

## The Religion of Ancient Egypt: An Exploration of Beliefs and Practices



Temple of Luxor 1450 BC

The religion of Ancient Egypt was an integral part of everyday life and an influential force in the development of the civilization's culture and politics. A complex system of polytheistic beliefs and rituals, the Ancient Egyptian religion was marked by its focus on the interaction between the human, divine, and natural worlds.

- **What is mythology?**

Myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the World and humankind assumed their present form. A myth may arise as either truthful depictions or elaborated accounts of historical events, as allegory or personification of natural phenomena, or as an explanation of ritual, but not to be taken literally.

Creation myths generally take place in a primordial age, when the World had not yet achieved its current form and explain how the World gained its current form and how customs, institutions, and taboos were established.

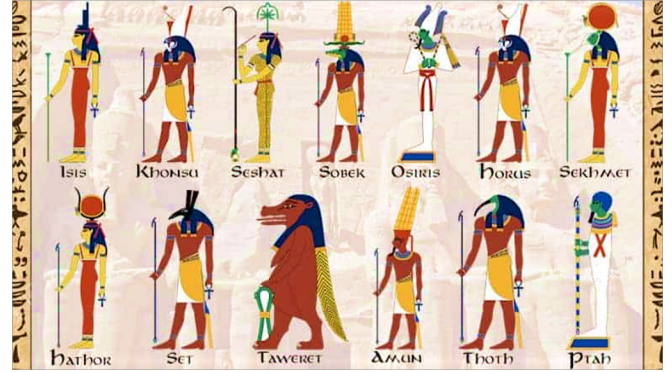
- **Creation Myth**

Creation myths generally take place in a Primordial Age. When the world had not yet achieved its current form. It explains how the world gained its current form. It represents the Theogony – the origins of the gods. Also, how customs, institutions and taboos were established. The creation of the universe took place over a long time. When 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.

- **Gods and Goddesses**

The pantheon of gods and goddesses was central to the Ancient Egyptian religion, each with specific roles and characteristics. There were gods associated with natural phenomena like the sun, sky, and Nile River, such as Ra, Nut, and Hapi. Other deities represented aspects of life and death, like Isis, the goddess of motherhood and fertility, and Osiris, the god of the underworld and judge of the dead.

The pantheon was not fixed, with the importance of gods rising and falling over time, often reflecting the political shifts of the civilization. An important example is the rise of the god Amun during the Middle Kingdom, eventually syncretizing with the sun god Ra to form Amun-Ra, a chief deity in the New Kingdom.



- **Belief in the Afterlife**

Belief in the afterlife was a fundamental aspect of Ancient Egyptian religion. The Egyptians believed that life continued after death in a different realm. Central to this belief was the concept of 'Ka', the spiritual double, which needed to be sustained after death. This belief led to the practice of mummification to preserve the body and the burial of material goods for use in the afterlife.

Judgment after death was another key belief, with the heart of the deceased being weighed against the feather of Ma'at, the goddess of truth and order, to determine their fate in the afterlife.

- **Rituals and Temples**

Religious rituals in Ancient Egypt varied greatly, from grand temple ceremonies to individual household rites. Temples were seen as homes for gods, where priests performed daily rituals to appease the gods and maintain Ma'at, the cosmic balance. These rituals often involved the presentation of offerings, recitations of hymns, and symbolic acts like the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony to animate statues of deities. Private rituals also played an essential role in religious life. Households often had small shrines for daily offerings and protective amulets were widely used.

- **Pharaohs and Religion**

Pharaohs, the rulers of Ancient Egypt, held a unique position in the religious system. They were seen as intermediaries between the gods and people, with some pharaohs being deified during or after their reign. The role of Pharaoh was not only political but also deeply religious. Pharaohs were responsible for maintaining Ma'at, building temples, and performing key religious rituals.



## The Ennead of Heliopolis, the Ancient Egyptian Creation Myth



The Ancient Egyptians, similar to other ancient civilizations, sought to explain their existence through various creation myths, the most prominent of which is the Ennead of Heliopolis. This essay explores this myth and its profound influence on Ancient Egyptian religious thought, society, and culture.

- **The Genesis of the World: Atum and the Benben**

The Heliopolitan cosmogony, named after the city of Heliopolis, where it was primarily worshipped, starts with the primordial waters of chaos, Nu or Nun. Within this infinite expanse, a mound known as the benben emerged. Atum, the first god, appeared on this mound, who was self-created or 'he who came into being of himself.' Atum represented the universe's completeness, encompassing male and female principles and holding the potential of life within himself.

- **Creation through Masturbation or Spit**

In the solitude of the primeval world, Atum brought forth the first divine pair, Shu and Tefnut, through masturbation or spitting, depending on the version of the myth. Shu, the god of air, and Tefnut, the goddess of moisture, were the first elements of life and represented the principles of dryness and wetness, respectively.

- **The Emergence of the World Order**

Shu and Tefnut, in turn, gave birth to two children: Geb, the earth, and Nut, the sky. This divine pair represented the physical world. However, Nut and Geb were inseparable, locked in an eternal embrace. Shu intervened and lifted Nut over him, creating space for air, earth, and sky. Geb and Nut produced four children: Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys. These nine deities — Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys — form the Ennead of Heliopolis.

- **The Role of the Ennead in Ancient Egyptian Beliefs**

The deities of the Ennead played crucial roles in Ancient Egyptian cosmology. Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys were central figures in the myths relating to themes of death and resurrection. The story of Osiris' murder by his brother Seth, his resurrection by his wife Isis, and the subsequent birth of their son Horus represented the cyclical nature of life and death and the concept of eternal life after death, crucial in Egyptian religious beliefs.

- **The Pharaoh and the Ennead**

The Pharaoh's connection to the Ennead was a fundamental aspect of Egyptian kingship. Pharaohs were believed to be the living embodiment of Horus and upon death, they would unite with Osiris, becoming rulers of the underworld. This belief system justified the divine kingship of the Pharaohs, reinforcing their authority and status in society.

- **The Ennead of Heliopolis**

Ra/Atum = Sun god, the Creator

Shu = god of Air

Tephnut = goddess of moist/water

Nut = goddess of the sky

Geb = god of earth

Osiris = god of the underworld

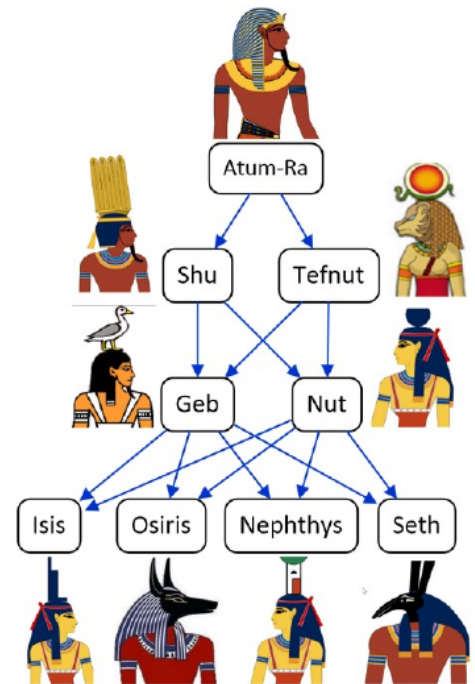
Isis = goddess of healing and magic, and mother of Horus

Seth. = god of chaos, the desert, storms, disorder, violence

Nephtys = goddess of household and protector of the dead

Horus = sky god/ successor of Ra and Osiris, protector of the ruler of Egypt.

Anubis = Protector of the deceased, mummification, and guardian of the cemetery



- **The Sun the Emblem of God**

- The Creator was symbolized by the sun, they called him RA.

- Ra is the Ruler of the real world and the underworld.

- The sun, symbol of light and enlightenment, is probably the most enduring symbol found in ancient and modern religions.

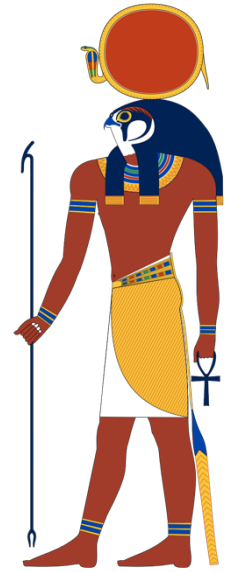
- Living in a land of eternal sunshine, it is little wonder the ancient Egyptians chose the sun as the prime symbol for the creator of the universe.

- From a number of passages drawn from texts of all periods it is clear that the form in which God made himself manifest to man upon earth was the sun, which the Egyptians called Ra and that all other gods and goddesses were forms of him. The principal authorities for epithets applied to God and to His visible emblem, the sun, are the hymns and litanies.

- In a late copy of a work entitled the "Book of Knowing the evolutions of Ra," the god Neb-er-tcher, the lord of the company of the gods, records the story of the creation and of the birth of the gods:--  
*"I am he who evolved himself under the form of the god Khepera, I, the evolver of the evolutions, evolved myself, the evolver of all evolutions, after many evolutions and developments which came forth from my mouth.[12] No heaven existed, and no earth and no animals or reptiles had come into being. I formed them out of the inert mass of watery matter; I found no place whereon to stand . . . . I was alone."*



- When the goddess Isis asks Ra about his name, He responds:
  - *I am the maker of the heavens and earth.*
  - *I am the establisher of the mountains.*
  - *I am the creator of the waters,*
  - *I am the maker of the secrets of the two horizons.*
  - *I am the light, and I am the darkness,*
  - *I am the maker of the hours, the creator of the days.*
  - *I am the opener of the gates,*
  - *I am the maker of the running streams,*
  - *I am Khepri in the morning, Ra at the noontime and Atum in the evening.*



- **The Concept of Life and Death in Ancient Egypt**

- **Life:**

- ◆ Conditional Continuity
- ◆ Duties and Responsibilities
- ◆ Morals
- ◆ Pleasing the gods

- **Death:**

- ◆ Inevitable
- ◆ Passage to Afterlife
- ◆ Full of Difficulties
- ◆ Need Protections and Guards

- **The Dead in the Tomb**

- The Five Principal Elements of the Deceased for Resurrection:
  1. Name
  2. Body
  3. Heart
  4. Ka – Spirit
  5. Ba – Soul
- During Death, the Ka (Spirit) and the Ba (Soul) frequently visit the body.

- **Religion Books**

1. Book of the Dead
2. Book of the underworld
3. Book of the Night
4. Book of Gates
5. Book of the Duat (12 hours of the night)
6. Book of Earth
7. Book of Nut
8. Book of the Caverns
9. Book of Litany of Ra

- **In a New Kingdom Egyptian tomb inscription from 1400 BCE Regarding one's afterlife reads:**  
*"May I walk every day unceasingly on the banks of my water, may my soul rest on the branches of the trees which I have planted, may I refresh myself in the shadow of my sycamore."*

To reach the eternal paradise of the Field of Reeds, however, one had to pass through the trial by Osiris, the judge of the dead, in the hall of truth.

- **The Declaration of Innocence**

There are 42 negative confessions that declare the innocence of the person. The perfect Egypt is the one whose heart does not carry any sin, and his heart is equal to Ma'at on the scale.

- **The Book of the Dead Chapter 125**

*"Peace be upon you, O the greatest God, the God of truth. I have come to you, O my God, subject to witness your majesty; I have come to you, O my God, embracing the truth, abandoning falsehood. For money other than me, I was not a liar, and I was not disobedient to you. I did not, O my God, cause the tears for a person, O my God, I did not cause the misery for an animal. I did not steal from the temples, I did not commit immorality, I did not desecrate anything sacred, I did not usurp forbidden money and did not violate the sanctity of the dead, I did not sell wheat at an exorbitant price and did not deceive anyone. I am pure, I am pure, I am pure."*

