

# Class Set

## The Story of Isis, Osiris and Seth



While Ra yet reigned upon earth as the first Pharaoh of Egypt, Thoth, the god of wisdom and magic whom he had created at the beginning of the world, uttered a prophecy.

"If Nut, the Lady of the Heavens, bears a son, he will one day rule in Egypt."

"Nut shall never bear a son, nor any children at all!" said Ra angrily. "No child of Nut shall take my throne from me! Lo, now I lay this curse upon her: she shall give birth to no child on any day in any year—no, nor in the nighttime either. I have spoken, and what I have decreed cannot be altered."

Nut was heartbroken at this. Yet Thoth had said that her son should rule in Egypt, and he was the wisest of all the gods. So she went to Thoth, who loved her, and begged for his aid.

"Grant me your love, and I will show you how your wish may be fulfilled—and yet Ra's curse will remain unbroken," said Thoth.

Nut consented readily to this, and Thoth soon devised a clever scheme. He visited Khonsu the Moon-god and challenged him to a game of draughts. Khonsu was a great gambler, and soon the stakes were high indeed—but highest of all on the Moon's side, for he was wagering his own light. And he had no chance of beating clever Thoth, who went on playing—and winning—until he had won enough of the Moon's light from Khonsu to make five extra days. These days he fitted in between the end of the old year and the beginning of the new. Before this there had only been three hundred and sixty days in each year: that number remained the same, but the five days between each year set the calendar right.

But since his match with Thoth, Khonsu the moon has not had enough light to shine throughout the month, but dwindles into darkness and then grows to his full glory again; for he had lost the light needed to make five whole days.



Here, now, were five days that were not any days in any year. On the first of these days Osiris, the eldest son of Nut, was born, and the second day was set aside to be the birthday of Horus the Elder. On the third day the second son of Nut was born, dark Seth, the lord of evil. On the fourth her daughter Isis first saw the light, and her second daughter Nephthys on the fifth. In this way the curse of Ra was both fulfilled and defeated: for the days on which the children of Nut were born belonged to no year.

When Osiris was born there were many signs and wonders. A great voice from heaven was heard crying, "The Lord of All comes forth into the light!" In Thebes a man called Pamyles heard a voice coming from the temple of Ra which bade him proclaim the birth of Egypt's greatest king, Osiris, the savior of mankind. By the advice of Thoth, Nut entrusted the baby Osiris to Pamyles to bring up: but Thoth himself instructed both Osiris and Isis in all the wisdom of the gods and in the hidden lore of which he was the master.



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# Class Set



Isis learned quickly, and also persuaded Khonsu to teach her all the mysteries of the Moon, so that she became the greatest magician that Egypt has even known.

When they were grown up, Isis and Osiris married, and Nephthys married Seth; and following their example, the human Pharaohs of Egypt ever afterward married their own sisters.

Eventually Ra ceased to reign as a king upon earth and took his place in the heavens where, day by day, he crossed over from the east to the west in the likeness of the Sun itself, and night by night he passed under the earth through the twelve regions called the Duat which the spirits of the dead also must pass if they would win to Ra's eternal kingdom.

As soon as Ra had taken his place in the heavens, Osiris became Pharaoh of Egypt with Isis as his Queen. They built the great city of Thebes as their capital and ruled well and wisely.

Not all men, even in Egypt, followed Osiris, however. There was evil awake in the world to strive against good—and in Egypt that evil found its leader in Seth, the younger brother of Osiris and Isis.

Seth would have rebelled and seized the throne while Osiris was away from Egypt, but Isis kept such good watch that he knew he would have no success. So he pretended to be a faithful subject and loving brother of the Pharaoh and his Queen. Secretly Seth gathered seventy-two wicked men, all of whom were ready to join in a conspiracy against Osiris.



As soon as Osiris returned, Seth invited him to a great feast which he had prepared in honor of his brother. Suspecting nothing, Osiris came unattended and was welcomed by Seth and his seventy-two companions. It was a very splendid feast during which each of the guests vied with the others to do honor to Osiris. At last, as it was drawing to a close, Seth said, "We have all paid our tributes of praise to my beloved brother, the good god Pharaoh Osiris. Now, to end the feast, I have a gift for one of my guests—but this time I do not know who it will be!"

Seth clapped his hands and his servants brought into the hall a most beautiful chest made of cedar wood from Lebanon and ebony from Ethiopia, inlaid with gold and silver, with ivory and lapis lazuli, and with precious stones.

When it was placed in the midst of the guests, the servants retired, the doors of the hall

were shut, and Seth spoke again.

"Here is my gift to one of my guests. It shall be his who fits most perfectly into the chest!"

All were admiring its beauty with cries of delight; and now they began one by one to see how well each of them fitted into it. But some were too tall and some were too short, some too fat and others too thin.

"Let me try," said Osiris at last. He stepped into the chest and lay down—and it fitted him perfectly, for Seth had secretly obtained the exact measurements of his brother's body.



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# Class Set



"It is mine!" cried Osiris. "See, it fits me like the skin I was born in!"

"It is certainly yours," answered Seth. "And it is fit to be the coffin you shall die in!"

So saying he slammed down the lid, and with feverish haste he and his evil companions nailed it up tightly, filled every crack with molten lead, and cast it secretly into the Nile. It was the time of the Inundation, and the swift waters hurried the chest out through the Delta and into the sea near the city of Tanis. Away it went over the waves until it came at last to the city of Byblos in Syria, the oldest city in the world. There a great wave lifted it over the cliffs and cast it into the heart of a young tamarisk tree growing near the shore. Speedily the tamarisk clasped it with its branches and grew around it until the chest was completely hidden in its trunk.

Isis had always known that Seth was filled with evil and jealousy, but kindly Osiris would not believe in his brother's wickedness. Isis knew as soon as her husband was dead, though no one told her, and she fled into the marshes of the delta carrying the baby Horus with her. She found shelter on a little island where the goddess Buto lived, and entrusted the divine child to her. As a further safeguard against Seth, Isis loosed the island from its foundations, and let it float so that no one could tell where to find it.

Back and forth over the land of Egypt wandered Isis, but never a trace could she find of the chest in which lay the body of Osiris. She asked all whom she met, but no one had seen it - and in this matter her magic powers could not help her.

Finally Isis found the tree that had grown around Osiris's casket. The king of Byblos had cut down the tree and used it as a pillar in his palace. After revealing herself as the goddess Isis, the King sent for his workmen, and the pillar was taken down and split open. Inside rested the coffin of Osiris; and when this had been lifted out Isis poured perfume on the pillar, and said, "Place this in your most sacred temple, and it will bring pilgrims to Byblos for many ages. For this wood has held the body of a god."

In time Isis floated up the Nile to the island where Buto was still guarding the infant Horus, and she hid the coffin among the reeds of the Delta until she could perform the funeral rites of Osiris.

However, her quest was by no means at an end. For on the very next night Seth and his followers came hunting through the darkness and the moonlight—for Seth best loved the hours of darkness when evil things wander the earth. As ill luck would have it, he came to Buto's island that seemed now to be part of the firm earth. Isis hid with Horus deep down among the reeds and escaped his notice. By the light of the moon Seth saw the chest of cedar wood inlaid with ebony and ivory, with gold and silver, and recognized it.

With a great howl of rage and hate he snatched the body of his murdered brother out of



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# Class Set



the chest, tore it into fourteen pieces, and scattered them far and wide over the land of Egypt.

"It is not possible to destroy the body of a god!" cried Seth. "Yet I have done it - for I have destroyed Osiris!" His laughter echoed through the land, and all who heard it trembled and hid.

Seth went on his way laughing. Isis crept out of her hiding place, entrusted Horus once more to Buto, and set out again in search of the pieces of her husband's body.

As she rowed hither and thither on the Nile in her boat made of papyrus, the very crocodiles took pity on her and let her pass—and ever since anyone sailing on the Nile in a papyrus boat has been safe from the crocodiles, who think that it is still Isis searching for the last piece of the body of Osiris.

One piece only she did not recover, for it had been eaten by certain impious fishes; and their kinds were accursed ever afterwards, and no Egyptian would touch or eat them. Isis, however, did not bury any of the pieces in the places where the tombs and shrines of Osiris stood. She gathered the pieces together, rejoined them by magic, and by magic made a likeness of the missing piece so that Osiris was complete. Then she caused the body to be embalmed and hidden away in a place of which she alone knew. And after this the spirit of Osiris passed into Amenti to rule over the dead until the last great battle, when his son Horus should slay Seth and Osiris would return to earth once more.

Osiris rested quietly in his grave, which (since Seth could no longer disturb it) Isis admitted was on the island of Philae, the most sacred place of all, in the Nile a few miles upstream from Elephantine. But the Egyptians believed that the Last Battle was still to come - and that Horus would defeat Seth in this also. And when Seth was destroyed forever, Osiris would rise from the dead and return to earth, bringing with him all those who had been his own faithful followers. And for this reason the Egyptians embalmed dead and set the bodies away beneath towering pyramids of stone and deep in the tomb chambers of western Thebes, so that the blessed souls returning from Amenti should find them ready to enter again, and in them to live forever on earth under the good god Osiris, Isis his queen and their son Horus.



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