UNE ✦ SACRA

Ancient Egypt

Legends of the Gods

(Egyptian myths)

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Egyptian priests and scribes

Adaptation (edition 1.2)

Credits

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About:

The great myths of Ancient Egypt, translated directly from papyri, stelae and temple walls. Ra tells how he created himself and the world out of the primeval waters of Nu; he sends his Eye, the goddess Hathor-Sekhmet, to destroy rebellious mankind and then saves it by making the goddess drunk on blood-red beer; Isis wrests Ra's secret name from him through the bite of a serpent she herself has fashioned; Horus of Behutet, in the form of the winged sun-disk, pursues Set and his allies throughout Egypt.

The collection is completed by the hymn to Osiris from the stele of Amen-em-heb, with Isis's search for her dead husband and the birth of Horus; the legend of the princess of Bekhten, healed by the statue of the god Khensu; the seven years' famine that ends when the king honours the god Khnemu, lord of the source of the Nile; and the Metternich stele, where Isis tells of her flight with the infant Horus, the scorpion sting that kills him and his resurrection by Thoth.

For readers who want the story, the Une Sacra "Adaptation" retells it in modern language, with notes where the original is broken. E. A. Wallis Budge's translation remains available.

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Prose adaptation: the nine legends told in modern English. Where the original is broken or needs explaining, a note in parentheses says what is missing and what is known from other sources. For the faithful text, choose the translation by E. A. Wallis Budge.

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THE HISTORY OF CREATION (A)

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1 This is the Book of Knowing the Transformations of Ra and of Overthrowing Apep, the serpent of chaos. (It comes from a papyrus of the fourth century BC, kept in the British Museum, copied from much older texts.)

2 The Lord of All speaks, after coming into being: "I am he who came into being in the form of Khepra, the scarab that is the rising sun. I am the creator of all that exists. Before me there was neither sky nor earth, nor the creatures that creep on the ground. I made them arise from the primeval waters of Nu, where I was without finding a place to stand."

3 "I was alone. Then, from myself, I brought forth Shu, the air, and Tefnut, the moisture. So, from one god alone, I became three. Shu and Tefnut moved away from me in the waters, and my Eye went after them and brought them back. When they returned, I wept for joy over them, and from my tears men and women were born."

4 "My Eye grew angry when it saw that I had put another in its place, and I set it on my brow, as the serpent that guards my head. Then I made the plants and the animals. Shu and Tefnut begot Geb, the earth, and Nut, the sky. And Geb and Nut begot Osiris, Horus, Set, Isis and Nephthys, and their children multiplied upon the earth."

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THE HISTORY OF CREATION (B)

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1 (This is another version of the same text, in the same papyrus.) The Lord of All speaks: "I came into being alone, in the form of Khepra, in the primeval time. I formed myself from the matter of the waters, when there was not yet any place to set my feet."

2 "I made everything by the power of the word, which was in my heart. I was one, alone; I laid the foundations of things and created the other forms. I united with my shadow, and from me came forth Shu and Tefnut, and they begot Geb and Nut."

3 "From the weeping of my Eye came human beings. When my Eye returned and saw that I had made another in its place, it grew angry, and I set it on my forehead, to rule the whole earth."

4 "And from the children of Geb and Nut came Osiris, Isis, Set, Nephthys and Horus, and their descendants filled the earth. That is why whoever recites this book overthrows Apep, the enemy of Ra, and Ra sails in peace across the sky."

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THE DESTRUCTION OF MANKIND

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1 This is the story of Ra, the god who created himself, when he was already king of men and of gods. Ra grew old: his bones turned to silver, his flesh to gold, and his hair to lapis lazuli. Men noticed it and started to plot against him: "Look, the king has grown old."

2 Ra heard and gathered the gods in secret: Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, the fathers who were with him in the waters of Nu, and Nu himself. He said: "Eldest god, from whom I came into being, ancient gods, my ancestors: see, the men who were born of my Eye are plotting against me. Tell me what to do. I do not want to kill them before I have heard your counsel."

3 Nu answered: "My son Ra, you are greater than the one who made you. Let your Eye go against those who have spoken against you." Ra saw that men had fled into the desert, afraid. The gods said: "Send your Eye in the form of Hathor, to kill them."

4 The Eye of Ra set out in the form of Hathor and killed the men in the desert. She came back and said: "I have overpowered men, and it pleased my heart." And the goddess came to be called Sekhmet, the Mighty One. (That is where the name of the lioness goddess comes from.) But Sekhmet, seized with thirst for blood, wanted to go on and put an end to all mankind.

5 Ra took pity on those who were left. He sent swift messengers to the island of Elephantine to fetch red ochre in abundance. He had the servant women grind barley to make beer, and mixed the red ochre into the beer

until it was the colour of human blood. They made seven thousand jars.

6 At night Ra had the red beer poured out over the fields, until it flooded them to a depth of four palms. In the morning the goddess came to continue the slaughter and saw the fields full. She found her own reflection beautiful, drank the beer, became drunk and went back home without recognizing men. So mankind was saved. (That is why, the text says, strong beer was drunk at the festivals of Hathor.)

7 But Ra was weary of living among men: "I am weary of being with them. I killed some, but the rest are worth nothing, and the destruction was not as great as my power." Nu told Shu to help his father, and the goddess Nut to carry him.

8 Nut turned into a cow, and Ra climbed onto her back. Men saw it and were afraid that he was going away forever; they tried to follow him and quarrelled among themselves. The cow rose higher and higher, until she grew dizzy and trembled, and Ra asked Shu to hold her up. Shu stood beneath Nut's belly, holding her up, and the eight gods of Heh held her legs. So the sky was raised up over the earth.

9 In the sky Ra made the Fields of Reeds and the Fields of Peace, where the blessed dead dwell, and filled the sky with stars. Then he called Geb and gave him charge of the serpents of the earth, and called Thoth and made him his deputy: "Stay in my place in the sky, while I give light to the dead down below." So Thoth became the Moon, which shines at night in place of the Sun. (The text ends with magical instructions for whoever recites this story.)

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RA AND ISIS

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1 Ra, the god who created himself, had many names, but his true name, the secret name, no one knew, not even the gods. That name was the source of his power. Isis was a wise woman, wiser than millions of gods, and she knew everything in heaven and on earth except the secret name of Ra. And she decided to discover it.

2 Ra was already old, and as he walked he let saliva drip from his mouth, which fell to the ground. Isis gathered that saliva with earth, moulded a sacred serpent from it and left it on the path by which Ra passed every day.

3 When Ra passed by with his gods, the serpent bit him. The venom entered his body, and he cried out to heaven. The gods asked: "What is it?" But Ra could not answer: his lips trembled, and the venom spread through his flesh like the Nile in flood. "Something has wounded me, and I do not know what it is. It was not I who made it. I have never felt pain like this. I am colder than water and hotter than fire."

4 The gods came weeping, and Isis came too, with her magic, the word that gives life and drives away pain. "What is it, divine father? Was it a serpent? Tell me your name, for he whose name is spoken lives."

5 Ra said: "I am he who made heaven and earth, who raised up the mountains and created all that exists. I am Khepra in the morning, Ra at noon and Atum in the evening." But the venom did not come out. Isis said: "That is not your true name. Tell me your name, and the venom will come out."

6 The venom burned like fire. At last Ra said: "Bend your ear, my daughter Isis, so that my name may pass from my body into yours." And he hid himself from the gods, and the name passed to Isis. (The text does not reveal the name.) Isis told Horus to keep the secret, and spoke the spell: "Come out, venom, come out of Ra! Let Ra live and let the venom die!" And Ra was healed. (The text ends with the recipe for the spell against scorpion and snake bites, which was its use.)

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HORUS OF BEHUTET AND THE WINGED DISK

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1 In the year 363 of the reign of Ra-Harakhti on earth, Ra was in Nubia with his soldiers when his enemies plotted against him. Ra set out in his boat down the Nile, and came to the region of Edfu, which is called Behutet.

2 Horus of Behutet was in Ra's boat, and Ra said to him: "Horus, my son, overthrow the enemies who are before you." Horus flew up to the horizon in the form of a great sun disk with wings, and that is why he is called "Great god, lord of the sky". From on high he saw the enemies and attacked them so fiercely that they lost their sight and hearing and killed one another. In an instant, no one was left alive.

3 Horus came back to the boat shining with many colours, and Ra embraced him: "You have made my heart happy." Ra went to see the fallen enemies and said: "There is sweet life here", and that is why the palace of Horus in Edfu is called "Sweet Life". (The text, carved in the temple of Edfu, explains the names of many places in this way.)

4 But the enemies who were left turned into crocodiles and hippopotamuses and went into the river to attack Ra's boat. Horus came with his followers, the smiths, armed with iron spears and chains, and they killed six hundred and fifty-one crocodiles before Edfu.

5 The war went on throughout all Egypt, down the river, and in every place Horus defeated the enemies, who were the followers of Set. Near the sea, Set himself appeared and shouted against Horus, and the two fought. Horus threw Set down, brought him bound before Ra, and Isis asked that he be handed over to Horus. Horus cut off the heads of his followers, and Set fled in the form of a serpent into the earth. (The text is long and repeats many battles, city by city.)

6 In the end, Ra said to Thoth: "Let Horus of Behutet be placed in all the temples of the gods of Egypt." That is why the winged sun disk is painted on every temple doorway, and whoever puts it there is protected from enemies.

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A HYMN TO OSIRIS AND THE ORIGIN OF HORUS

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1 Praise to Osiris, lord of eternity, king of the gods, of many names, of sacred forms and of rites hidden in the temples. He is the eldest of the brothers, the eldest son of Geb and Nut, who received from his father the rule of the earth. (It is a hymn carved on a stele of the New Kingdom, now in the Louvre.)

2 Osiris ruled Egypt with justice. He made the Nile flow, brought abundance, taught the laws, and gods and men loved him. But his brother Set, out of envy, killed him. (The hymn does not tell of the death of Osiris directly, out of reverence; it only says that he "fell".)

3 Isis, his sister and wife, searched for the body without rest. She went about the earth weeping, not stopping until she found it. With her wings she made shade and with her wings she made a breeze over him; she made the gestures of lamentation and brought her brother back to life. She roused the weary one, the one who lay motionless, took his seed from him and had a son.

4 She raised the child alone, hidden in the marshes of the delta, without anyone knowing where she was. When the boy grew strong, she brought him before the gods. This son is Horus, the avenger of his father.

5 The gods gathered in assembly and judged the dispute between Horus and Set. They found for Horus: they gave him his father's throne and the kingship of the earth. Horus was crowned, and there was joy in heaven and

on earth. Evil was driven away, justice returned, and Osiris came to reign in the world of the dead, as judge and lord of eternity.

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KHENSU AND THE PRINCESS OF BEKHTEN

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1 In the time of Pharaoh Ramesses II, the king was in Mesopotamia receiving the tribute of foreign peoples. The prince of Bekhten brought gifts and, at their head, his eldest daughter, who was very beautiful. Pharaoh found her more beautiful than anything, gave her the name Neferu-Ra and made her his great royal wife. (This is the "Bentresh Stele", an inscription from the temple of Khonsu in Thebes, written centuries after the reign of Ramesses.)

2 Years later, a messenger from the prince of Bekhten arrived in Thebes: "Bentresh, the queen's younger sister, is ill, and no one can cure her. Send a wise man to examine her." Pharaoh sent the royal scribe Tehuti-em-heb, a wise man. He went to Bekhten and saw that the princess was possessed by a spirit, against which he had no power.

3 The prince sent another request: "Send a god to fight against this spirit." Pharaoh went to the temple of Khonsu, the moon god, in Thebes, and asked the god to send an image of himself, Khonsu the Planner, who drives out evil spirits. The statue agreed with a nod of the head and received the magic power of the great Khonsu.

4 The statue travelled seventeen months to Bekhten, by boat and with chariots and horses. When it arrived, it worked its magic on the princess, and she was healed at once. The spirit spoke to the god: "Come in peace, great god. Bekhten is yours, its people are your servants, and I too am your

servant. I will go back to the place I came from. But ask the prince to hold a feast for me and for you." Khonsu agreed, the prince held the feast, and the spirit went away.

5 The prince was so happy that he wanted to keep the god forever, and the statue stayed three years and nine months in Bekhten. Until one night the prince dreamed that the god came out of the shrine in the form of a golden falcon and flew off to Egypt. He woke sick with fear and had the statue sent back to Thebes, with many gifts. Khonsu the Planner handed over all the gifts to the great Khonsu in his temple, keeping nothing for himself.

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KHNEMU AND THE SEVEN YEARS' FAMINE

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1 In the year 18 of Pharaoh Djoser, the king sent a message to the governor of the south, in Elephantine: "I am sad on my throne, because for seven years the Nile has not risen. Grain is scarce, the seeds have dried up, and everything there is to eat is meagre. The people rob their neighbours, the children cry, the old are downhearted, the temples are shut.

1.2 I want to know where the Nile springs from and which god dwells there." (This is the "Famine Stele", carved on a rock on the island of Sehel in the time of the Ptolemies, but set two thousand years earlier, in the age of Djoser and his wise man Imhotep.)

2 The governor came and explained: the Nile springs at Elephantine, from two caverns beneath the earth, called Qerti. There dwells Khnum, the ram-headed god, who guards the gates of the river and releases it at the right season. He is also the potter who shapes men on his wheel.

3 Pharaoh went to the temple of Khnum, offered sacrifices and prayed. At night Khnum appeared to him in a dream: "I am Khnum, who made you. My arms are around you. I know what goes on in the Nile. I will make it rise again, with no more years of want, and the plants will grow, and the famine will end. The granaries will be filled, and the people will rejoice."

4 Pharaoh woke happy and, in thanksgiving, gave to the temple of Khnum the lands on both sides of the river near Elephantine, and a tenth of everything that came from them: grain, fish, birds, cattle, gold and precious

stones. And he had the decree carved on a stone in the sanctuary, so that no one would forget it.

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THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF HORUS

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1 (This text comes from a magical stele of the time of Pharaoh Nectanebo II, the "Metternich Stele", used to cure scorpion stings.) Isis speaks: "I am Isis. I came out of the house where Set, my brother, had shut me in. Thoth, the great god, said to me: come, goddess Isis, hide yourself with your son, so that he may grow and become strong and take his father's throne."

2 "I went out in the evening, and seven scorpions came with me to protect me. Three went in front, two on each side, and two behind. I said to them: look at no one, speak to no one on the way. We came to a town, and a rich woman saw me from afar and shut the door in my face. The scorpions were furious and gathered their venom into the sting of one of them, Tefen."

3 "A poor peasant woman opened the door of her house to me. But Tefen went in under the rich woman's door and stung her son, and fire broke out in the house. The woman went weeping through the town, and no one helped her. My heart took pity on that child, who was not to blame. I laid my hands on him and spoke the spell: venom of Tefen, come out, fall to the ground! The child lived, and the fire went out. The rich woman, repentant, brought her goods to the peasant woman who had taken me in."

4 "Afterwards, in the marshes of Khemmis, I raised my son Horus. One day I went out to fetch food, and when I came back I found Horus fallen, lifeless, with water in his eyes and foam at his mouth, his body limp and

his heart still. A scorpion had stung him. I cried out, and no one came. The fishermen and the peasants of the marsh came and wept with me, but no one knew the spell."

5 "Nephthys, my sister, came weeping, and the goddess Serqet, she of the scorpions, came too. They said to me: cry out to heaven, so that the boat of Ra may stop. And I cried out. The boat of the Sun stopped in the sky, and Thoth came down, full of magic: what is it, Isis? No harm can come to your son, for the boat of Ra protects him. I have come to give Horus back his breath."

6 Thoth spoke the great spell: "Awake, Horus! Let the venom come out, let it fall to the ground! The boat of Ra shall not move, the sun shall not shine, the flood shall not come, the plants shall not grow, until Horus lives again for his mother!" The venom came out, and Horus breathed again. Isis embraced him.

6.2 Thoth told the people of the marsh to take care of the boy, and went back to heaven, and the boat of Ra went on its way. (From then on, whoever was stung was cured with these words, which identified the sick person with Horus.)

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