

Chapter 4

The Egyptian Religion and Creation Myth

Objectives

To gain an understanding of the Egyptian creation myth and to become familiar with the primary gods of the Egyptian pantheon.

Mystery

How did the ancient Egyptians explain the creation of the world? Which gods played a role in forming the earth and bringing civilization to the people?

Discussion and Research Projects

1. What are myths? Do they contain truths? How can you understand their symbolic meaning?
2. Where do myths come from? How did myths, particularly Egyptian myths, influence other religious beliefs?
3. Describe the events that unfolded in the creation myth.
4. What symbols found in the creation myth were used by the pharaohs?
5. The creation myth is full of dualities (opposites). Can you name them?
6. How does the creation myth explain the arrival of pain and suffering on earth?
7. Why do you think the sun god was so important to the Egyptians?
8. Compare the Egyptian creation myth to other creation myths from other parts of the world.
9. Compare the Egyptian creation myth with modern scientific theories on how the earth and the universe were formed.



Creative Projects

1. Use **Activity Sheets 7, 8 and 9** to learn about how the ancient Egyptians visualized the creation of the world.
2. Use **Activity Sheet 10** to learn about the cosmic gods of the creation story.
3. Divide your students into small groups. Ask each group to create a dialogue and act out the events of the Egyptian creation myth.
4. Ask your students to produce drawings illustrating the events that unfolded in the creation myth.

FACT SHEET: The Egyptian Religion and Creation Myth

Myths

Myths are stories that become part of humanity's collective memory.⁶ They are said to represent the dreams of a society. It is possible to interpret them from a variety of perspectives to explain natural phenomena, such as how the earth was formed. At another level, they are a rich source of insights into society and human behaviour.

Myths, particularly creation myths, have had a profound effect on ancient cultures. They form the foundation of religious beliefs that influenced all forms of cultural expression, as well as values and attitudes.⁷ Nowhere is this more true than in Egypt.

Myths are rich in symbolic meaning. Their settings may seem strange and their characters larger than life, but by learning to understand their meaning, we can unlock their secrets. Capable of amazing feats, such as changing shape, the characters in myths often represent aspects of human behaviour such as love and jealousy, or phenomena such as order and destruction.



In this depiction of a myth, the Great Cat performs an heroic deed by killing Apophis, the evil snake. The snake symbolizes hostile forces that cause problems for the deceased during their journey to paradise.

Photo: Harry Foster (CMC S98 3544)

The Evolution of Religion

One of the most interesting aspects of ancient Egypt is its religion. The depth of Egyptian thinking and the rich imagination displayed in the creation of ideas and images of the gods and goddesses are beyond compare. In elaborating their beliefs, the Egyptians were searching for an understanding of the most basic laws of life, death and the universe.



The pharaoh Seti I holding a sekhem, a sceptre symbolizing power and authority

They developed the first thought forms of the Godhead — the beginnings of a religion. Their beliefs evolved slowly over the centuries and gradually developed into a comprehensive world view shared by the people of the Nile.

Religion is the glue that binds local communities into nationhood and creates common understandings and shared values that are essential to the growth of a civilization. No religion is fully formed at its inception. By looking at ancient Egypt, one can see how belief systems evolved to become the driving force of cultural expressions. In the early stages of human thought, the concept of God did not exist. Our early ancestors were concerned about natural phenomena and the powers that controlled those phenomena; they did not worship a personalized form of God. This stage of religious development is referred to as “magical”.⁸



Thoth, the god of writing, depicted with the head of an ibis and a human body
CMC ECD98-018 #21

In Egypt, before the concept of God existed, magical power was encapsulated in the hieroglyph of a sceptre (or rod or staff). This is one of the most enduring symbols of divine power, ever present in images of the pharaohs and the gods.

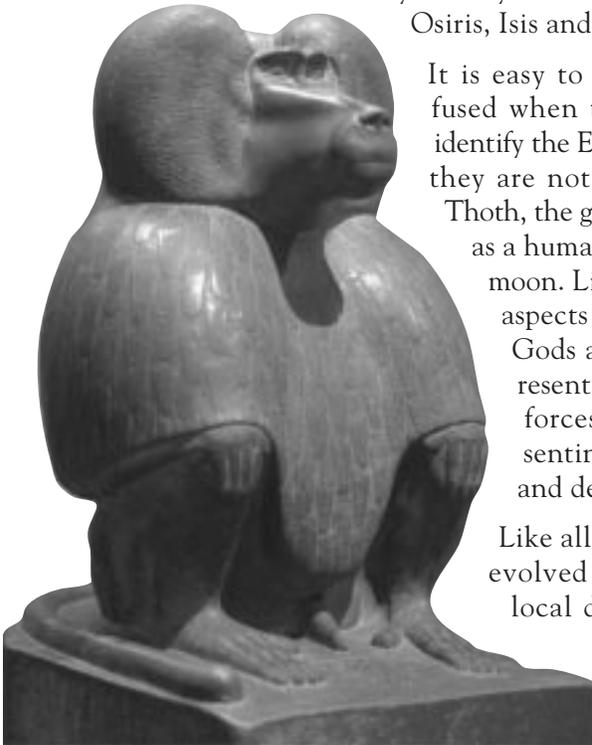
As human society evolved, people gradually gained a degree of personal identity. With a higher sense of individuality, they began to conceive the gods in a personalized form. This stage in development is called “mythical”. In Egypt, this process began during the late prehistoric period, when writing was being invented and myths were being formulated.

At that stage, every Egyptian town had its own deity, manifested in a material fetish or a god represented in the shape of an animal, such as a cat goddess, cobra goddess, ibis god or jackal god. As the pantheon grew in cohesiveness, these gods and goddesses were given human bodies and credited with human attributes and activities.

The temples in the major cities throughout the land were constructed to venerate local gods. During the New Kingdom, these temples honoured a triad of gods based on the pattern established by the mythical family of Osiris, Isis and Horus.



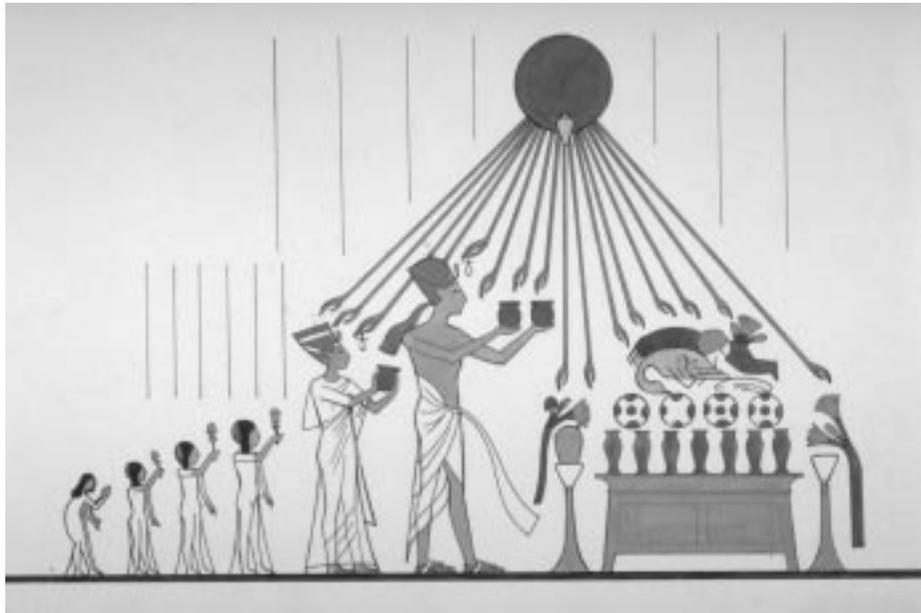
Ibis
Photo: Harry Foster (CMC S98 3493)



Sculpture of a baboon representing the god Thoth
CMC ECD98-029 #16

It is easy to get confused when trying to identify the Egyptian gods. There is a large number of them and they are not always depicted the same way. For example, Thoth, the god of writing and messenger of the sun god, is seen as a human with the head of an ibis, or as a baboon or the moon. Like the Greek gods, the Egyptian gods symbolized aspects of life, human emotions and the physical world. Gods and goddesses are often grouped in pairs to represent the dual nature of life, the negative and positive forces of the cosmos. An example is Osiris, representing life and order, and Seth, representing disorder and destruction.

Like all religions, that of ancient Egypt was complex. It evolved over the centuries from one that emphasized local deities into a national religion with a smaller number of principal deities. Some theologians think that Egypt was moving towards a monotheistic faith in a single creator, symbolized by the sun god.



*The pharaoh Akhenaten and his family worshipping the sun god, Aten
Photo: Royal Ontario Museum (CMC ECD98-040 #58)*

When the Greeks and the Romans conquered Egypt, their religion was influenced by that of Egypt. Ancient pagan beliefs gradually faded and were replaced by monotheistic religions. Today, the majority of the Egyptian population is Muslim, with a small minority of Jews and Christians.

The Egyptian Creation Myth⁹

Introduction

Like other creation myths, Egypt's is complex and offers several versions of how the world unfolded. The ancient Egyptians believed that the basic principles of life, nature and society were determined by the gods at the creation of the world. It all began with the first stirring of the High God in the primeval waters.

The creation myth is recounted in the sacred hieroglyphic writings found on pyramids, temples, tombs and sheets of papyrus. These writings describe how the earth was created out of chaos by the god Atum. The earth was seen as a sacred landscape, a reflection of the sky world where the gods resided.

The creation of the universe took place over a long period of time when the gods lived on earth and established kingdoms based on the principles of justice. When the gods left the earth to reside in the sky world, the pharaohs inherited the right to rule.



Heh, god of chaos

The First Gods

The *Book of the Dead*, dating to the Second Intermediate Period, describes how the world was created by Atum, the god of Heliopolis, the centre of the sun-god cult in Lower Egypt. In the beginning, the world appeared as an infinite expanse of dark and directionless waters, named Nun. Nun was personified as four pairs of male and female deities. Each couple represented one of four principles that characterized Nun: hiddenness or invisibility, infinite water, straying or lack of direction, and darkness or lack of light.

Atum created himself out of Nun by an effort of will or by uttering his own name. As the creator of the gods and humans, he was responsible for bringing order to the heavens and the earth. As Lord of the Heavens and Earth, he wears the Double Crown of Upper and Lower Egypt and carries the *ankh*, a symbol of life, and the *was* sceptre, a symbol of royal authority.



Atum, the Creator



The mythical Benu bird standing before an offering table

According to the Pyramid Texts, written on the walls of pyramids, the creator god

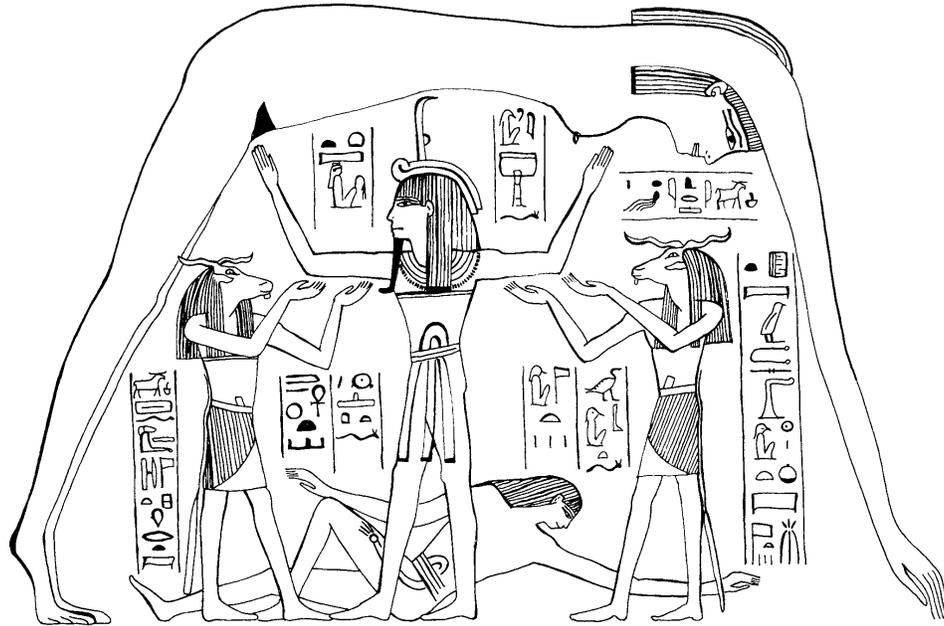
emerged from the chaotic darkness of Nun as a mythical Benu bird (similar to a heron or phoenix). He flew to Heliopolis, an ancient city near Cairo, where, at dawn, he alighted on the Benben, an obelisk representing a ray of the sun. After fashioning a nest of aromatic boughs and spices, he was consumed in a fire and miraculously sprang back to life. The capstone placed at the top of an obelisk or a pyramid is associated with the Benu. Called a pyramidion or the Benu, it is a symbol of rebirth and immortality.

The Creator God's Offspring

At a time the Egyptians called *Zep Tepi* (the First Time), Atum created two offspring. His son, Shu, represented dry air, and his daughter, Tefnut, represented corrosive moist air. The twins symbolize two universal principles of human existence: life and right (justice).

The twins separated the sky from the waters. They produced children named Geb, the dry land, and Nut, the sky. When the primeval waters receded, a mound of earth (Geb) appeared, providing the first solid dry land for the sun god, Re, to rest. During the dynastic period, Atum was also known as Re, meaning the sun at its first rising.

Geb and Nut produced four offspring: Seth, the god of disorder; Osiris, the god of order; and their sisters, Nephthys and Isis. This new generation completed the Heliopolitan Ennead, the group of nine deities that began with Atum, the primeval creator god.



Shu, the god of air, separates the sky goddess, Nut, from the earth god, Geb. Two ram-headed gods stand beside Shu.

Drawing: Catherine Fitzpatrick
Photo: Harry Foster (CMC S98 3504)

In another version of the creation story, the city of Hermopolis, in Middle Egypt, substituted the Ennead with a group of eight deities called the Ogdoad. It consisted of four pairs of gods and goddesses symbolizing different aspects of the chaos that existed before creation. The goddesses were depicted as snakes and the gods as frogs. Their names were Nun and Naunet (water), Amun and Amaunet (hiddenness), Heh and Hauhet (infinity), and Kek and Kauket (darkness).

The Sun God's Eye

The sun god, Re (a form of Atum), ruled over the earth, where humans and divine beings coexisted. Humans were created from the Eye of Re or *wedjat* (eye of wholeness). This happened when



Eye of Re or *wedjat*
CMC S97 10364

the eye separated from Re and failed to return. Shu and Tefnut went to fetch it, but the eye resisted. In the ensuing struggle, the eye shed tears from which humans were born.

The familiar eye motif is an enduring symbol for the creator, Atum, for Re and for Horus, the son of Osiris and Isis. It represents the power to see, to illuminate and to act. The act of bringing the eye back to the creator was equivalent to healing the earth — the restoration of right and order. Maintaining right and order to pre-

vent the earth from falling into chaos was central to the pharaoh's role.

Another version of the creation myth states that the *wedjat* simply wandered off, so Re sent Thoth, the moon god, to fetch it. When it returned, the eye found that another eye had taken its place. To pacify the furious eye, Re placed it on his brow in the shape of a uraeus (a cobra goddess), where it could rule the whole world. Pharaohs wore the uraeus on their brows as a symbol of protection and to show that they were descended from the sun god.

The First Rebellion

When Re became old, the deities tried to take advantage of his senility. Even humans plotted against him, which led to their fall from divine grace. In reaction to the

rebellion, Re sent his eye

to slaughter the rebels, a deed he accomplished by transforming himself

into Sekhmet, a raging powerful goddess (depicted as a lion). After punishing his foes, he changed himself into the contented goddess Hathor (depicted as a cow).

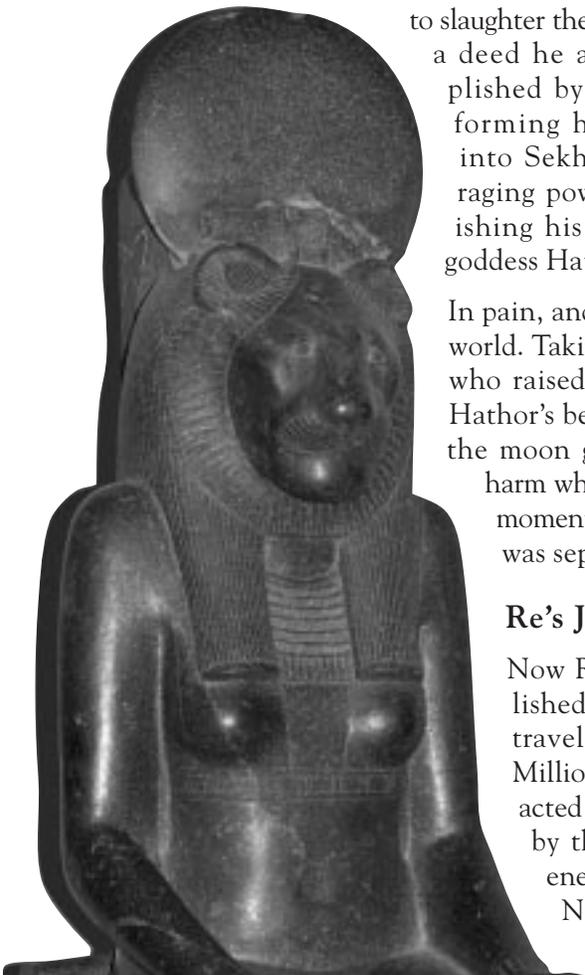
In pain, and weary of these problems, Re withdrew from the world. Taking the form of Hathor, he mounted on Nut (sky), who raised him to the heavens. The other gods clung to Hathor's belly and became the stars. Following this, Thoth, the moon god, was given a spell to protect humans from harm when the sun disappeared below the earth. From that moment on, humans were separated from the gods, as earth was separated from the heavens.

Re's Journey

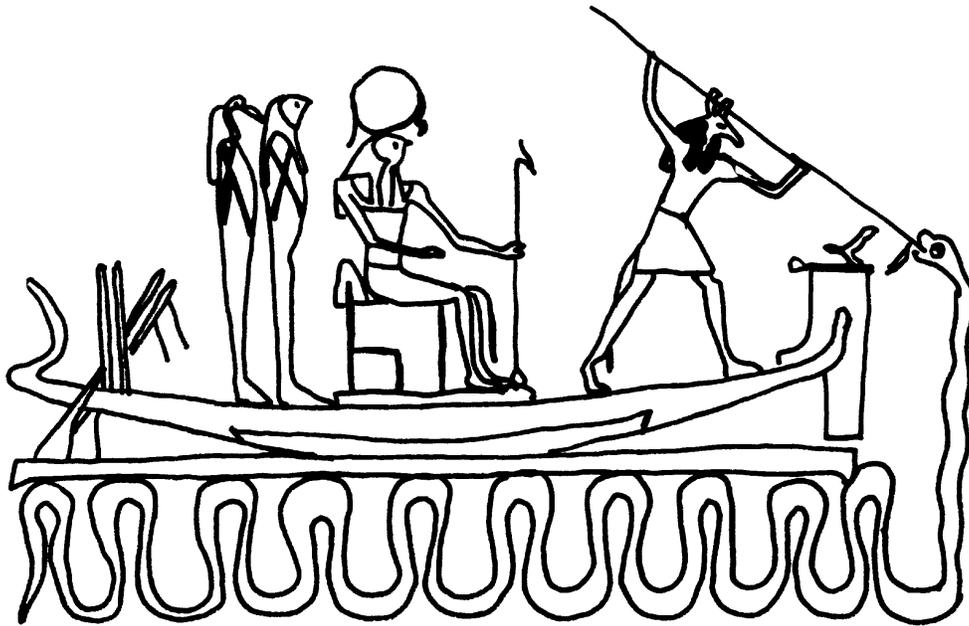
Now Re lived in the heavens, where order was established. Each morning he was reborn in the east and travelled across the sky in a boat, called the Bark of Millions of Years, accompanied by a number of gods who acted as his crew. The sun god was carried across the sky by the scarab god, Khepri, a dung beetle. His chief enemy was the Apep, a huge serpent that lived in the Nile and the waters of Nun. Apep tried to obstruct the solar bark's daily passage, but the sun god was ultimately victorious.



Pharaoh with a uraeus on his crown
CMC ECD98-029 #9 (photo)



Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess
CMC ECD98-024 #99 (photo)



Seth, at the prow of a solar bark, repels Apep, the evil snake of chaos. Re-Horakhty, the sun god, sits on his throne, and behind him stand Horus and Thoth.

The sun god was the most important deity in the Egyptian pantheon. He had many names: as the sun disk, he was Aten; as the rising sun, he was Khepri, the scarab; at the sun's zenith, he was Re, the supreme god of Heliopolis; and as the setting sun, he was Atum. Egypt's pyramids and obelisks, as well as the sphinx, were associated with the sun god. In the New Kingdom, the sphinx was a symbol for the sun god as Re-Horakhty, the winged sun disk that appeared on the horizon at dawn.

The sun, symbol of light and enlightenment, is probably the most enduring symbol found in ancient and modern religions. Living in a land of eternal sunshine, it is little wonder the ancient Egyptians chose the sun as the prime symbol for the creator of the universe.



The winged sun disk represents the sun god. It consists of the wings of Horus, two hooded cobras and a sun disk.

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