

Isis and Osiris

excerpted from the *Moralia* by Plutarch (1stC Greek historian); tr. F.C. Babbitt, 1936, capp. 12-15, 18-20 [§351B-359B]; in-text comments in square brackets by Christopher Monroe; for full text, see the website *Lacus Curtius*: <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Isis_and_Osiris*/home.html>

12 Here follows the story related in the briefest possible words with the omission of everything that is merely unprofitable or superfluous:

They say that the Sun, when he became aware of Rhea's intercourse with Cronus,⁵⁹ invoked a curse upon her that she should not give birth to a child in any month or year; but Hermes [equivalent to the Egyptian Thoth], being enamoured of the goddess, consorted with her. Later, playing at draughts with the moon, he won from her the seventieth part of each of her periods of illumination,⁶⁰ and from all the winnings he composed five days, and intercalated them as an addition to the three hundred and sixty days. The Egyptians even now call these five days intercalated⁶¹ and celebrate them as the birthdays of the gods. They relate that on the first of these days Osiris was born, and at the hour of his birth a voice issued forth saying, "The Lord of All advances to the light." But some relate that a certain Pamyles,⁶² while he was drawing water in Thebes, heard a voice issuing from the shrine of Zeus, which bade him proclaim with a loud voice that a mighty and beneficent king, Osiris, had been born; and for this Cronus entrusted to him the child Osiris, which he brought up. It is in his honour that the festival of Pamyliia is celebrated, a festival which resembles the phallic processions. On the second of these days Arueris was born whom they call Apollo, and some call him also the elder Horus. On the third day Typhon [equivalent to the Egyptian Seth] was born, but not in due season or manner, but with a blow he broke through his mother's side and leapt forth. On the fourth day Isis was born in the regions that are ever moist;⁶³ and on the fifth Nephthys, to whom they give the name of Finality⁶⁴ and the name of Aphroditê, and some also the name of Victory. There is also a tradition that Osiris and Arueris were sprung from the Sun, Isis from Hermes,⁶⁵ and Typhon and Nephthys from Cronus. For this reason the kings considered the third of the intercalated days as inauspicious, and transacted no business on that day, nor did they give any attention to their bodies until nightfall. They relate, moreover, that Nephthys became the wife of Typhon;⁶⁶ but Isis and Osiris were enamoured of each other⁶⁷ and consorted together in the darkness of the womb before their birth. Some say that Arueris came from this union and was called the elder Horus by the Egyptians, but Apollo by the Greeks.

⁵⁹ Cf. *Moralia*, 429F; Diodorus, I.13.4; Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evang.* II.1.1-32.

⁶⁰ Plutarch evidently does not reckon the ἑνῆ καὶ νέα (the (p)31 day when the old moon changed to the new) as a period of illumination, since the light given by the moon at that time is practically negligible. An intimation of this is given in his *Life of Solon*, chap. xxv (92C). Cf. also Plato, *Cratylus*, 409B, and the scholium on Aristophanes' *Clouds*, 1186. One seventieth of 12 lunar months of 29 days each (348 days) is very nearly five days.

⁶¹ Cf. Herodotus, II.4.

⁶² What is known about Pamyles (or Paamyles or Pammyles), a Priapean god of the Egyptians, may be found in Kock, *Com. Att. Frag.* II. p289. Cf. also 365B, *infra*.

⁶³ The meaning is doubtful, but Isis as the goddess of vegetation, of the Nile, and of the sea, might very naturally be associated with moisture.

⁶⁴ Cf. 366B and 375B, *infra*.

⁶⁵ Cf. 352A, *supra*.

⁶⁶ Cf. 375B, *infra*.

⁶⁷ Cf. 373B, *infra*.

13 One of the first acts related of Osiris in his reign was to deliver the Egyptians from their destitute and brutish manner of living.⁶⁸ This he did by showing them the fruits of cultivation, by giving them laws, and by teaching them to honour the gods. Later he travelled over the whole earth civilizing it⁶⁹ without the slightest need of arms, but most of the peoples he won over to his way by the charm of his persuasive discourse combined with song and all manner of music. Hence the Greeks came to identify him with Dionysus.⁷⁰

During his absence the tradition is that Typhon attempted nothing revolutionary because Isis, who was in control, was vigilant and alert; but when he returned home Typhon contrived a treacherous plot against him and formed a group of conspirators seventy-two in number. He had also the co-operation of a queen from Ethiopia⁷¹ who was there at the time and whose name they report as Aso. Typhon, having secretly measured Osiris's body and having made ready a beautiful chest of corresponding size artistically ornamented, caused it to be brought into the room where the festivity was in progress. The company was much pleased at the sight of it and admired it greatly, whereupon Typhon jestingly promised to present it to the man who should find the chest to be exactly his length when he lay down in it. They all tried it in turn, but no one fitted it; then Osiris got into it and lay down, and those who were in the plot ran to it and slammed down the lid, which they fastened by nails from the outside and also by using molten lead. Then they carried the chest to the river and sent it on its way to the sea through the Tanitic Mouth [**in the Nile Delta**]. Wherefore the Egyptians even to this day name this mouth the hateful and execrable. Such is the tradition. They say also that the date on which this deed was done was the seventeenth day of Athyr,⁷² when the sun passes through Scorpion, and in the twenty-eighth year of the reign of Osiris; but some say that these are the years of his life and not of his reign.⁷³

14 The first to learn of the deed and to bring to men's knowledge an account of what had been done were the Pans and Satyrs who lived in the region around Chemmis,⁷⁴ and so, even to this day, the sudden confusion and consternation of a crowd is called a panic.⁷⁵ Isis, when the tidings reached her, at once cut off one of her tresses and put on a garment of mourning in a place where the city still bears the name of Kopto.⁷⁶ Others think that the name means deprivation, for they also express "deprive" by means of "koptein."⁷⁷ But Isis wandered everywhere at her wits' end; no one whom she approached did she fail to address, and even when she met some little children she asked them about the chest. As it happened, they had seen it, and they told her the mouth of the river through which the friends of Typhon had launched the coffin into the sea. Wherefore the Egyptians think that little children possess the power of prophecy,⁷⁸ and they try to divine the future from the portents which they find in children's words, especially when children are playing about in holy places and crying out whatever chances to come into their minds.

⁶⁸ Cf. Diodorus, I.13-16.

⁶⁹ Cf. Diodorus, I.17.1-3; 18.5-6; 20.3-4.

⁷⁰ Cf. 362B, 364D-F, *infra*, and Herodotus, II.42 and 144.

⁷¹ Cf. 366C, *infra*.

⁷² November 13. Cf. also 366D and 367E, *infra*.

⁷³ Cf. 367F, *infra*.

⁷⁴ Cf. Herodotus, II.91 and 156, and Diodorus, I.18.2.

⁷⁵ Cf. E. Harrison, *Classical Review*, vol. XL pp6 ff.

⁷⁶ Cf. Aelian, *De Natura Animalium*, X.23.

⁷⁷ The word kopto, "strike," "cut," is used in the middle voice in the derived meaning "mourn" (*i.e.* to beat oneself as a sign of mourning). Occasionally the active voice also means "cut off," and from this use Plutarch derives the meaning "deprive."

⁷⁸ Cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Oratio XXXII* p364 D (660 Reiske), and Aelian, *De Natura Animalium*, XI.10, *ad fin.*

They relate also that Isis, learning that Osiris in his love had consorted with her sister⁷⁹ through ignorance, in the belief that she was Isis, and seeing the proof of this in the garland of melilote which he had left with Nephthys, sought to find the child; for the mother, immediately after its birth, had exposed it because of her fear of Typhon. And when the child had been found, after great toil and trouble, with the help of dogs which led Isis to it, it was brought up and became her guardian and attendant, receiving the name of Anubis, and it is said to protect the gods just as dogs protect men.⁸⁰

15 Thereafter Isis, as they relate, learned that the chest had been cast up by the sea near the land of Byblus⁸¹ [in Lebanon] and that the waves had gently set it down in the midst of a clump of heather.... [Capp. 15-17, which tell of Osiris being brought back from Lebanon, skipped]

18 As they relate, Isis proceeded to her son Horus, who was being reared in Buto,⁸⁶ and bestowed the chest in a place well out of the way; but Typhon, who was hunting by night in the light of the moon, happened upon it. Recognizing the body he divided it into fourteen parts⁸⁷ and scattered them, each in a different place. Isis learned of this and sought for them again, sailing through the swamps in a boat of papyrus.⁸⁸ This is the reason why people sailing in such boats are not harmed by the crocodiles, since these creatures in their own way show either their fear or their reverence for the goddess.

The traditional result of Osiris's dismemberment is that there are many so-called tombs of Osiris in Egypt;⁸⁹ for Isis held a funeral for each part when she had found it. Others deny this and assert that she caused effigies of him to be made and these she distributed among the several cities, pretending that she was giving them his body, in order that he might receive divine honours in a greater number of cities, and also that, if Typhon should succeed in overpowering Horus, he might despair of ever finding his true tomb when so many were pointed out to him, all of them called the tomb of Osiris.⁹⁰

Of the parts of Osiris's body the only one which Isis did not find was the male member,⁹¹ for the reason that this had been at once tossed into the river, and the lepidotus, the sea-bream, and the pike had fed upon it;⁹² and it is from these very fishes the Egyptians are most scrupulous in abstaining. But Isis made a replica of the member to take its place, and consecrated the phallus,⁹³ in honour of which the Egyptians even at the present day celebrate a festival.

19 Later, as they relate, Osiris came to Horus from the other world and exercised and trained him for the battle. After a time Osiris asked Horus what he held to be the most noble of all things. When Horus replied, "To avenge one's father and mother for evil done to them," Osiris then asked him what animal he considered the most useful for them who go forth to battle; and when

⁷⁹ Nephthys; cf. 366B, 368E, and 375B, *infra*.

⁸⁰ Cf. Diodorus, I.87.2.

⁸¹ Cf. Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, II.1.3.

⁸⁶ Cf. 366A, *infra*.

⁸⁷ Cf. 368A, *infra*. Diodorus, I.21, says sixteen parts.

⁸⁸ Cf. Eusebius, *Praepar. Evang.* V. p198 B.

⁸⁹ Cf. 359A, 365A, *infra*, and Diodorus, I.21.

⁹⁰ Cf. Diodorus, I.21.

⁹¹ Cf. 365C, *infra*.

⁹² Cf. Strabo, XVII.1.40 (p812).

⁹³ Cf. Diodorus, I.22.6.

Horus said, "A horse," Osiris was surprised and raised the question why it was that he had not rather said a lion than a horse. Horus answered that a lion was a useful thing for a man in need of assistance, but that a horse served best for cutting off the flight of an enemy and annihilating him. When Osiris heard this he was much pleased, since he felt that Horus had now an adequate preparation. It is said that, as many were continually transferring their allegiance to Horus, Typhon's concubine, Thueris, also came over to him; and a serpent which pursued her was cut to pieces by Horus's men, and now, in memory of this, the people throw down a rope in their midst and chop it up.

Now the battle, as they relate, lasted many days and Horus prevailed. Isis, however, to whom Typhon was delivered in chains, did not cause him to be put to death, but released him and let him go. Horus could not endure this with equanimity, he laid hands upon his mother and wrested the royal diadem from her head; but Hermes put upon her a helmet like unto the head of a cow.

Typhon formally accused Horus of being an illegitimate child, but with the help of Hermes to plead his cause it was decided by the gods that he also was legitimate. Typhon was then overcome in two other battles. Osiris consorted with Isis after his death, and she became the mother of Harpocrates, untimely born and weak in his lower limbs.⁹⁴

20 These are nearly all the important points of the legend, with the omission of the most infamous of the tales, such as that about the dismemberment of Horus⁹⁵ and the decapitation of Isis. There is one thing that I have no need to mention to you: if they hold such opinions and relate such tales about the nature of the blessed and imperishable (in accordance with which our concept of the divine must be framed) and if such deeds and occurrences actually took place, then

"Much there is to spit and cleanse the mouth,"

as Aeschylus⁹⁶ has it. But the fact is that you yourself detest those persons who hold such abnormal and outlandish opinions about the gods. That these accounts do not, in least, resemble the sort of loose fictions and frivolous fabrications which poets and writers of prose evolve from themselves, after the manner of spiders, interweaving and extending their unestablished first thoughts, but that these contain narrations of certain puzzling events and experiences, you will of yourself understand. Just as the rainbow, according to the account of the mathematicians, is a reflection of the sun, and owes its many hues to the withdrawal of our gaze from the sun and our fixing it on the cloud, so the somewhat fanciful accounts here set down are but reflections of some true tale which turns back our thoughts to other matters; their sacrifices plainly suggest this, in that they have mourning and melancholy reflected in them; and so also does the structure of their temples,⁹⁷ which in one portion are expanded into wings and into uncovered and unobstructed corridors, and in another portion have secret vesting-rooms in the darkness under ground, like cells or chapels; and not the least important suggestion is the opinion held regarding the shrines of Osiris, whose body is said to have been laid in many different places.⁹⁸ For they say

⁹⁴ Cf. 377B, *infra*.

⁹⁵ Cf. *Moralia*, 1026C, and *De Anima*, I.6 (in Bernardakis's ed. vol. VII p7).

⁹⁶ Nauck, *Trag. Graec. Frag.*, Aeschylus, no. 354.

⁹⁷ Cf. Strabo, XVII.1.28 (p804).

⁹⁸ Cf. 358A, *supra*, and 365A, *infra*.

that Diochites⁹⁹ is the name given to a small town, on the ground that it alone contains the true tomb; and that the prosperous and influential men among the Egyptians are mostly buried in Abydos, since it is the object of their ambition to be buried in the same ground with the body of Osiris. In Memphis, however, they say, the Apis is kept, being the image of the soul of Osiris,¹⁰⁰ whose body also lies there. The name of this city some interpret as “the haven of the good” and others as meaning properly the “tomb of Osiris.” They also say that the sacred island by Philae¹⁰¹ at all other times is untrodden by man and quite unapproachable, and even birds do not alight on it nor fishes approach it; yet, at one special time, the priests cross over to it, and perform the sacrificial rites for the dead, and lay wreaths upon the tomb, which lies in the encompassing shade of a persea-tree,¹⁰² which surpasses in height any olive.

⁹⁹ The introduction of Diochites here is based upon an emendation of a reading found in one MS. only. The emendation is drawn from Stephanus Byzantinus, a late writer on geographical topics.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. 362C and 368C, *infra*.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Diodorus, I.22, and Strabo, XVII. p803, which (p53) seem to support the emendation “Philae.” Others think that the gates (the MS. reading) of Memphis are meant.

¹⁰² The persea-tree was sacred to Osiris.