

The Myth of Osiris and Isis

From Plutarch's *Moralia*

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Characters: **Osiris:** Mythical god-king of Egypt **Set:** Brother of Osiris and Isis
 Isis: Sister and wife of Osiris **Horus:** Son of Osiris and Isis

ACTIVE
READING

When **Osiris** reigned over the Egyptians he made them reform their destitute and bestial mode of living, showing them the art of cultivation, and giving them laws, and teaching them how to worship the gods. Afterwards he travelled over the whole earth, civilizing it; far from requiring arms, he tamed mankind through persuasion and reasoning joined with song of all kinds and music which he brought over... **Set**, during his absence, did not rebel, because **Isis** was on her guard, and able to keep watch upon him vigorously; but after Osiris returned, Set laid a plot against him, having taken seventy and two men into the conspiracy, and having for helper a queen coming out of Ethiopia... That she secretly measured the body of Osiris, and made to the size a handsome and highly ornamented coffer which he carried into the banqueting room. And as they were all delighted with its appearance and admired it; Set promised in sport that whoever should lie down within it, and should exactly fit, he would make him a present of the chest; and after the others had tried, one by one, and nobody fit into it; then Osiris got in, and laid himself down, thereupon the conspirators running up shut down the lid, and fastened it with spike-nails from the outside, and poured melted lead over them, and so carried it out to the River, and let it go down down into the sea...

When Isis heard the news, she cut off a lock of her hair and put on a mourning robe... As she wandered about everywhere, not knowing what to do, she met no one without speaking to him... even when she fell in with little children, she inquired of them about the coffer; these last chanced to have seen it, and told her the branch of the River through which Set's accomplices had let the chest drift into the sea...

Proceeding thence, she learnt by inquiry that the chest had been washed up by the sea at a place called Byblus... They tell how Isis having learnt all this by the divine breath of fame, came to Byblus, and sitting down by the side of a spring all dejected and weeping spoke not a word to any other persons...

The coffin she clasped in her arms, and wailed... and putting the coffer on board a ship, put to sea...

As soon as ever she obtained privacy, and was left by herself, having opened the coffer and laid her face upon the face of the corpse, she wailed and wept...

But when Isis had gone to see her son **Horus**... and had put the coffer away, Set being out a hunting by moonlight came upon it, and recognizing the corpse, tore it into *fourteen* pieces, and scattered them abroad. Isis having heard of this, sought after the fragments, passing over the swamps in a papyrus boat; for which cause such as sail in papyrus boats are never injured by the crocodiles, because they either fear or respect the goddess, from this circumstance there are many places called "Tombs of Osiris" all over Egypt, because she, whenever she came upon a fragment of the body, there celebrated a funeral... Of the members of Osiris the only one [was] Isis was unable to find... and that Isis in its stead made a model and consecrated it... in honor whereof the Egyptians hold a festival.

Afterwards Osiris came from the shades to Horus, and trained and exercised him for war, and then asked him "What is the finest thing possible?" and when he replied "to avenge one's father and mother when ill-treated..."