INTERCULTURAL OUTREACH

CultureGuide

Egypt

Series 1
Elementary (K–6)
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THE LEGEND OF OSIRIS AND ISIS

The story of Osiris and Isis is one of the most famous legends in ancient Egyptian mythology. This story explains why the ancient Egyptians took great care to preserve and bury their dead loved ones in a special way called mummification. This story also explains why Egyptian kings, or pharaohs, were believed to possess great power.

Starting Points

1. Imagine that you are going on a long trip. What would you need to take with you? The ancient Egyptians believed that life after death was like a long journey and that they would need to bring supplies for their journey with them. In the story of Osiris and Isis, Isis made sure her husband had what he needed for his long journey after death.

2. Look at pictures of ancient Egyptian mummies. What do you notice about the mummies? Why do you think ancient Egyptians did this? The process of preparing a mummy is called mummification; it is a long process that preserves a body so that it does not decay. In the legend of Osiris and Isis, Osiris is mummified, showing the significance of preserving bodies after death.

3. Egypt was one of the greatest civilizations in the ancient world. It was a polytheistic civilization, which means that the people believed in numerous gods and goddesses. There are many stories about their favorite gods and heroes. The following legend tells about Osiris—who was both a king of Egypt and a god—and his wife, the goddess Isis.

Information

Osiris: King of Egypt

Osiris was a great king. He was also a god. He and his wife, the goddess Isis, ruled Egypt and brought prosperity to all the land. Osiris taught the people in his kingdom how to grow crops, make bread, and brew beer. He gave the people laws so they could live happily together. Everyone loved Osiris, except his brother, Set (see Folklore & Language Visual 1). Set was jealous of his brother’s prosperous kingdom.

When Osiris saw that the people of Egypt were living in peace and prosperity, he decided that they would not miss him if he left Egypt and traveled to Asia. There, he could teach other people how to live civilly. Isis, being a very wise goddess, stayed and ruled in the king’s stead.

Set’s Trap

While the king was away, his jealous brother devised a plan to get rid of Osiris forever. First, Set secretly obtained the exact measurements of Osiris. Then, he told Isis that
he wanted to hold a banquet in honor of her husband. When Osiris returned home, Set, along with seventy-two other conspirators, prepared a marvelous feast. Osiris ate the delicious food and thanked Set warmly.

At the end of the feast, Set’s servants brought out a beautiful box made of precious woods, lined with gold and silver, and painted with beautiful images of animals, birds, and gods. Set announced to the guests that there would be a contest. He declared that whoever could fit perfectly inside the box would receive it as a gift; however, Set had made this box exactly Osiris’s size so that only the king would fit into the trap. Each conspirator tried to climb into the box, but each was either too small, too tall, or too fat. No one fit the box. Finally, it was Osiris’s turn. As soon as he climbed into the box, Set slammed the lid shut and sealed it with molten lead. He threw the box into the Nile River, and Osiris drowned.

**Isis Searches for Her Husband**

Isis grieved over her lost husband. She left her kingdom and began to search the land for her husband’s body. She knew that if Osiris was not buried properly, he could not be happy in the afterlife. She searched for years without finding a trace of her husband.

Meanwhile, the box drifted out to sea and finally rested near Byblos, an ancient city in modern-day Lebanon. The box settled against a small bush. The bush grew and grew until it became a huge tamarisk tree and engulfed the box. News of the magnificent tree spread throughout the land. The king of Byblos cut the tree down and used it as a pillar to support his beautiful palace (see Folklore & Language Visual 2). Isis heard about the tree and instantly knew that such a magnificent tree must contain the remains of her husband. She quickly sailed to Byblos and broke open the wooden pillar. Sure enough, the box was inside. She took the box home and hid it in a safe place along the shores of the Nile River. But that night Set was hunting in the moonlight and stumbled across the wooden box. In a rage, he ripped the body of Osiris into fourteen pieces and scattered them throughout the land.

Sad but determined, Isis searched and eventually found thirteen of the fourteen pieces. With her magical powers, she produced a replica of the missing piece and put the body of Osiris back together. She then wrapped her husband in linen and used her powers to wake him. She could only wake him for a short time—just long enough for Osiris to journey to the underworld. She kissed her husband for the last time and then he departed to the underworld where he became the god and ruler of the dead. Shortly afterward, Isis miraculously gave birth to Osiris’s son, Horus.

**Horus Rules His Father’s Kingdom**

Horus became strong and wise, much like his great father. He grew quickly, and when he reached his teenage years, he fought against his uncle Set. They fought and fought until, finally, the gods decided to settle the matter. They ruled in favor of Horus, declaring him king of Egypt. Set was cast out into the desert. The pharaohs, or kings, who later ruled Egypt were said to have Horus’s special guidance so they could rule as wisely and as bravely as he did.
Activities

1. See if you can “mummify” each other. Divide into groups of five or six. Choose one person to be the mummy and one to be the overseer. The mummies need to stand with their arms folded across their chests while the other group members pass a roll of toilet paper to each other and wrap it around their mummy. Have a race to see which group can wrap their mummy the fastest. The overseer will direct the wrapping, making sure that no skin or clothing is showing from the shoulders down to the ankles.

2. Go to a library, search the Internet, or visit a museum to learn more about mummies. Write a short essay about how mummies were made, how they were decorated, and why they were important to the ancient Egyptians (see Additional Resources).

3. Look at depictions of people in ancient Egypt (see Folklore & Language Visual 1 and Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 1). What do you think an image of you would look like if it were drawn in ancient Egypt? How would it be different from the way you really look? Draw an Egyptian-style picture of yourself.

4. Divide into small groups. Each group will illustrate a section of the legend of Osiris and Isis. Draw either on the board or on butcher paper and then explain to the rest of the class what is happening in the picture. Another option is to draw masks to use in acting out the story for the class.

5. Make a list of qualities you think make a legend exciting. After hearing the legend of Osiris and Isis, discuss whether it fits your list of what makes an exciting story.

6. Rewrite the legend of Osiris and Isis from Set’s point of view. Be sure to include descriptions of how he feels and what he does. Share your story with a classmate.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Isis go to so much trouble to help her husband? Why do people help others even when they are not paid or recognized for their service? Make a list on the board of people who have served others without getting a reward.

2. In the story, Set fought against Osiris and Horus because he was jealous. What would have been a better way for Set to work out his jealousy? Could Osiris or Horus have reacted to Set in a better way? What can you do if you are jealous of someone else? What can you do if a sibling or friend is jealous of you?

3. The legend of Osiris and Isis is very old. It has been remembered only because it was written down. If you could write down only one story about yourself, what would it be? What would you want people to remember about you? Why?

4. Why do legends get passed down? Do legends still get passed on today? How?

5. What are some legends that have been passed down in American culture? When and where did you first hear those particular legends?

6. Have you ever heard different variations of the same legend? How and why do you think legends change over time?
**TIME LINE**

**3100 B.C.E.** Menes, king of Upper Egypt, unites all of Egypt and starts the first dynasty of Egyptian kings; Egypt changes from a tribal society to a nation with a centralized government; Memphis becomes the capital.

**2686** Old Kingdom begins; the first pyramids are built; great kings such as Zoser rule.

**2182** Middle Kingdom begins after much chaos; Mentuhotep rules and reunifies the country.

**1554** New Kingdom begins (the most prosperous time in ancient Egypt’s history); pharaohs become gods of the land; great rulers such as Thutmose III, Ramses II and III, Akhenaten, and Hatshepsut rule.

**525** Persians conquer Egypt.

**343** The sovereignty of Nectanebo is established; the last true pharaoh is conquered by the Persians.

**332** Alexander the Great conquers the Persian Empire and takes control of Egypt; Egypt becomes part of the Hellenistic world; Alexandria becomes the capital.

**323** After Alexander dies, Ptolemy Soter, Alexander’s favorite general, becomes the ruler of Egypt, Palestine, and lower Syria; he builds many monuments, including the lighthouse at Alexandria.

**290** Ptolemy builds the Library of Alexandria.

**196** Egyptian priests make a decree commemorating Ptolemy in hieroglyphics in both the Greek and Egyptian Demotic languages on a black stone tablet called the Rosetta Stone.

**51** Cleopatra fights against her brother to rule Egypt.

**31** Caesar Augustus conquers Egypt and starts Roman reign.

**641 C.E.** Muslims invade Egypt; in time, most Egyptians are converted to Islam.

**868** Egypt again becomes independent under Ibn Tulun.

**973** Fatimids conquer Egypt and create a prosperous Egyptian nation.

**1168** Crusaders attack Egypt, and Saladin becomes the sultan; he rules over much of Palestine and Syria.

**1250** Mamluks rule Egypt; only the upper class has national rights.

**1798** Napoleon defeats the Mamluks; the Ottomans invade; the French are forced to evacuate Egypt.

**1799** One of Napoleon’s men finds the Rosetta Stone; it becomes the key to deciphering hieroglyphics.

**1883** Lord Cromer becomes the British agent in Egypt; British rule begins to be recognized.

**1922** King Tutankhamun’s tomb is discovered.

**1952** The British leave Egypt; Egypt becomes a republic.
1954 Gamal Abdul Nasser, leader of the rebellion against the British, becomes prime minister and afterwards president
1956 Egypt claims control of the Suez Canal; Britain, France, and Israel invade; later a cease-fire is declared
1958 Egypt and Syria unite to form the United Arab Republic (UAR); Syria later withdraws
1967 Israel defeats Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in the Six-Day War; Egypt loses land; the Suez Canal closes for several years
1971 Egypt adopts a new constitution and a new name: the Arab Republic of Egypt; the Aswan High Dam is finished
1973 Egypt and Syria begin the Yom Kippur War against Israel
1979 Egypt and Israel sign a peace treaty
1981 President Anwar al-Sadat is killed by Jihad members
1989 Hosni Mubarak elected president; Egypt readmitted to the Arab League
1995 Attempted assassination of President Mubarak
1997 Fifty-eight tourists killed by a gunman in front of Temple of Hatshepsut near Luxor
2005 First poll held in which multiple candidates are allowed to stand; President Mubarak re-elected

HOLIDAYS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 Jan</td>
<td>The Coptic Church (the Christian church of Egypt) celebrates Christmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>Eid al-Adha (celebration of Abraham’s willingness to offer his son as a sacrifice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Muharran (Islamic New Year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar, Apr</td>
<td>Easter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Apr</td>
<td>Liberation of Sinai Day (celebration of the regaining of the Sinai Peninsula in 1982 after Israel had taken it in 1967)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 May</td>
<td>National Labor Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>23 Jul</td>
<td>Anniversary of the 1952 revolution, when a group led by Colonel Gamal Nasser overthrew the king</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 Sep</td>
<td>Coptic New Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Sep</td>
<td>Suez Day (anniversary of the restoration of the Suez Canal, also called Popular Resistance Day)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Oct</td>
<td>Armed Forces Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov</td>
<td>Ramadan begins</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dec</td>
<td>Eid al-Fitr</td>
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Note: The dates of Islamic holidays vary each year because they use a 354-day lunar calendar.
Folklore & Language Visual 1: Egyptian Gods

- **Set**

- **Horus**

- **Osiris**

- **Isis**