queen of all the land of Egypt. So greatly was Osiris loved by the people and so great his civilization of the land, that his brother Set coveted his brother's kingdom and planned his demise.

Set's plot to overthrow the King saw him devise a plan where Osiris' body measurements were taken and a most beautiful sarcophagus built. So great was its beauty that Set explained to a group of visiting guests that whosoever shall fit its dimensions perfectly, it shall belong to them. As all the guest found no fit, Osiris was asked to take a turn which he begrudgingly did, only to have the lid slammed shut, bolted in place and sealed with molten lead. The coffin was then thrown into the Nile and floated out to sea.

When Isis heard of the tragic news, she went in search of him.

After three days afloat, the sarcophagus washed up in Byblos and came to rest in a tamarisk tree. Magically the tree grew up around the chest, hiding it from view. One day the King of Byblos saw the wondrous tree and decided to cut it down and use it as a support pillar for his palace. Isis had been tipped off about the tree in Byblos and came in search of it. The King and Queen handed over the chest and Isis opened it to find the body of her drowned husband. She journeyed home to Egypt and hid the sarcophagus but Set found it and in an enraged state, slashed the body of Osiris into fourteen parts and scattered them far and wide across the kingdom.

On hearing of the desecration of her husband's body, Isis once again set out to retrieve the parts of Osiris' body. She reassembled his body once again, except for the penis which it is said was devoured by fish. So Isis fashioned a golden likeness of the phallus of Osiris, consecrated it in his honour and attached it to his body. Breathing life into his nostrils, he returned from the underworld and began to instruct their son Horus to seek his revenge. Then the battle between Horus and Set began. This war raged for many days and nights,

but ultimately Horus was victorious and Set was placed in chains. But when Isis saw her brother thus chained, she felt great pity for him and let him go, enraging her son. Horus ripped the crown from his mother's head, but Thoth replaced it with a headdress of cow's horns.

The Egyptian stories tell of Isis reattaching the penis of Horus and resurrecting him from the Tuat or underworld and impregnating herself with their son Horus who she raised in hiding until old enough to avenge his father's death upon Seth and himself ascend to the throne.

Whatever version of the myth, the themes of death and resurrection or rebirth are commonly associated with Isis. She is also the Goddess associated with the roles of great mother, wet-nurse of the dead, bringer of new life as the midwife and protector of women giving birth. She brings the Nile flood each year and is equated with the snake-goddess Renenutet, the goddess of harvest. She is Mistress of life as magician and protector as well as Mistress of Heaven. In the Hellenistic and roman periods, these roles were simplified into three: protector of women and marriage, goddess of maternity and the new-born, guarantor of the fertility of fields and the abundance of harvests. Associated with Demeter and Aphrodite as well as Persephone.

She is also known as the winged bird goddess of antiquity and quite possibly her origins are some 6,500 BCE old as she was associated with the original Bird of Prey Goddess which developed into Isis. The Bird of Prey Goddess was symbolised by the vulture, the owl and other birds of prey and carrion eaters (as these birds would 'tend to the dead' eating corpses). The connection is also made to these birds of prey in relation to their keen eyesight, used to hunt and catch prey, as well as their lofty perspective which is 'all-seeing'

Isis is the feminine archetype for creation – the goddess of fertility and motherhood. She has gone by many names and played any roles in history and mythology – as goddess and female creator.

Her name literally means *female of throne*, i.e. *Queen of the throne*. Her original headdress was an empty throne chair belonging to her murdered husband, Osiris. As the personification of the throne, she was an important source of the Pharaoh's power. Her cult was popular throughout Egypt, but the most important sanctuaries were at Giza and at Behbeit El-Hagar in the Nile delta.

The hieroglyph for her name originally used meant (female) of flesh, i.e. mortal, and she may simply have represented deified, real, queens. The most commonly used name for this deity, Isis, is a Greek corruption of the Egyptian name; and its pronunciation as *eye-sis* is a further corruption by English speakers.

The true Egyptian pronunciation is unknown, as Egyptian hieroglyphs only recorded consonants, and left out most of the vowels. The Egyptian hieroglyphics for her name are commonly transliterated as *jst*; as a convenience, Egyptologists pronounce that as *ee-set*.

