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Cover by John Bayalis and Homer Holdren

ISIS: *Wife and Mother of the Sun*

FOR almost two millenia, the religion of ancient Egypt has claimed the interest of the nations of the West. When the once-powerful gods of Greece and Rome became shadowy philosophical abstractions with little hold on the people, a large part of the classical world turned to the ancient wisdom of Egypt. The obscure temple hieroglyphs, the obelisks and sphinxes before the shrines, the strange linen vestments of the priests with their shaven heads and faces, the endless, archaic ritual, and the animal forms of some of the idols, everywhere filled the classical world with peculiar awe. Wonderful mysteries seemed surely to be hidden beneath these incomprehensible externals. In particular, worship of the deities of the Osirian cycle of myths, which included the cult of Isis as the archetypal wife and mother, spread throughout the Roman Empire.

Osiris was one of the oldest of the great solar gods of Egypt. As king of the earth, he was aided in his government by his faithful sister-wife, Isis. A benefactor of men, and beloved as a righteous ruler, he nevertheless provoked the jealousy of his brother, Seth, and was craftily misled and slain by him. After great tribulation, Isis gained possession of her lord's body and reanimated it by means of her magic. Although unable to resume his earthly kingdom, Osiris passed down in triumph to the nether world, to become ruler of the dead.

On earth, Isis escaped the continuing persecution of Seth by taking refuge in the marshy fastnesses of the Nile Delta. Here her son, Horus, was born and secretly reared. Grown to manhood, the youth determined to become the avenger of his father. He pursued Seth, and in the ensuing awful battle, during which both were fearfully mutilated, Seth was finally conquered. Horus triumphantly assumed the earthly throne of his father. Unwilling to accept defeat, Seth then raised before the tribunal of the gods the question of the validity of Horus's claim

to his father's throne. Defended by Thoth, the god of letters, Horus was vindicated and his position as ruler of the earth upheld. Thus Horus became for the people the embodiment of the qualities of a good son, and one who symbolized their hope in the ultimate triumph of the just cause.

But Horus not only inspired the living; he had also an important function to perform for the dead. In the nether world was the great hall of judgment, with its tribunal of strange daemonic forms before whom each dead person must appear to confess his sins. If the deceased could declare that he had neither stolen, nor committed adultery, nor reviled the king, nor committed any other sin; and if the great balance, on which his heart was weighed against the feather of truth, showed that he was an innocent person, he was acquitted of punishment. Horus then presented the worthy soul to his father, Osiris, and the deceased joined the nation of the blessed dead.

The bronze statue of Isis and Horus on this month's BULLETIN cover dates from about 600 B.C., a period when the religion of the Old Kingdom (2700–2200 B.C.) was being consciously revived under the Saite kings. Although earlier tomb-chapel reliefs portraying mythological subjects were frequently copied, the new portrayals of the gods had a more human and realistic quality. Portrait statues, for example, display a mastery of anatomical structure and a sure grasp of individual character. Similarly, in the cover photograph, the child, Horus, does not appear in the traditional upright posture of a miniature god, but as a real child, who will be nursed by his mother for the first three years of his life, and who has fallen asleep at her breast. Thus the sculpture, which is on exhibit in the Museum's Hall J, Peoples of Ancient Egypt, appears to foreshadow the later Coptic Christian treatment of the Madonna and Child theme.

Certain conventional symbols of the two deities, however, still remain. Horus wears the traditional short, plaited lock on one side of the head, a style that was copied in his honor by the children of royalty and sometimes by the family heir. The horns on the headdress of the goddess identify Isis with the sky, which is often personified in Egyptian mythology by a cow. The horns, together with the sun disk, symbolize her role as the heavenly wife and mother of the sun-god, with whom both Horus and Osiris are identified.

It was this cult of the great mother Isis which persisted as a powerful rival to rising Christianity during the first three centuries of the Christian era. Thereafter, Christianity spread more rapidly, and in the fourth century the closing of all pagan shrines was accomplished by Theodosius with the secure support of the masses. The sole exception was in Nubia, where certain nomadic tribes still refused to accept the Christian faith. The Roman government, which feared the raids of these barbarians and even paid tribute to keep them quiet, was forced to tolerate a few priests of Isis in the temple at Philae, at the southern frontier of the Roman province. Not until the beginning of the sixth century was the powerful Emperor Justinian able to suppress these remnants of paganism by closing the temple and imprisoning the priests.

With the death of the last priest who could read and interpret the "writings of the words of the gods," as the hieroglyphs were called, the old faith sank into oblivion. "It was only in popular magic that some superstitious practices lingered on as feeble and sporadic traces of what had been, a couple of centuries before, a faith which bade fair to become the universal religion. . . ." ¹

¹ W. Max Muller, "Egyptian Mythology," *The Mythology of All Races* (Boston, 1918), XII, 244. The above account is adapted largely from this source.



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