

1 Isis:

Harmony of Flesh/Spirit/Logos

Isis, the Great Mother goddess of the Egyptians, was worshipped not only for her protective, healing, nutritive, loving, and compassionate qualities, but for her strength, initiative, independence, and rational approach to life and its vagaries. Neither passive nor all-accepting, she relied overtly on her own acumen to redress the ills and imbalances that confronted her. Consciously aware of and related to her own “center,” Isis was in touch with the deepest folds of her psyche, the “source” of her instinctual sagacity. She was a woman in harmony with herself.

Mediatrice between peoples and between mortals and immortals, each of the ten thousand names awarded to Isis by her worshippers served to convey certain aspects of her multidimensional personality: “Mother of Heaven,” “Queen of all Gods and Goddesses,” “The Divine One,” “The Light-Giver of Heaven,” “Queen of Earth and Heaven,” “Lady of Life,” “Lady of Bread and Beer,” “Lady of Joy and Abundance,” “Lady of Love,” “The All-Receiving,” “The Female Ra,” “The Female Horus.” Multiple as well was the symbology used to denote Isis: among other representations she was given as the “Door,” the “Coverer of the Sky,” and the “Thet” (a knot or buckle, signifying life and blood). Her headdresses—a crown with a solar disk centered between a pair of horns, a small replica of a throne, a vulture, etc.—were generally associated with animals and insects, such as the cow, the scorpion, or the serpent, and each stood for a facet of her personality.

Isis’s names, images, and associations, whether concrete or abstract, may be viewed as reflections of unconscious processes in the woman/deity and in the Egyptian people as well, who brought her into being and then transformed and enriched their concept of her during the course of the centuries.

Perhaps Isis's most unusual personality trait—for her time as for ours—was her combination of Spirit and Logos with earthiness and deep feeling, to which multitudes of worshippers responded and on to which they projected.

Ectypal Analysis

The analysis of Isis's spiritual and psychological evolution, which is my focus, is based on extracts from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, pyramid texts, coffin texts, hymns, and legends such as "The Conflict of Horus and Seth" and "The God and His Unknown Name of Power." Because of the lack of coherence and continuity in the extant versions of the Isis and Osiris myth, I have had recourse to the writings of authors such as Plutarch (*Isis and Osiris*) and Diodorus (*Library History*).

Within the framework of Egypt's complex metaphysics, Isis, Osiris, and their two sons, Horus the Elder and Horus the Younger, along with other immortals in the pantheon, were worshipped as individual deities. New gods were brought into being whenever a need arose among Egyptians to emphasize specific aspects of an original deity. The avatars of the original god or goddess not only were given personal names, individual physical frames, and psychological characteristics of their own but were intricately merged with one another as manifestations of the original transcendent deity.

Given the balance between spirit and matter in the society that created Isis, it is not surprising to learn that she functioned harmoniously both sexually and spiritually. No antagonism, no sense of humiliation, degradation, or sinfulness, disturbed the cohabitation of spirit and flesh. Modifications of Isis-worship in Egypt during the course of centuries—increasing emphasis on spirit while downgrading flesh—may be used as a barometer to measure the greater or lesser role played by women in that society.

Indeed, the high position women enjoyed in ancient Egypt's matrilinear society was unusual for their time and for ours as well. Until the end of the Middle Kingdom (1786 B.C.E.), women were equal with men before the law. Not only could they inherit property but they could dispose of it as they saw fit, going so far even as to disinherit their children. Since wealth descended through the female, the death of a wife saw the daughter, not the husband, become the beneficiary. It was not unusual, therefore, for a widowed Pharaoh to marry his own daughter, as had Ramses II in order to insure his power. If there were no male heirs in the ruling family, a woman could inherit the throne. Some women had ruled as queens and kings, such

as Mer-Neith, Hatshepsut, Ti, Nefertari, Nefertiti, and Cleopatra VII. Nor were religious functions denied to women: they occupied posts as priestesses, healers, magicians, and even scribes. Due to increasing Greek influence, the remarkably powerful role played by women in Egypt slowly began to erode. The downward course continued precipitously after Alexander the Great became Pharaoh in 332 B.C.E., and under the Ptolemies. Following Cleopatra's death, Egypt became a Roman province in which women were compelled to assume, with few exceptions, a subservient position.

Significant for our study of the role Isis played in Egyptian society was the authority accorded to religious centers. Divided into districts or cities (nomes), they vied for prominence, either through conquest, prestige, wealth, or by other means. Some of the districts commanding greater power were Heliopolis, Hermopolis, Memphis, and Thebes. Frequently a nome developed its own philosophical school, cosmogonic beliefs, and local deities, into which it merged those of less influential nomes.

According to the metaphysicians of Heliopolis (Sun City), the world emerged into light from dark primordial waters (Nun, a male power) when the god Atum (Totality, or Void) became manifest as a "primeval hillock." In a text dating from the Sixth Dynasty (twenty-fourth century B.C.E.), Atum, the life force, the container of all future or potential creation, "the Seed of Millions," effected the first scission when he "didst spit out what was Shu" (Air, Space, Light) and "didst sputter out what was Tefnut" (Moisture, World Order). By expelling or exhaling these cosmic elements from himself, he endowed everything with life. Spiritual in emphasis, but significant also on a feeling plane, the description continues: "Thou didst put thy arms about them as the arms of a *ka* was in them." The *ka*, an extremely complex power in Egyptian metaphysics, is defined as the vital force, essence, or spirit of a personality, and, symbolically, the source of the power that transmits "life power from gods to men" (Pritchard 1955, 1; Clark 1991, 231).

In another text in the *Book of the Dead* (Eighteenth to Twenty-first Dynasties, 1500–1000 B.C.E.), Atum evokes one of his avatars, transliterated as both Re or Ra, and splitting into masculine and feminine halves, fertilizes himself by himself.

I am Atum when I was alone in Nun [waters of chaos, out of which life arose]; I am Re in his (first) appearances, when he began to rule that which he had made. . . .

I am the great god who came into being by himself. . . .

I am yesterday, while I know tomorrow. (Pritchard 1955, 4)

In keeping with the involutions of Egyptian metaphysics and the androgynous nature of their godhead, Atum's hand, instrumental in the creative act, was personified as woman (Atum's female aspect), became his consort, and was given the name of Iusas.

Atum was creative in that he proceeded to masturbate with himself in Heliopolis; he put his penis in his hand that he might obtain the pleasure of emission thereby and there were born brother and sister—that is Shu and Tefnut. (Pyramid Utterance # 527, quoted in Clark 1991, 42)

When the first Pharaoh, Menes, united Upper and Lower Egypt (c. 3360 B.C.E.), Memphis (White Walls) became his imperial city. It was there that the ruler set down those patterns that government and religion would follow in future dynasties. The worship of the god Ptah as the First Principle, according to Memphis doctrine, was all-encompassing and lasted for three thousand years. Although a creator god who, like Atum, had brought forth the world from himself, Ptah did not have recourse to masturbation; more philosophical and abstract in concept, he gave birth to the cosmos non-anthropomorphically—through the mind (“heart,” “tongue”) or intelligence.

Ptah *thought* the elements of the universe with his *mind* (heart) and brought them into being by his commanding *speech* (tongue, word). Thus the Logos doctrine had been applied to Creation (see Genesis 1; John 1; Rig-Veda 1:164, 34).

There came into being as the heart and there came into being as the tongue (something) in the form of Atum. The mighty Great One is Ptah, who transmitted [*life* to all gods] as well as (to) his *ka's*, through his heart by which Horus became Ptah, and through his tongue, by which Thoth became Ptah.

(Thus) it happened that the heart and tongue gained control over [every] (other) member of the body, by teaching that he is in every body and in every mouth of all gods, all men, [all] cattle, all creeping things, and (everything) that lives, by thinking and commanding everything that he wishes.

His Ennead (company of gods) is before him in (the form of) teeth and lips. That is (the equivalent of) the semen and hands of Atum. Whereas the Ennead of Atum came into being by his semen and his fingers, the Ennead (of Ptah), however, is the teeth and lips in this mouth, which pronounced the name of everything, from which Shu and Tefnut came forth and which was the fashioner of the Ennead. (Pritchard 1955, 5)

Acting through thought and conveying his will or command by primeval speech, Ptah created Atum, and in so doing transmitted divine powers to Horus (the sun god) and to Thoth (the god of speech, wisdom, justice). As the unique creator of the world and of everything within it, Ptah was an active force throughout nature, absorbing the functions of other gods while also maintaining responsibility for ethical order.

Shu and Tefnut in turn gave birth to the sky goddess Nut, her body manifesting itself as arched over her consort, the earth god Geb, whose raised arms supported her. There followed the birth of four children—Isis/Osiris and Seth/Nephthys—the protagonists of Isis's existence in both mortal and divine spheres. Still in her mother's womb, Isis and Osiris fell in love and had intercourse, and from their union was born Horus the Elder. Upon Osiris's birth at Thebes, the following words emanated from the temple: "The Lord of all comes to light" (Hani 1976, 372).

Archetypal Analysis

Miraculous Birth and Cosmic Identification

Miracles were associated with Isis even before her birth. Her unification or marriage with Osiris in utero is an example of, and may be a partial explanation for, her remarkably integrated personality—a "one-in-herself" or *complete* individual.

Because of the love relationship she had experienced while still in her mother's womb, Isis was a woman connected to both masculine and feminine components of her psyche, each working independently and, at the same time, in harmony. Thus, it may be suggested that Isis enjoyed an androgynous personality. Accordingly, her psychological makeup differed from the norm: neither unconsciously nor consciously did she need to project those traits that she lacked onto a god-man—that is, onto a person with godlike authority—since these characteristics were operational within her. Unimpeded, she could draw sustenance from contents within her psyche whenever the need arose.

Nor, consequently, did Isis's comportment follow the centuries-old patterns devised by patriarchal societies. Strength, Logos, and self-assurance, associated with the male, as well as feeling, relatedness, and emotionality, associated with the female, were at work within her. In moments of danger or pain, for example, she had no difficulty in centering her thoughts and

actions on the immediate problem, and extracting the resources necessary from within rather than relying on others. If she felt she needed further assistance, she called on the deity whose special gifts were related to the situation. Since deity, psychologically, is defined as the Self (total psyche), Isis was placing her faith in her own conscious and subliminal spheres for the solution of her problem.

Not only was the scope of her highly intuitive personality enriched by the connectedness she felt with all facets of her psyche, but the free-flowing knowledge thus placed at her disposal increased the breadth of her rational function. She was equipped, then, to assess external happenings, both concretely as well as qualitatively. As a thinking person, Isis showed equanimity, restraint, and integrity; on the emotional level, she was, as a woman who loved and was loved, able to offer warmth, compassion, and understanding.

That Isis was associated with the moon also reveals elements in her personality. The alternating rhythms, vibrations, and waves determined by the moon's force of radiation or "streams of power" impacted strongly on Isis's moods. During the first quarter or full moon, for example, she represented generative female power. During its waning phases (last quarter or new), she was disposed to sadness and tears, which, however, had positive overtones. As harbinger of dew, moisture, rain, and tides, Isis's woefulness, symbolically speaking, had a direct impact on the swelling of the Nile, crucial for the Egyptians' crops. Understandably, then, Isis became identified with fertility: "The moon, with her humid and generative light," Plutarch wrote, "is favorable to the propagation of animals and the growth of plants" (Harding 1971, 110).

Associated with the floodwaters of the Nile and with life and crops, Isis was replicated in paintings and statues as a birth and nursing goddess. She was visualized as nursing Horus, which permitted the drawing of a later parallel with the Virgin Mary. In another sculpture, she was seated on the back of a pig, her legs outstretched, awaiting the birth process to begin. That her body took the form of a triangle indicates a triad or trinity that, according to numerical symbology, suggests that the 1 (*mother*), after coupling with the 1 (*father*), thus forming 2, becomes 3 with manifestation (*child*)—or 1 again in that the parents exist within the offspring.

Osiris, associated for the most part with the waxing moon, became the giver of seed and was thus known as "the plant of life." Since grains like barley and other seeds sprout from beneath the black earth and are fecundated through Isis by the mud of the Nile, both deities were considered the life force in plants and the fertilizing agents in animals and humans. Osiris's

power abates with the waning moon and the concomitant recession of the Nile waters. Grain dies, as does Osiris; it grows anew with his resurrection—in keeping with the moon's timed and timeless cyclicity.

As representatives of the telluric domain of swamps, rivers, and mud, Isis and Osiris together experienced the mysteries of insemination in the earth's womb and gestation in the depths of darkness—in secret.

The Earthly Sojourn

According to Plutarch and Diodorus, Isis and Osiris lived their early years on earth as monarchs of Egypt. Osiris, a divinely human and altruistic god-man, came to be known as his country's civilizing agent, teaching his people to raise crops and vines, to build cities and canals, to worship, and to devise a legal system. Out of love for humankind, he traveled to foreign lands to teach the less-fortunate classes notions of peace and productivity. During his absence, he left to Isis the government of the kingdom (Plutarch 1924, 56ff.).

Not only did Isis administer the land by adhering to its laws and customs; she also formulated new decrees, some aimed at chastising violent men for their misdeeds. In addition, she taught women the domestic arts of corn grinding, flax spinning, and bread making. In gratitude, the people offered her ears of corn—the first fruits of the harvest.

But Seth (god of evil, darkness, drought, perversity), brother of both Isis and her husband, became envious of Osiris's power and success as monarch. Moreover, he fell passionately in love with Isis. To satisfy his desires, he decided to usurp the throne of Egypt, achieve power, and take Isis for himself.

An irritating, obstructive, and negative power, Seth/Evil is an archetypal figure like other satanic powers in world religions. As a catalyst, he is the energy needed to pave the way for change in both the personal and collective domains. As a cosmic force, he is ever active and functions perpetually. Stepping into the lives of those who are content with their lot, he symbolizes the destroyer of the status quo, the disrupter of stasis. The test to which the integrity and wisdom of Isis and Osiris were subjected was a factor in their emotional and spiritual evolution, a kind of rite of passage. An instrument of permutation, Seth triggered the event to which the Pharaoh and his queen would respond as thinking individuals.

Planning to kill the twenty-eight-year-old Osiris upon his return to court, Seth gathered about him seventy-two conspirators, secretly ascertained his brother's measurements, and had a box/casket made to fit the size. During a

banquet in honor of the monarch, on the seventeenth day of the month of Hathor (late September or early November), Seth informed the guests that the box would be awarded to the individual whose body fit into it. He persuaded Osiris to lie in the box in order to test the size; whereupon his cohorts quickly closed the cover and brought the “coffin” to the mouth of the Nile, where they set it afloat.

Upon hearing of the crime, Isis uttered lamentations that were heard throughout the land. In her grief she snipped a strand of her hair, then donned a mourning dress. Since hair (head) symbolizes one’s spiritual qualities, the clipping of some strands indicates that one’s vital forces will pass with the donor’s properties and virtues to the receiver of the lock. Identified with the earth’s tresses, or grass, hair is associated in agrarian societies like Egypt with vegetation and is thus a nurturing force. Isis’s cutting of a strand of her hair may also be considered a premonitory image of Osiris’s future dismemberment.

By donning a mourning dress, Isis was not only conveying her sorrow but also hiding her body within its folds—implying, psychologically, a need for introversion. Withdrawal from, or renunciation of, worldly affairs would help her come to terms with her anguish.

Isis set out on her quest for Osiris’s casket. Wanderings imply both an external and inner trajectory and, in Isis’s case, may be looked upon as an effort on her part to reposition *her* truth, *her* spiritual center, which had been so severely displaced by her husband’s demise.¹ With the perseverance and patience so characteristic of her, Isis learned that the “coffin” had been washed ashore at Byblos (Phoenicia).

The Tree: A Desexualized Phallus

Osiris remained a fertility god—in death and in life—as attested to by Isis’s discovery that his casket, lying inside the trunk of a tamarisk tree, had so stimulated nature’s proliferation that the tree’s bark had grown around and embraced the coffin. Moreover, the tree itself had reached such inordinate height that the king of the region had it felled to use as a supporting column of his palace (*ibid.*, 63).

Why did a *tree*, referred to as the *djed* (stability, durability) pillar, play such a significant role in the Isis/Osiris myth? Associated in many religions with the Tree of Life or the world axis, trees, unlike other vegetation, represent duration. In contrast to inorganic stone, wood typifies organic living

matter. In a semiotic humanization of the tree, outspread branches function as head and arms, and the phallic trunk as sacrum, or seat of virility. Osiris's *djed* pillar was unusual, however, in that the representation of the phallus was not in the trunk but on the top or head of the tree, implying a new understanding of a desexualized generative force. The phallus has now been awarded a "higher" and more spiritual or sublimated status. Fertilization, then, is no longer equated with lower extremities, but with the more abstract upper thinking regions (Neumann 1954, 230–33).

Horizontal and vertical symbolism also apply to the *djed* pillar: lying on the ground, it represented the physically dead or unconscious Osiris; raised, it stood for the "higher" or "head" phallus, the resurrected Lord, the "everlasting begetter." Death had divested Osiris of his telluric identification and had transformed him into an Uranian or sky entity: "I set up a ladder to Heaven among the gods," he said, "and I am a divine being among them" (*ibid.*, 231–33). The merging of the lower phallic principle with the higher heart-soul (*ba*) permitted fusion with Osiris's *kh*u (spiritual soul). His "tree birth" or resurrection into another sphere of being represented an ascension and a new spiritual orientation.²

A thinking and strong-willed woman, Isis immediately had recourse to her knowledge of magical art—in this case, totemism. Calling upon one of her avatars, the swallow, she assumed its attributes, suggesting a need on her part to sublimate, to hypostatize, and to induce other than rational powers.

Now a creature of the air, Isis could observe the telluric situation from above and from different vantage points, thereby distancing herself from the problem of how best to gain access to Osiris's coffin. The opening of a variety of perspectives allowed her consciousness to expand in a kind of rite of passage that tapped her intuitive, perceptive, and telepathic resources. By transcending human limitations—the prerogative of a goddess—she was able, psychologically speaking, to experience the divine within her, or the Self. From within, then, did she learn how to enact the sacred mystery that would reveal to her what course of action she must take.

Isis/swallow (soul/spirit) flew around the tree/pillar. She *saw* into matter; she saw her husband's body lying cradled within the coffin and the tree's protective bark; she drew on her powers of cognition to impose orderly thinking. First, she asked: how best could she approach the pillar? Her answer: by seeking out the queen of the land. Using her maternal qualities of warmth and tenderness to her advantage, she offered her services to the queen as nurse to her children. In this capacity, within a short time Isis felt

close enough to the royal couple to reveal her secret and beg them to give her the pillar. Once her request had been granted, she removed the casket from within the tree/pillar and opened it. At the sight of Osiris's body, her grief was such that her threnodies filled the air.

Although she cognized Osiris's dead body and its physical alteration, she was not yet emotionally prepared to accept the loss of the "living phallus." She incanted her pain in the formula:

Come to thy house, come to thy house, thou pillar! Come to thy house,
beautiful bull, Lord of men, Beloved, Lord of women. (Ibid., 222)

In her role as Great Mother, she attempted to assuage her woe even while seeking to comfort Osiris during his difficult initiatory journey into the Duat (Underworld or the West).

Thy mother has come to thee, that thou mayst not perish away the great
modeler she is come, that thou mayst not perish away. She sets thy head in
place for thee, she puts together thy limbs for thee; what she brings to thee
is thy heart, is the body. (Ibid.)

The Dismemberment

Intent upon bringing Osiris's body, which had floated out of Egypt, back to her land, Isis again set sail. Although during the trip she opened the casket and embraced her dead husband passionately, once she reached land, she left his body hidden but unattended in a remote area. (The reasons for this are difficult to explain, because the various versions of the Osiris myth are so contradictory on this point.) During her absence, Seth, out on a hunting trip, happened upon the corpse. This time, in order to make certain that he had rid himself of his enemy, Seth cut Osiris into fourteen pieces, which he then scattered throughout Egypt.

Isis, returning and intuiting that this heinous deed had been perpetrated by the ignominious Seth, again filled the countryside with her cries. Weeping served as an outlet to help heal her mutilated psyche, but once her tears had abated, she set out once again on a long and arduous journey to gather the fragments of her dismembered husband. Wherever she found one, she had a temple, shrine, or tomb erected to honor the god-man. She found, however, only thirteen parts of Osiris's body. The fourteenth—the phallus—had been devoured by an oxyrhynchus fish.

The cult of the fish, a symbol of wisdom and fecundity, existed in dynastic times. These underwater creatures were venerated not only as animals per se but because they were also inhabitants of the abode of the living gods.

The fish is identified with subliminal pulsations and generative powers, and water with the collective unconscious. The phallus within the fish's stomach continued to assure the fertility of the nation. Whereas Osiris had formerly worked in the open, henceforth he would work in secret, thereby wielding far greater power than if he had been physically present. Religion, after all, thrives on mystery. Unwittingly, the scatterer of Osiris's body had increased his enemy's telluric stature. "Osiris, the grain" had been "threshed" by Seth, the purveyor of dissension and chaos (ibid., 223).

Seth's dismemberment of a once *whole* fertility god-king, his "breaking down of the living units" of Osiris's body, symbolizes a psychological fragmentation of this ruling archetypal power. Such sectioning is significant in that it mirrors a parallel change taking place in the Egyptian society. The mutilation of the archetype was symptomatic of the transformation of a social and religious ruling principle that no longer seemed to answer the needs of the people.

A redistribution of spiritual values had also been effected by Isis through the building of shrines to honor the places where the fragments of Osiris's body had been found. The strength of Osiris worship intensified throughout the land, the new cults serving to restructure and reevaluate the dominant religious ethos. As Osiris's role as lord of Duat increased, Ra's solar power diminished. Thus was the previous balance—or status quo—between Osiris and Ra destabilized.

Visitation and Resurrection

Still unable to accept the reality of her husband's physical demise, Isis used her own ingenuity to concretize her sexual fantasies: she made a wooden phallus to replicate the missing one. After listening to specific words pronounced by Thoth, the god of wisdom, moon god, and patron of the arts, speech, science, and hieroglyphics—or, psychologically, drawing upon her own subliminal sphere for enrichment—Isis embarked on the second step of her initiatory ritual.

She again transformed herself into a bird, or, according to some versions of the myth, a kite. No sooner had the metamorphosis been accomplished than Isis threw herself on her husband's dead body, kissing it passionately in

what might be alluded to as a necrophilic act. Although erotic stimulation by corpses used to be considered a perversion limited to males only, further investigation has proven that the disorder exists in females as well.

As Isis in the form of a bird flew around the corpse, she beat her wings, sending the breath of life into Osiris. In so doing, she gained his resurrection.

Isis by her love drew forth again the potency of the dead Osiris. Isis the magician avenged her brother. . . . She made to rise up the helpless members of him whose heart was at rest, she drew from him his essence, and made therefrom an heir. (Harding 1971, 185)

According to Plutarch and Diodorus, the Egyptians believed that Osiris was resurrected after his dismemberment. Whether he returned to life as a spirit or in physical form is unknown, although it is said that he had the power of speech and thought. Osiris, then, had not died. It was only his earthly form, which he had donned upon entering the domain of the living and had known during his rulership on earth, that had experienced death. For thousands of years the ancient Egyptians thrived on the notion of the god-man's immortality. Indeed, it was this concept to a great extent that had endowed them with their strength and power, while also inuring them to earthly disasters no matter the form they took.

The transcendental move from body to mind—or human form to bird/spirit—had so deeply troubled Isis that her psychological disequilibrium triggered an archetypal vision which took the form of a *visitation*. Revealed to her was the future birth of Horus—the Redeemer, the hawk-headed god, whose right eye was to be the sun and the left, the moon.

The sacred eye of Atum and of Ra, one of the most complex symbols in Egyptian metaphysics, had been, according to certain nome beliefs, empowered by these deities to create the world. In Isis's visitation, the sacred eye functioned as an aspect of the great goddess herself. Psychologically, her inner sight allowed her access to certain contents of her collective unconscious, via their representations in archetypal visions, making her privy to happenings beyond the linear sphere, in a space-time continuum. It was then that she perceived Horus flying directly into the blackened sky of the Underworld, into and past Ra's domain, en route to fulfilling the destiny of his father, Osiris.

Because the *ka* (generative power) of the dead Osiris had been restored to him, Isis was able to conceive Horus while her husband continued his existence as spirit. Horus became the living and functioning son, the earthly

counterpart of his father, while Osiris, who dwelled in the Duat, immobile or “at rest” for eternity, remained the abstract fertilizing or catalytic agent of all that was to be (Clark 1991, 108).

After Horus’s birth, Atum spoke to him: “I salute you! May the followers of your father Osiris serve and worship you” (ibid., 215). And Isis knew the ecstasy of beatitude:

Ah! O my son Horus, sit in this land of your father Osiris in this your name of “Falcon upon the ramparts of Him whose name is hidden. . . .”

Isis approaches the “Retreated One” [Atum]. Horus is brought forward. Isis asks that he be admitted as a “distant one,” among the guides of eternity.

“Look at Horus, O Gods!” (ibid., 216)

Other versions of the visitation, of Isis’s resurrection of Osiris, and of Horus’s conception also exist. One, for example, is based on reliefs and inscriptions garnishing the walls of the shrine of the god Sokar in the temple of King Seti I (1306–1290 B.C.E.) at Abydos. These indicate that Isis, after having discovered the body of Osiris, arrested its putrefaction and revived it. In one depiction, Osiris, held by Isis, was able to raise one arm to his head and with the other to grasp his phallus so as to arouse himself to orgasm. Isis then pressed herself onto the phallus, thus becoming impregnated (Hart 1990, 32–33).³

After Isis’s miraculous resurrection of Osiris, the “giver of life from the beginning,” he descended to the Duat, becoming not only its ruler as lord of Eternity but judge as well of the living. Because his worshippers looked upon his resurrection as a miracle offering them hope of eternal existence in Duat, he became known as the “ruler of the living.” He was also a sacrificial agent who had taken upon himself “all that is hateful” or sinful in the world (ibid.), and Horus the Younger, the hawk god, God’s “beloved son,” was born to continue in his father’s rulership (Clark 1991, 107).

Although Isis—mother, wife, sister—had been the instrument of resurrection and conception, it is surprising to learn that only Osiris, the Father (God), Horus (the Divine Son), and a third power, the *Ka-mutef* (Bull of his Mother), were consubstantial. The mystery was made manifest when Osiris changed into the Son and the Son into the Father, via the procreative or regenerative power of the *Ka-mutef*. Coming to his dead father Osiris, Horus embraced him: “By this embrace he transferred to him either his own Ka, or a portion of the power which dwelt in it; the embrace was, in fact, an act

whereby something of the vital energy of the embracer was transferred to the embraced." Not only did the *Ka-mutef* (later identified with the Holy Ghost) generate the Son from the Father, but it mediated between the two as well, empowering the Son and heir to carry out his directives (Jung 1963a, par. 177).

The diminishing role that women would play in society for centuries to come is evidenced by the fact that neither Isis nor the Mary in Christianity was included in the Trinity. Although Isis appeared as the goddess Maat, one of her avatars, and was visible behind the seated Osiris in the Judgment Hall as one of the judges of the dead, she was, nevertheless, not on a par with Osiris, Horus, or the *Ka-mutef*. Despite the fact that Isis, like Mary, was a "vessel" from which flowed life and blood, both divine mothers were shunted aside in favor of the masculine principles of Osiris/Horus/*Ka-mutef* in the Egyptian pantheon, and Father/Son/Holy Ghost in Christianity (1963b, par. 261).⁴

Isis's resurrection of Osiris had both positive and negative connotations. The god of fertility's rebirth, paradoxically in a state of castration, triggered a compensatory reaction in Isis, who imagined and reproduced a wooden sexual device to replace the missing (impotent) phallus. Osiris's impotence had wrought a deep psychological change in the formerly sexually active Isis. She hypostatized, becoming a vessel for the containment of spirit. Thus, the once integrated earthly being, whose relationship with both tellurian and heavenly realms had been fluid and balanced, was transformed into a strictly celestial force. The long wooden member that had helped beget Horus may then be understood as a prefiguration of a new phase and direction in religion and in kingship. Emphasis would now be placed on the spiritual, while the physical would be downplayed.

Isis Decapitated

Fearing that Seth might try to harm the infant Horus, Thoth, god of wisdom, advised Isis to hide the baby in the papyrus marshes of the Nile delta. The child must be raised and trained, Thoth admonished, to fight his father's murderer. Isis remained ever-protective of her child: on one occasion, summoned by the gods, she found him lying on the ground "inert and helpless." Stretching out her arms to him in love and crying, "I will protect thee, I will protect thee, O my son Horus," she smelled the dying infant's breath—an approach used even today by some physicians to determine the nature and source of a disease. Concluding that Horus had been stung by a scorpion, she

called upon Thoth, or, psychologically, the Self, to help her. In her remote and inaccessible depths, Isis gleaned Thoth's secret words spoken for her to hear. Thus was Horus magically and "mysteriously" restored to life.

In several tales, including "Horus and Seth" dating from the reign of Ramses V (Twentieth Dynasty, eleventh century B.C.E.), Evil was unflagging in his attempts to gain the Egyptian throne and relentless in concocting ways of destroying his young competitor. Since law and order were a highly sought goal in Egyptian society, those values existed in the divine Ennead, the supreme tribunal to which Horus appealed for help. Having accepted the case and in accordance with protocol, Thoth, "the intelligence of the gods," placed the "Holy Eye" (in this case, a symbol of authority) before Atum.

The court at times seemed to favor Horus's cause; at others, Seth's case was convincingly argued. The latter's proposal for hand-to-hand combat was, however, vetoed by Thoth, who considered it too disorderly a means of obtaining justice. Nor was a compromise offer made to Seth of two Syrian goddesses as wives deemed acceptable. Seth finally convinced the tribunal to allow the antagonists to resort to an ancient royal ritual: battling in the form of hippopotami.

Obligated to accept the council's decision, Isis was fearful ("Surely Seth will kill my son Horus?"), but in keeping with her behavioral pattern in moments of crisis, she activated her powerful thinking function. When, however, a mother interferes overtly in a child's battle, she may deprive the child of an opportunity to gain experience. Devising a weapon intended to save her son, she took a rope

which she made into a cable. Then she took an ingot of metal and beat it into a harpoon-head. She tied the cable to it and threw it into the water where Seth and Horus had submerged. (Clark 1991, 204)

Isis assumed that she would be able to distinguish the two antagonists/hippopotami submerged in the water and would harpoon the enemy. But

the bronze pierced the sacred body of her son Horus. Then Horus cried out loud: "Help, Mother Isis, my mother! Order your weapon to free itself from me!" (Ibid.)

Stunned when she realized she had wounded her son, Isis acted rapidly and incisively, having recourse this time to both reason and magic: she conjured

the harpoon from Horus's body. Angered by her own failure to destroy Seth the first time, she hurled the weapon again, and this time made a direct hit (Hart 1990, 38).

Paralleling Horus's plea for compassion was Seth's appeal to Isis to release him from the harpoon. He astutely played on her sympathy, reminding her that they were, after all, brother and sister. Although aggressive and even ruthless in protecting her son, Isis was moved by Seth's words and conjured the harpoon from his body.

His mother had released not only his enemy but his father's murderer, and Horus's "face [became] fierce like that of a leopard." He snatched his knife and with it cut off his mother's head. (In some versions of the tale Horus cut off his mother's headdress.) Then he "took it in his arms and went up the mountain" (Lichtheim 1976, 219).

The hawk-headed Horus, the focus of his mother's existence, had suddenly felt displaced by the warmth of her response to her brother's plea. Nor, he rationalized, could he forgive her for the seeming affront to his father. Unable to cope with what he experienced as his mother's rejection of him, his reaction was drastic and instantaneous.

What was the symbolic meaning of Horus's decapitation of Isis? His act, unlike the castration of Osiris, had not been aimed against the feminine and maternal parts of her body; rather, he had shorn off her intelligence, spirituality, psyche, and mind. Was it a question only of jealousy because of his mother's interest in the well-being of her brother? Or had Horus unconsciously been so pressured by the increasing power of the patriarchy in Egypt that he could no longer accept a mother who thought for herself and acted according to her nature and principles?

Aware of the injustice of Horus's brutal act, the gods called for his punishment. Their search for him "up the mountain," however, proved futile. Seth succeeded in finding him, but kept his discovery a secret. When he came upon him, Horus was alone, dazed by his crime. This gave Seth the opportunity first to throw his opponent to the ground and then to gouge out his eyes, which he buried on the mountainside. Miraculously these eyes were transformed into two lotus flowers. Some time later, an avatar of Isis, Hathor (House of Horus) the cow goddess (milk-giver, and thus sustainer of life), came upon the blind and weeping Horus. A healer, Isis/Hathor restored his vision by rubbing his eyes with the milk of a gazelle, thus acting out the archetypal mother's compassion for her child, no matter how much pain he had inflicted on her.

Seth and Horus resumed their vicious struggle. On one occasion, Horus pulled out his enemy's testicles, while Seth his opponent's left eye. After more altercations, Thoth, the deity of order, convinced Seth and Horus to plead their case before the great council of the gods (Clark 1991, 109). In time, the conflict was settled. The Son of the Father was awarded the throne and the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Most impressive, however, was the manner in which the court handled Seth's feelings of humiliation. Although he finally withdrew his claim to the kingship, Seth was not expelled from the pantheon of gods. On the contrary, Ra took the opportunity to enlighten Egyptian worshippers with a profoundly mystical notion: "Let Seth, son of Nut, be given to me to dwell with me and be my son. And he shall thunder in the sky and be feared" (Lichtheim 1976, 222).

Evil, as the son of Ra, did not vanish, but remained a cosmic principle. Thus it is implicit in the notion of enlightenment and in the faculty of reason. Wherever the sun god appears, so, too, does the shadow force, underscoring the eternity and necessity of opposites in the manifest world—in the very life process. Never to be obliterated, antagonism plays its role, stirring deities and mortals to extend themselves beyond their limits in an effort to bring into being new ideas and fresh approaches to life.

Isis and the Power Principle

Fascinating, beautiful, and mothering, Isis was also articulate and logical. Her inquiring mind was never inactive. Indeed, there were times in her life when she, like Prometheus and Faust, yearned to acquire greater insight and power—not for herself exclusively, but to help the collective resolve its ills. Such is the thrust of the Egyptian legend, "The God and His Unknown Name of Power," written in the Nineteenth Dynasty (1350–1200 B.C.E.).

Seemingly bored with her lot on earth, Isis pondered ways of increasing her power. Might not she one day rule the earth? the stars? She is thus described by a patriarchally oriented scribe:

Now Isis was a clever woman. Her heart was craftier than a million men; she was choicer than a million gods; she was more discerning than a million of the noble dead. There was nothing which she did not know in heaven and earth, like Re, who made the content of the earth. (Pritchard 1955, 12)

A passage in the famous *Litany of Re* (Ra) reads: "Thou [Re] art the bodies of Isis," suggesting that she, too, contains the sun's creative energy (Piankoff 1964, 19).

Isis was convinced that she could gain the power she sought by learning Ra's secret *name*. Egyptians believed that names stemmed from "primeval speech," that they originated when Atum created the Word, and that they contained the essence or godliness of a being (Pritchard 1955, 63). Within the name, then, there existed the blueprint (a kind of DNA) of a person's character, traits, and potential. Such a notion suggests an identity between *image* and *object*, as well as between "the name and the thing" (Piankoff 1964, 3). The divulgence of one's secret name (a person's reality and innermost feelings and thoughts) implies surrender of one's hiddenness. The recipient of the knowledge of one's secret name thus gains power over the revealer and is able to manipulate him or her. Ra, the sun god, although endowed with seventy-five names, possessed only one *hidden* name, which had to remain unknown in order for him to preserve his power.⁵

The Ra in our text, "The God and his Unknown Name of Power," is, however, no longer the young, vibrant, creative force he had once been. The former subduer of the monstrous serpent Apophis, the caster of spells, the hero of heroes, has grown old. The Ra who had once ruled on earth at the *beginning*, a kind of golden age known as the "First Time" when divinities and humans lived together in peace and harmony, now had the attributes and weaknesses of mortals: he is pictured as incontinent, dribbling from his mouth, and continuously calling up his glorious past in an attempt to prop up his powers.

Ra worship, as previously mentioned, was supreme in Egypt until the Fifth Dynasty, after which it began to decline as the cult of the god-man Osiris ascended. By the Sixth Dynasty, not only had the awe of Ra's worshippers diminished considerably, but his most remarkable attributes had now become identified with Osiris. The Ra-Osiris synthesis produced a *unio mystica* as a binomial God.

Did this change in religious emphasis suggest that the attributes usually identified with the sun—rational or conscious principles associated with the head—were weakening in favor of the more mysterious, darkened realm of Osiris's underworld/unconscious?

The now vulnerable Ra was subjected to humiliation as Isis applied her knowledge of magic to discover the once formidable god's secret name. Taking some of Ra's spittle that had fallen to the ground, she

kneaded it for herself with her hand, together with the earth on which it was. She built it up into an august snake; she made it in the form of a sharp point. It did not stir alive before her, (but) she left it at the crossroads past which the great god used to go according to the desire of his heart throughout his Two Lands. (Pritchard 1955, 12)

No sooner did the god appear than he was bitten by the viper. As the poison slowly filtered into his bloodstream, his pain was so excoriating that he called on the children of the gods to cast their spells and apply their wisdom to cure him. Isis assured Ra that her utterances would succeed in expelling the poisons from his body. She spoke cunningly and with a perfect appreciation of her position of power:

What is it, what is it, my divine father? What—a snake *stabbed* weakness in thee? One of thy children lifted up his head against thee? Then I shall cast it down with effective magic. I shall make it retreat at the sight of thy rays. (Ibid., 13)

The holy one was, of course, delighted to benefit from Isis's curative skills. Not to be outwitted, she asked the "divine father" for his secret name. Again Ra enumerated his past achievements—including his creation of the "bull for the cow, so that sexual pleasures might come into being," and of "heaven and the mysteries of the two horizons, so that the souls of the gods might be placed therein"—but he refrained from revealing his secret name (ibid.). Undaunted, Isis persisted: "Thy name is not really among these which thou hast told me. If thou tellest it to me, the poison will come forth, for a person whose name is pronounced lives" (ibid.).

As astute dialogue continued its course, Ra grew increasingly weaker as the poison was absorbed into his blood. In agony, "[t]he great god divulged his name to Isis, the Great of Magic" (ibid.). Only now would she recite her spell to cure him who would otherwise have died.

Flow forth, scorpion poison! Come forth from Re, O Eye of Horus! Come forth from the burning god at my spell! It is I who acts; it is I who sends (the message). Come upon the ground, O mighty poison! Behold, the great god has divulged his name, and Re is living, the poison is dead...through the speech of Isis the Great, the Mistress of the gods, who knows Re (by) his own name. (Ibid., 14)

By maximizing her own thinking powers and thus depotentiating those of the god Ra, Isis enhanced the role and function of the feminine principle.

As a composite of intellect as well as the more subtle devices of ruse and cunning, she became integrated into Ra: "Thou [R] art the bodies of Isis" (Piankoff 1964, 19).

Isis's drama—that of the inner life of woman and deity—is everywoman's. Within Isis, referred to as the Vase of Life, cohabit harmonious distillations of sun and darkness, head and body, spirit and matter. She was a woman who used reason (*logos*) to cope with the rigors of her earthly and divine experience. She drank deeply of love, sexuality, and spirituality. In some measure she may be considered the prototype of today's woman. Independent, self-reliant, and sensitive to her own needs as well as to those of others, Isis lived out the archetypal drama of a woman fulfilled!

It is no wonder that Plutarch included in his *De Iside et Osiride* the following inscription located at Saïs, one of the centers for the Isis mystery cult in ancient times. "I am all that has been and is and will be; and no mortal has ever lifted my mantle" (Plutarch 1924, 131).