

# THE DEATH OF OSIRIS

## VOCABULARY PREVIEW

Below is a list of words that appear in the story. Read the list and get to know the words before you read the story.

- appease—calm; lessen
- barren—lifeless
- brooding—thinking seriously
- contended—claimed; stated
- craned—stretched
- cunning—sly; clever
- descended—moved downward
- drastic—extreme
- eternity—endless time; life after death
- exquisite—beautifully made
- fertile—able to produce life
- former—previous; earlier
- frenzied—wild; out of control
- immortal—able to live forever
- intact—in one piece
- intrigued—fascinated; charmed
- labored—heavy; difficult
- resented—took offense at; felt anger at
- sorely—painfully; unbearably
- wailing—crying loudly

### Main Characters

- Horus—son of Isis and Osiris
- Isis—wife of Osiris
- Nephtys—Set's wife
- Osiris—pharaoh of Egypt; husband of Isis and father of Horus
- Set—brother to Osiris

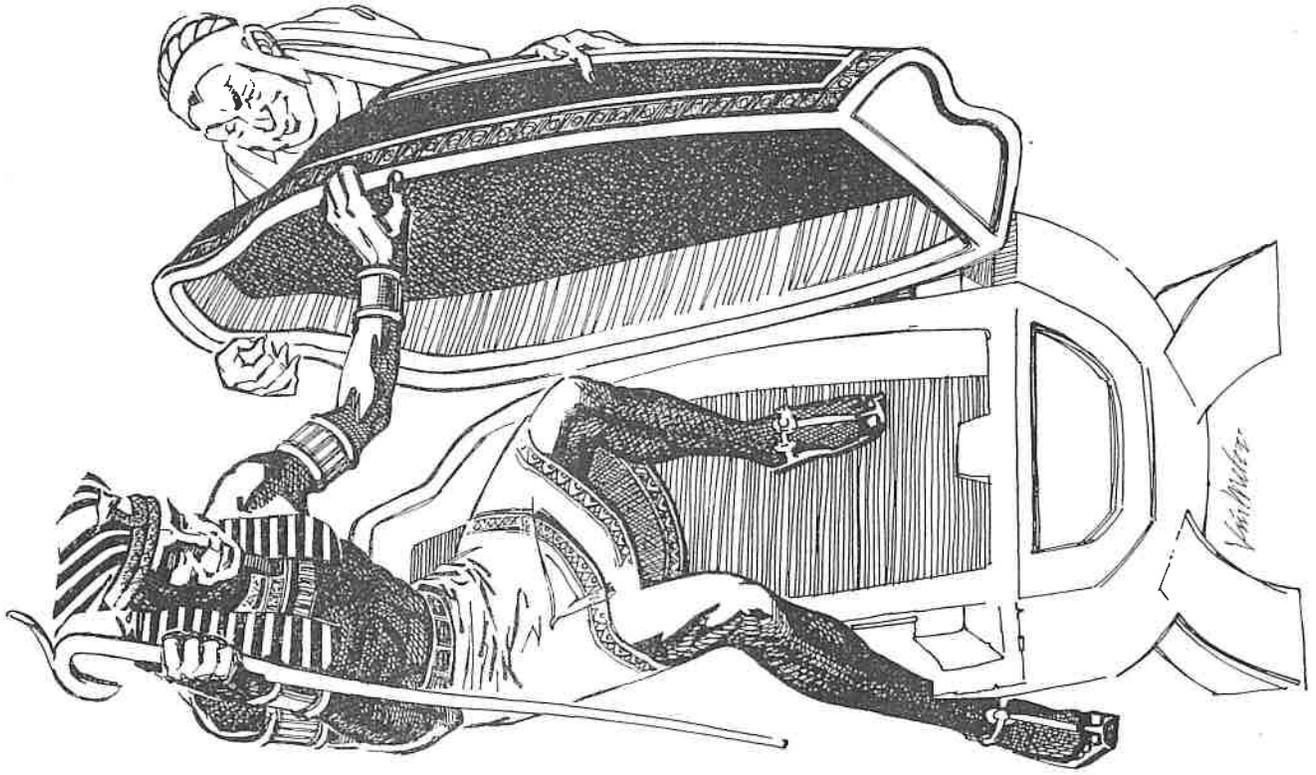
# The Death of Osiris

A myth from Egypt

*The kingdom of Egypt  
is wisely ruled by the powerful  
gods Osiris and Isis.*

*But even the gods aren't safe from  
the jealous schemes of others.*

*Osiris' evil brother, Set, wants the throne  
for himself. And he's figured out a  
way to get it—by offering his  
brother a special "gift."*



Osiris' closed his eyes and sighed wearily. Would the party never end? All this drinking and laughing and joking was giving him a headache. He was ready to go home. Osiris looked around him. No one else acted like they were ready to leave. He sighed again. "I'll stay just a few more minutes," he said to himself. "Then I'll go home to my wife. I don't care if I *am* the guest of honor."

Osiris was Egypt's pharaoh.<sup>1</sup> But he was no ordinary king—he was also a god. He was the great-grandson of Ra, the god who had created the earth.

1 (ō sēr' us)

2 (fā' rō) Pharaoh was the title of the ancient Egyptian kings.

Osiris was at his own homecoming party. The celebration had been planned by his brother Set.

Osiris and Set had never been particularly fond of each other. Osiris ruled the **fertile** land of Egypt with his wife Isis.<sup>3</sup> Set had to settle for governing the desert lands. For this reason, Set **resented** his brother's greater power.

So Osiris was surprised when Set invited him to the party. But Osiris wanted to trust his brother, so he accepted the invitation.

For the last several months, Osiris had been busy traveling throughout the land teaching the people how to grow food. He enjoyed his travels. But he was happy to be home again.

The pharaoh was especially glad to be back with his wife Isis. The lovely goddess had ruled the kingdom in her husband's absence. She had done a fine job.

Another loud burst of laughter from the party goers interrupted Osiris' thoughts.

"All right," Osiris thought. "I've had enough."

But just as he started to get up, he heard the voice of his brother Set.

"Quiet, everyone, I have something to say," Set announced.

Osiris sat back down. He would listen to whatever his brother had to say and then say good night.

"I have a surprise for you all," Set continued. "Something I hope you'll enjoy." Set then turned to face one of the doorways.

Osiris turned his gaze too. What he saw caused him to sit up. Several servants were carrying an empty casket<sup>4</sup> into the hall.

But this wasn't just any casket. It was the most beautiful one Osiris had ever seen.

A gasp of admiration followed the casket as it was brought to the front of the room.

"What do you think of it?" Set asked the crowd. "It was

<sup>3</sup> (i' sis)

<sup>4</sup> A casket is a box used for burial. The Egyptians buried their dead in beautifully carved coffins that were built to fit the dead person.

made especially for this dinner by the finest carpenters in the land."

Osiris and the other guests **craned** their necks to get a closer look. The lid and sides of the casket were decorated with **exquisite** designs. And the entire box was covered with gold and jewels.

The Egyptians took great delight in such a well-made casket. They knew that earthly life was but a step toward the next. One's burial place needed to be pleasant in order to enjoy a happy life in the world to come. That's why the Egyptians built large tombs and furnished them well.

The dinner guests could see that this casket was special. Every one of them would be happy to spend **eternity** in such a charming place.

"We're going to have a contest," Set announced. "Everyone shall try out the coffin. The lovely casket shall belong to the person who fits it perfectly."

Immediately everyone scrambled to the front of the dining hall. Each wanted to be the first to lie down in the casket.

Osiris stayed behind and watched. He forgot about wanting to go home.

"How wonderful it would be to have such a casket for myself," he thought. "But is it proper for someone of my rank to take part in such a game? After all, I am pharaoh."

As Osiris looked on, the guests tried out the casket one by one. However, no one seemed to be an exact fit. They were either too short or too tall. Or they were too fat or too thin.

At last everyone except Osiris had lain in the coffin. And everyone except Osiris wore a disappointed look.

Set looked at his brother. "You must try it, Osiris," he declared.

The pharaoh was doubtful at first. "I'm not sure I should do this," he said.

But the guests encouraged him.

"None of us fit, Osiris," one said. "You're the only one left."

Osiris walked up to the casket and looked in. It certainly seemed to be close to his size. What would be the harm in just

trying it out?

Without delay, Osiris climbed into the coffin and lay down.

"A perfect fit!" cried one of the guests.

"The casket is yours!" exclaimed another.

Set walked over to the casket and peered inside.

"Yes," he said, smiling down at his brother. "Just as I planned." His smile suddenly grew cruel. "Dear brother. You're going to the Underworld earlier than expected."

Set's voice began to grow louder. "At last, this is my hour, Osiris."

"What are you talking about?" asked Osiris with a nervous laugh.

"I should have been named the ruler of all of Egypt. But your **cunning** wife Isis tricked our great-grandfather. She discovered his secret name and used it to gain power for you both.

"In the meantime," Set continued with anger in his voice, "I was left to rule the desert. What can I do with that?"

"Nothing," Set answered himself. "Nothing grows there; few people live there. I feel like I rule a pile of sand.

"All that's going to change," Set **contended**, raising his voice. "Now I will rule all of Egypt. And you, Osiris, won't be around to stop me!"

With those words, Set slammed the lid of the coffin shut.

"Let me out!" Osiris called. "Set, there is no reason for this!"

From inside the dark casket, the trapped pharaoh heard nails being driven into the lid. Osiris began to panic as he realized that Set was trying to kill him!

Osiris' breathing grew more and more **labored**. The air in the coffin was quickly running out.

"Oh, Isis," thought Osiris, thinking of his beautiful wife. "Little do you know that as you sleep, your husband, the father of your son, is being murdered!"

Osiris felt himself being moved. In another moment he was falling. Suddenly he felt a sharp bump and heard a splash.

"I'm in water," was Osiris' last thought. Then he closed

his eyes and lost all consciousness.

◆ ◆ ◆  
The next morning Isis sleepily opened her eyes and looked at the pillow next to her.

She sat up quickly. Where was Osiris? Surely the party hadn't lasted all night? Her thoughts were interrupted by a **frenzied** knock at the bedroom door.

"Oh, Isis," cried a servant upon entering. "I have some horrible news. Set has killed Osiris!"

"What?" Isis screamed. "No, it can't be. Not Osiris! Tell me it's not true!"

Isis soon found out it *was* so. She listened in disbelief as her servant told of Osiris' murder. Then she tore through the palace, **wailing** with grief.

No one could comfort her. She had lost her husband and partner. Her son Horus had lost his father. But worse than death, her noble husband would go without burial.

"Where will my husband spend eternity?" she cried. "He should be buried in the finest tomb on earth! Instead, he's lost in the muddy waters of the Nile!

"I've got to find him," Isis finally decided. "I can't just forget about him."

If anyone could manage that task, it was Isis. She was a mighty sorceress,<sup>5</sup> with the power to perform great magic.

Isis began her quest by changing herself into an elderly woman. Then she set out to find her dead husband.

The grieving goddess first followed the Nile, hoping against hope to find the coffin washed up against the bank. But she found no sign of it anywhere.

Isis didn't give up, though. She vowed to herself that she wouldn't stop searching until she had found Osiris.

◆ ◆ ◆  
What had become of the unlucky pharaoh whose own brother had plotted against him?

Poor Osiris had quickly drowned as water filled the casket. Then the river carried him and his golden box out into

<sup>5</sup> A sorceress is a female magician.

the Green Sea.<sup>6</sup> The casket washed up on the Phoenician shore near the city of Byblos.<sup>7</sup> There a tamarisk<sup>8</sup> tree quickly sprang up around it. Before long the rapidly growing tamarisk completely enclosed the coffin within its trunk.

This is how a tree became the tomb of the god of all growing things. Perhaps that is why the tamarisk quickly grew to be the largest of its kind.

One day the king and queen of Byblos saw the tree and were impressed with its tall, straight trunk.

"What a perfect addition to our new palace," the king exclaimed.

The queen agreed. "And smell the tree's lovely perfume. Its heavenly scent will fill all the rooms."

So the tamarisk, with the coffin hidden inside, was used as a ceiling support for the great hall of the new palace of Byblos.

Meanwhile Isis had arrived at the Green Sea. She followed the shore, questioning every traveler she met along the way. At last she approached Byblos. There she began to hear stories of a wonderful tamarisk tree supporting the great hall of the palace.

"The tree gives off the most wonderful perfume," said travelers coming from that direction. "There has never been a tree like it in this land."

As Isis neared the palace, she immediately recognized the perfume. It was the favorite scent of her beloved husband.

"Osiris' body must be trapped inside that tamarisk tree," she thought. "But how can I get to the coffin if the tree is used as a support? To suddenly remove the tree will bring the new palace to the ground. Even cutting the tree open to remove the coffin might cause the ceiling to fall."

Wearily Isis sat down to rest while she tried to figure out what to do. As it should happen, the handmaidens<sup>9</sup> of the queen of Byblos came by. Isis greeted them warmly.

<sup>6</sup> The Green Sea was the Egyptian name for the Mediterranean.

<sup>7</sup> Byblos was located near present-day Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>8</sup> A tamarisk is a tree with tiny narrow leaves that grows in desert areas.

<sup>9</sup> Handmaidens are female servants.

The young women were **intrigued** by this strange woman who looked like one of royal blood. "She is clearly from a foreign country," said one handmaiden to another.

The handmaidens took Isis in, giving her a place to rest and food to eat. In turn, Isis quickly became a favorite of the young girls. She showed them new ways to arrange and perfume their hair. She secretly used her magic to help them with their daily problems.

After a short time the handmaidens told their queen of the wonderful woman. The queen was curious, so she sent for Isis.

"Certainly this stranger is Egyptian," the queen thought when she stared into the sad, kind eyes of Isis. Egyptians were known to have magic powers.

"You must stay and be nurse to my young son," the queen of Byblos said to Isis.

The goddess readily agreed. Now she had an excuse to stay at the palace while she thought of a way to rescue her dead husband.

Isis soon grew to love the royal child. He reminded her of her own young son Horus, whom she **sorely** missed. She loved the baby so much that she decided to make him **immortal**.

Every night, she placed the baby on the burning coals of the fireplace. The spells she cast kept the baby from burning. "Don't be afraid, my child," the goddess cooed. "Soon you will be just like the gods."

But Isis' spells were interrupted one night when the child's mother entered the room unexpectedly. The poor woman saw her baby in the fire and screamed in terror. "How dare you try to kill my baby!" she cried. "I trusted you!"

The king heard his wife's cries and rushed into the room.

"What is the meaning of this?" he angrily demanded.

Isis was sad that the spell had been broken. Now the precious baby could never become immortal.

But then the goddess saw how frightened the child's parents were. To **appease** their fear, she removed her disguise.

There she stood in her full glory before the king and queen of Byblos.

The royal pair were awestruck. They knew at once that they faced a goddess—and that their son had received very special care indeed.

"Please forgive us, goddess. You must stay with us here in the palace," they invited.

"Thank you for your kind offer," Isis replied. "But I have found what I came for." She led them to the great hall and pointed to the tamarisk tree. "This noble tree is the tomb of my husband, the pharaoh Osiris. I didn't wish to destroy your palace by opening it."

The king and queen of Byblos were amazed. They now understood why the tamarisk was unlike any other tree in their kingdom. Quickly they called together the craftsmen who had built the palace.

"Tell us how to remove this tree," the king said to the builders. The head craftsman looked up at the ceiling and scratched his head. He studied how the tree supported the roof. He knew another tree like this was not to be found in the whole kingdom.

"Perhaps we can replace the tree with a support made of smaller trees," the craftsman said at last. "But we must build a structure to hold everything in place while we remove the tamarisk."

"Do it, then," commanded the King.

The structure was built, just as the craftsman had suggested. When that was done, the workers safely removed the tamarisk from the great hall. Then the king and queen of Byblos happily presented the tree to Isis.

"At last!" the goddess exclaimed. "At last I will be able to see my beloved husband again."

Isis used her magic to open the tree trunk, revealing the wonderful coffin. Then she opened the coffin and looked upon her husband's face.

The pharaoh was truly dead, but he looked as young and handsome as he had in life. The goddess flung herself across the coffin, weeping bitterly.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" the queen of Byblos offered in sympathy.

"No," Isis replied tearfully. "There is nothing anyone can do."

"At least let us provide you with a ship for your return home," the king insisted.

"Thank you," Isis said. "That is very kind."

As the ship carried her home, Isis silently sat beside the coffin. She was too wrapped up in her sorrow to move or speak.

The ship reached the Nile and began to make its way up the mighty river. Isis now saw that Egypt's very soil was no longer fertile. All green growth had turned brown. Egypt was beginning to look like the deserts of Set's former kingdom.

"How sad that Egypt suffers just as I do!" Isis thought. "Will the land itself die of grief over Osiris?"

Isis ran her hand over the designs carved into the coffin. "Dear Osiris," she whispered to her husband's body. "I brought you back to Egypt so that I could bury you—so that you would have a good afterlife. But Egypt suffers under Set's rule.

"We'll have to do something more **drastic**," Isis continued. "I know of certain magical herbs<sup>10</sup> growing in the marshes. I shall use them and return you to life. But I must keep you hidden from Set. If he discovers what I mean to do, he'll ruin everything."

Isis ordered the ship's captain to land near the marshes along the river's edge. She carefully hid the casket among the reeds. Then she covered it with leaves and branches.

Isis walked far up the river bank, searching for the magical herbs. She didn't notice a pair of eyes poking out of the water, watching every move she made.

The eyes were those of a scaly crocodile who grinned wickedly as Isis searched the marsh. Unfortunately, the beast was one of Set's spies. Once the crocodile saw what Isis had done, he slipped beneath the surface without making a splash.

<sup>10</sup> Herbs are plants that are sometimes used as medicine or seasoning.

Swiftly the crocodile swam toward Set's new palace. In a short time, he was leading Set himself to the coffin.

"So Isis has found you," Set said to Osiris' body. "Perhaps she plans to bury you. Or maybe she would like to bring you back to life.

"Well, we can't have that!" said Set with a chuckle. "I know just what to do!"

Set knew how important it was for the body to remain intact after death. Otherwise, the soul itself would not live on into the next life. So Set pulled his brother's body from the coffin and chopped it into sixteen pieces. Then he scattered the pieces of the body far and wide across the land of Egypt.

"There!" he said, when his business was completed. "That will take care of Osiris—in this world and the next!" Sure of his success, Set returned to his palace.

When Isis had found the herbs she needed, she returned to where she had hidden the coffin. She froze in horror at what she saw.

The lid of the coffin was flung open. The casket was empty. A scrap of Osiris' royal robe floated in the water. Isis trembled, realizing at once what the wicked Set had done.

"You will not win this way, Set!" Isis screamed into the wind. Her tears flowed into the Nile. Every creature grieved with her. Even the crocodile felt ashamed of Set's awful deed.

Isis searched the marsh nearby. A few pieces of Osiris' body were scattered there. But many more remained unbound.

"I will find them if I have to search all of Egypt!" Isis declared. She hurried back to her palace and began to prepare for the long journey ahead.

Before she left, Isis was surprised to receive a visit from Set's wife, the goddess Nephthys.<sup>11</sup>

"Isis, my husband must be stopped," Nephthys said. "Set killed Osiris because he hates all good and is only capable of evil. If he remains pharaoh, all Egypt will become a desert. The world will be full of suffering forever."

Isis looked deep into her sister's eyes, wondering for a

<sup>11</sup> (nef'this)

moment if this might be a trick. But Isis knew that Nephthys was a friend of the dead. She would never mistreat a soul that had recently died.

"Come, then, and help me search," said Isis gratefully. "It will not be an easy task, and I welcome your help."

So Isis and Nephthys set out through the land of Egypt. They wandered far and near, patiently gathering the pieces of Osiris' body.

Everywhere Isis and Nephthys went, they saw crops failing and people starving. "We must hurry," Nephthys said to Isis. "Otherwise Set will rule the whole world."

Wherever Isis and Nephthys found one of the pieces of the body, the local people celebrated and built a temple to Osiris. Isis hoped she could help these kind people by restoring Osiris' life—and the life of the land.

At last, Isis and Nephthys returned to the palace of Egypt with all sixteen pieces. Isis carefully put the body of Osiris back together again. She rubbed her husband's dead limbs with oils and the herbal potion she had made. Slowly but surely, the pieces of the body grew back together.

Isis prayed over the body, calling upon friendly gods. Even her son Horus helped her. The powers of the gods and the effects of the herbs, oils, and potion all began to do their work. But the most powerful medicine was Isis' love for her husband.

Hour after hour Isis prayed. And hour after hour the air crackled and the earth trembled. At last everything grew silent, as though the world was holding its breath.

The next sound was a sigh from Osiris' lips. He opened his eyes and found himself staring at his wife. "Isis, my love," he breathed.

The goddess was overjoyed. "Osiris!" she cried as she embraced him. "How wonderful to have you back at last!"

Indeed, all Egypt was thrilled to have the pharaoh back. And it wasn't just the people who rejoiced. The moment Osiris breathed again, the land also came back to life. The fields turned green, and trees again grew leaves.

Even though Osiris was brought back to life, his brother Set still ruled over Egypt. For this reason, Osiris, Isis, and their son Horus went into hiding.

Osiris was delighted to see his son again. "Horus will soon be a fine young man," he told Isis proudly. "One day he will be pharaoh."

Even in hiding the family lived happily for several months. But then, toward the end of the summer, Isis noticed that Osiris seemed less joyful. He looked tired and he spent more and more time **brooding** by himself. Soon he seemed no more than a shadow.

"Husband, something troubles you," said Isis with concern. "Please tell me what it is."

Osiris sighed. "I no longer feel at home among the living," he said sadly.

"What do you mean?" asked Isis.

"When my body was closed up in Set's coffin, my soul wandered through the Underworld,<sup>12</sup> restless and searching. There I learned all the ways of the dead.

"And now I think I know the Underworld better than I do my own kingdom," he continued. "I have given the living all the gifts I can. I want to return to the Underworld and help the dead."

"But you can't!" cried Isis, tears forming in her eyes. She ran to her husband and held him tightly. "Think of how Egypt will miss you—and how I will miss you!"

"I know, I know," said Osiris softly. "I'm deeply grateful. I have you to thank for letting me see my kingdom and my son again. But there's a time for death as well as life—even for gods.

"You know this as well as I do," he continued. "We both understand the land. We've seen how floods come and go. And after the floods, we've waited while the grain grows rich and golden. Then, after the harvest, we've watched the land

<sup>12</sup> The Underworld is the home of the dead.

grow brown and **barren** until it comes time for life again.

"Isis, you brought me back to life," Osiris said with a smile. "And when you did, the land was renewed. After I am gone, you will be reminded of me every spring—when the land becomes green again."

Isis bowed her head and thought over what her husband had said. Finally she sadly nodded her head in agreement. She knew it would be selfish to try to keep him among the living.

But one thing worried her. "Set still controls Egypt," she said to Osiris. "Without you here, how can your son and I protect ourselves?"

"Use your magic to protect Horus while he is a child," said Osiris. "That won't be for long. Soon he will be old enough to defeat Set. And even in the Underworld, I will be able to send my help."

These words comforted Isis. "Osiris, I will always love you. But I understand why you have to leave. And I know that one day I will join you. That's what will keep me going. So until then, farewell, my love!"

Isis remained strong as her husband **descended** into the Underworld. After all, she was watching one of the world's great mysteries—the magic circle of life and death. As a sorceress and goddess, Isis knew this magic very well.

In the Underworld, Osiris took his rightful place as king. There he greeted the newly arrived souls and taught them the ways of the afterlife. He ruled with fairness over the dead, just as he had over living men and women.

Not long after Osiris left the earth, Isis called her son to her side. She explained to him that he would one day rule Egypt. But he would have to defeat Set to do so.

"You'll need special powers to overthrow Set," Isis said. "I'm going to give you a secret word that will give you the power you need to be pharaoh. The word is the secret name of your great-great-grandfather—Egypt's first pharaoh. You must guard this word carefully."

Then bending low, she said, "The name is..."