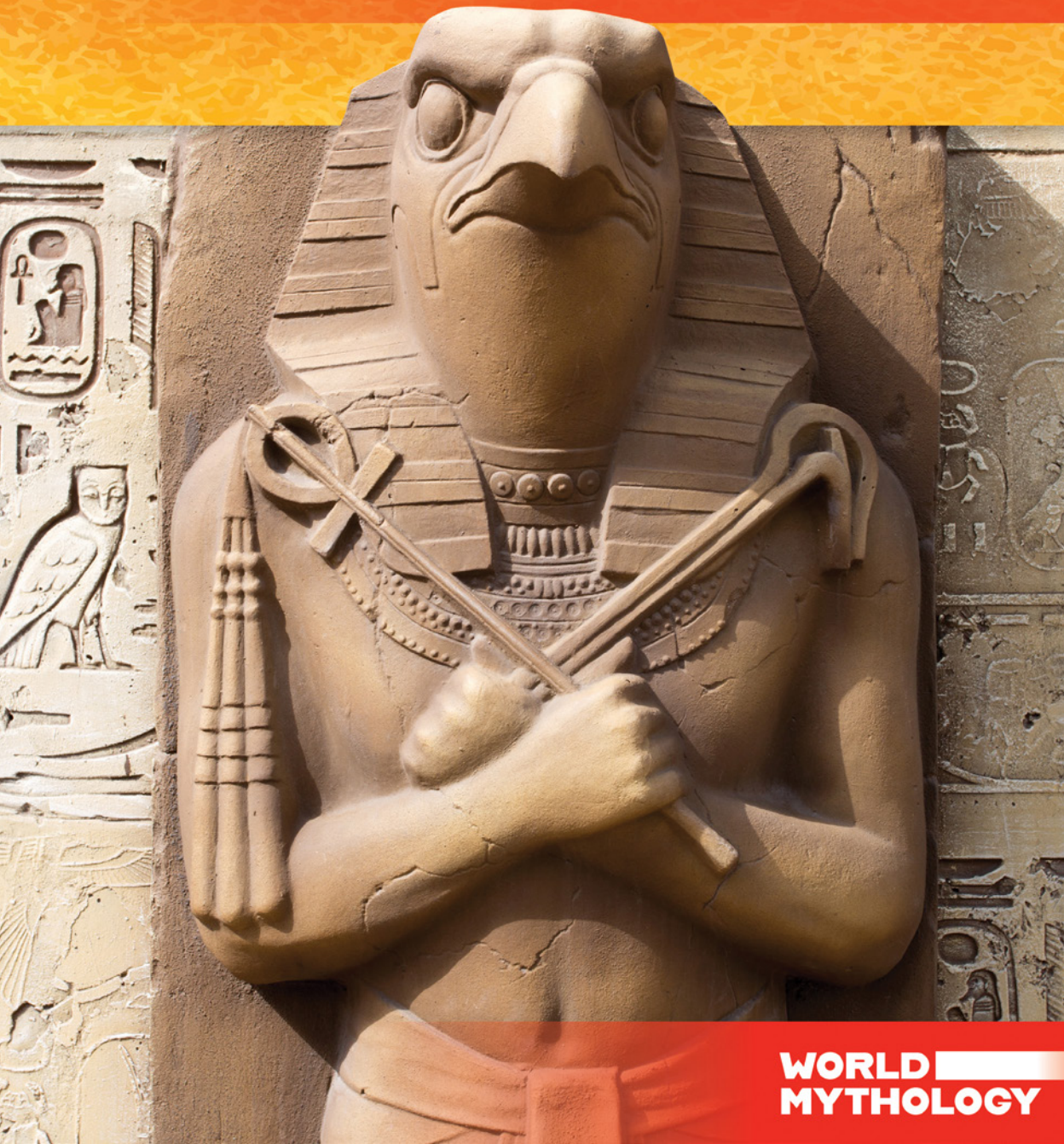


# Egyptian MYTHOLOGY

Don Nardo



**WORLD**   
**MYTHOLOGY**



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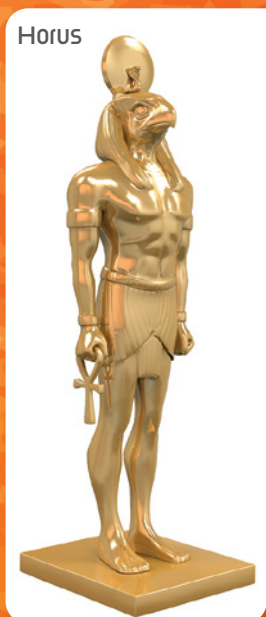
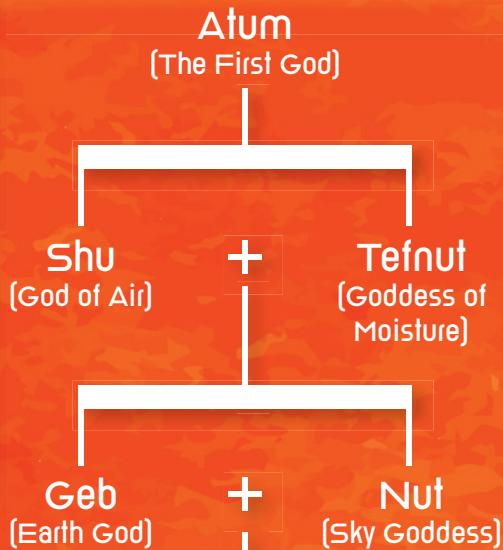
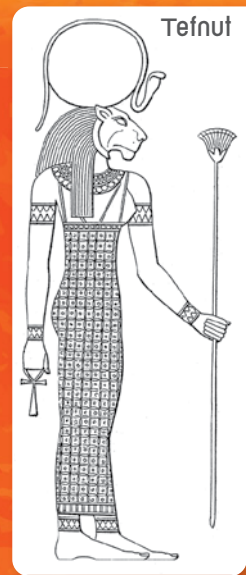
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# GODS OF EGYPT'S BEST-KNOWN CREATION MYTHS



Isis  
[Mother Goddess]

+

Osiris  
[Ruler of the Underworld]

Horus  
[God of Kingship +  
Egypt's Protector]

Nephthys  
[God of  
Mummies]

+

Seth  
[God of War +  
Storms]

Anubis  
[God of the Dead]



# The Creation of the Gods and People

Of the many stories making up Egyptian mythology, the creation of the universe and of humanity were among the most crucial and best known. Such a tale about how the world got started is called a cosmogony. The ancient Egyptians had a number of different cosmogonies, some of which differed from or even contradicted parts of the others. Most people today at first find this odd. This is because a majority of the world's leading modern faiths feature only a sole creation tale.

The main reason the Egyptians had multiple creation myths is that their religion was at first very local in character. Each town or region had its own divine benefactor who was thought to watch over the area and its inhabitants. That area might also have its own creation myth in which the local deity was said to be the creator. Thus, the residents of Egypt's various early regions developed very sturdy local religious traditions. On the national level, meanwhile, the pharaoh, who ruled the entire country, recognized the wisdom of maintaining all those local traditions as a way of preserving loyalty and order. As Leonard H. Lesko explains, "Gradually, or perhaps quickly, local myths from throughout the country were brought together into a system"<sup>12</sup> that included all the local cosmogonies and thereby made the inhabitants of all the regions content.

## **At the Center of the World**

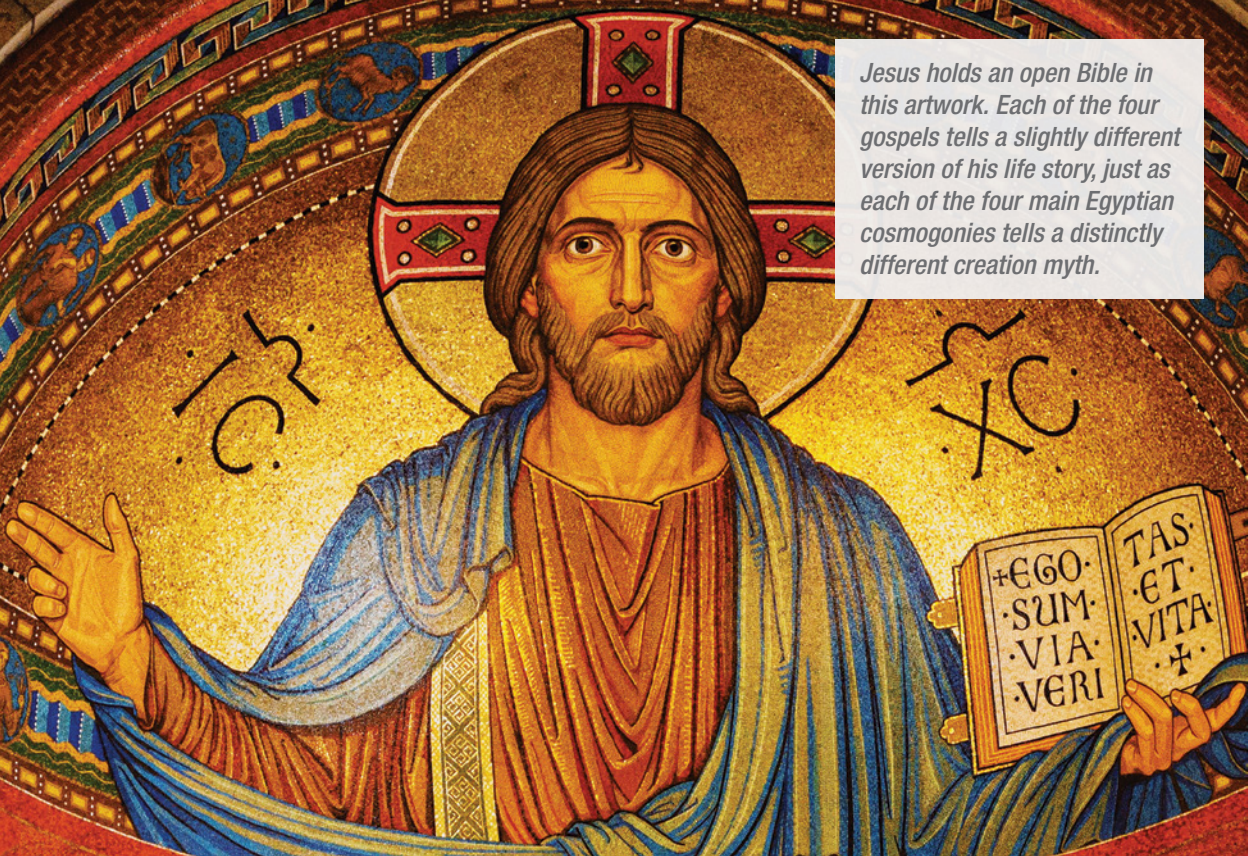
Despite the differences in these stories, over time the population of Egypt as a whole came to view all the creation myths as more or less equally acceptable. The reason for this was the manner in which the country's priests explained those multiple myths. They told people that the exact way creation occurred would likely always remain unclear to people. The concepts involved, they insisted, were largely beyond human comprehension; therefore, the gods had fashioned and passed on to humanity creation stories filled with symbols and mystical ideas. The resultant air of mystery and wonderment attached to those tales was actually appealing to most Egyptians and perfectly adequate for their needs. To the average person, the fact that the creation myths all portrayed a cosmos containing order and continuity was comforting. It imparted a feeling that their country and its culture would always stay secure and unwavering.

A number of historians have offered an analogy to make this acceptance of multiple creation myths more understandable to people today. All of today's Christians, they point out, accept the authenticity of the New Testament's four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), in spite of the fact that they contain sometimes conflicting accounts of Jesus's life. People tend to see the differences as imperfections introduced by human storytellers and to emphasize instead that the four accounts contain a single and bigger underlying truth. The ancient Egyptians viewed their conflicting creation myths in a very similar manner.

Those same creation stories also instilled in the early Egyptians the earnest conviction that they and their country were special and favored above all other people and nations. According to this view, the creation had happened in Egypt. That made it the center of the world, where heaven and earth meet.

## **The Fruitful Creator Atum**

One of Egypt's four main creation stories strongly supported that self-important concept of the country residing in a central position



*Jesus holds an open Bible in this artwork. Each of the four gospels tells a slightly different version of his life story, just as each of the four main Egyptian cosmogonies tells a distinctly different creation myth.*

in the world. The myth in question emerged from the so-called City of the Sun, Iunu, better known in later ages by its Greek name—Heliopolis. It was located in the spot now occupied by Egypt's capital, Cairo.

According to this version of creation, the god Atum sprang into being quite suddenly, and apparently miraculously, from the shadowy depths of a primitive sea that existed before earth did. An ancient hymn to Atum quotes that primeval deity as saying, "Heaven had not come into being, the earth had not come into being, the creatures of the earth and the reptiles had not been made in that place. I lifted myself from the watery mass. . . . I did not find a place where I could stand. I was alone. I took courage in my heart. I laid a foundation. I made every form [of living thing]."<sup>13</sup>

### **ATUM**

**The creator god whose center of worship and influence was the city of Heliopolis**

## Myths from the *Pyramid Texts*

Of the ancient Egyptian religious texts that mention gods and contain myths about them, among the best known and well documented are the so-called *Pyramid Texts*. The oldest versions have been dated to various eras, but most modern scholars think the first examples emerged in the 2300s BCE. These writings were painted or carved onto the lids of coffins as well as on the walls of tombs inside the pyramids at Saqqara (in northern Egypt), among them the famous Step Pyramid of the pharaoh Djoser.

The main purpose of the texts was to explain basic rituals and offerings to the gods. Common among these scripts are prayers and chants intended to aid the pharaohs in making it to the afterlife. In providing the king and his aides with this information, the texts' authors described some basic myths, including how the sun god, Ra, went about certain duties and tasks. Also, a number of the prayers recount myths pertaining not only to the afterlife but also to the world's creation. A few of the *Pyramid Texts* refer to the Myth of Kingship (describing the first pharaoh, who was a god). This includes the earliest known Egyptian literary reference to Osiris, lord of the underworld, and his death at the hands of his nefarious brother, Seth. In addition, several of the texts mention the gods worshipped at Memphis and Hermopolis and important information about their origins.

The same myth pictured Atum fashioning the *benben*, or “mound of creation,” the world's first shred of dry land. The priests who maintained the shrines at Heliopolis claimed that the sacred mound was situated in the center of the entire universe. Although most of the *benben* no longer existed, they said, a small fragment of it had survived and lay guarded night and day inside Atum's temple at Heliopolis.

While still standing alone on the sacred mound, Atum created some gods, who in turn went on to create still more deities. Among the first divine beings Atum brought forth were Shu, god of air, and his twin sister, Tefnut, goddess of moisture and rain. Those two divinities then produced two more—Geb, god of

earth, and his consort Nut, goddess of the sky. Next, Geb and Nut crafted four more gods—Isis, Osiris, Nephthys, and Seth. Collectively, Atum and the eight beings who subsequently arose made up the widely respected assembly of nine gods that the Egyptians labeled the Ennead.

According to the Heliopolitan cosmogony, directly following the creation of the Ennead, the world's many other features formed. Among them were the plains, valleys, mountains, forests, and seas. Humans came next. "Men and women arose from tears which came forth from my eye,"<sup>14</sup> Atum supposedly said in a verse from the *Pyramid Texts*. Once that had been accomplished, the last act of creation for fruitful Atum was to fashion the diverse plants and animals that have filled nature ever since.

### **PTAH**

**The Memphite creator god, who made other gods by saying their names**

## **Creating via Thought and Speech**

A second important creation tale emerged from Egypt's first national capital, Memphis, which the pharaoh Narmer had established during his unification of the country. The chief creator deity in this myth was Ptah, who was also thought to protect craftspeople of various kinds. His principal power was said to be the ability to take a thought or concept and magically transform it into reality. He did this, scholar David P. Silverman writes, through

the normal human activity of artistic creation. Crafts such as building and sculpture involve an initial concept in the artisan's mind. Eventually, through the artist's skill, this concept takes shape as a finished building, or a statue carved from stone. To the Memphite [priests], the link between the artist's concept and the ultimate transformation of his raw material was the force embodied by the god Ptah.<sup>15</sup>

According to the Memphite cosmogony, Ptah employed a similar process in his major act of creation. It involved not only him

but also some of the features of Heliopolitan creation tradition, among them the deity Atum, the *benben*, and the nine-member Ennead. The main difference was that in Ptah's version he existed *before* these other features arose. First, Ptah sprang into being; then he transformed the thought of a daughter into a real daughter, Naunet; and finally he mated with her and thereby generated Atum.

The transformations Ptah was able to accomplish were generally brought about via his spoken word. That is, he either named or verbally described something, and a second or two later that thing appeared out of nothingness. An inscription on a stone monument found at Memphis, for example, depicts how Ptah created Atum. Atum "came into being from the heart" and "came into being from the tongue," it begins. In other words, Ptah thought about Atum in his heart (the Egyptians believed that thought occurred in the heart, not the brain) and spoke his name, and Atum then appeared. Moreover, "all the gods were

## **Discard the Brain but Keep the Heart**

In the creation story involving the god Ptah, he possessed miraculous speech, a verbal reflection of "what the heart thought." That concept of conscious thought emanating from the heart is a reminder that the ancient Egyptians had a majorly mistaken idea of what the heart does and how it functions. Thanks to concepts repeated in several traditional myths, as well as advocated by Egyptian doctors, the common wisdom was that the brain was a mostly useless organ that made the sinuses in the nose work properly. In contrast, the heart was the organ in which resided crucial human functions, including intelligence, emotions, memory, thought, and even personality. Moreover, the belief was that when the gods chose to talk to men and women, they did so via the heart. All of this explains why, when the Egyptians mummified a dead body, they threw away the allegedly useless brain and endeavored to keep intact the heart, which they assumed was the vital seat of intelligence.

born and the Ennead was completed. Every word of the god came into being through what the heart thought and the tongue commanded.”<sup>16</sup>

## Vast Energies of Creation

A third story of the creation of the gods and the world evolved in the region surrounding the town of Khemnu, later better known by its Greek name, Hermopolis. Located more than 100 miles (161 km) south of Memphis, Hermopolis meant “Town of the Eight,” indicating that eight deities were connected to the local creation myth. This divine group of eight was known as the Ogdoad. Its members were Amun, Amaunet, Nun, Naunet, Hey, Hauhet, Kek, and Kauket.

One substantial difference between the Heliopolitan and Hermopolitan creation traditions was how the divinities came into being. In the version from Heliopolis, Atum arose miraculously from an eternal, dark ocean and proceeded to create other gods. In contrast, in the version from Hermopolis, the Ogdoad’s members were not fashioned by an earlier being. Instead, in ways no one comprehended, they had somehow always existed in the timeless sea’s murky waters.

During those endless eons, the proto-deities had taken the forms of frogs, snakes, and other lowly creatures. They had traveled in four pairs, so that, for example, Nun stayed always with Naunet, and Hey swam only with Hauhet. This might have gone on forever, but for reasons unknown it did not. Instead, one day the eight tiny creatures abruptly merged, in the process forming the mighty sun god Atum-Ra. At that very same moment, they also gave rise to the *benben*, which the Hermopolitan priests claimed lay in the region of their city, *not* Heliopolis. The vast energies driving this huge surge of divine creation caused a titanic blast. “The primeval mound was thrust clear,” George Hart

### **OGDOAD**

**A group of eight gods promoted by the priests at Hermopolis**

explains, and thereafter was called “the Isle of Flame because the sun-god was born on it and the cosmos witnessed the fiery glow of the first sunrise.”<sup>17</sup>

The concept of four pairs of gods that originated in the temples of Hermopolis was not based on an arbitrary or meaningless number. Rather, the local priests who developed it at some point in the distant past believed that the number 4 possessed some deep and in some cases mysterious meanings. First, it stood for the four cardinal points—north, south, east, and west—which many ancient peoples viewed as having some sort of mystical meaning. Those points were used not only during travel from one place to another but also in studying planets and other heavenly bodies and in laying out the sites of large buildings such as palaces and temples.

In addition, each of the three giant pyramids at Giza has four sides; moreover, those sides are almost perfectly aligned with the four cardinal points. The exact reason the builders did that is unclear. But it may have been that the number 4 denoted an aspect of nature that was stable and in balance. Thus, the creation story featuring the Ogdoad combined religious mystery with mathematical symbolism, which the Egyptians viewed as spiritually powerful and compelling.

## **Fashioning People and Animals**

The fourth major creation story of the Egyptians emerged much later than the ones from Heliopolis, Memphis, and Hermopolis. During the New Kingdom, which began in about 1550 BCE, a series of strong pharaohs engaged in conquests that considerably expanded Egyptian territory and influence. These conquests brought the Middle Eastern region now occupied by Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan into a growing empire. Thebes, situated on the Nile a few hundred miles south of Hermopolis, became the Egyptian empire’s capital city and center of cultural and religious activities.

*The famous pyramids at Giza (near modern Cairo) tower over the desert sands. Each is a four-sided structure in part because the ancient Egyptians believed that the number 4 held a number of mystical qualities.*



Among those religious activities was a policy instituted by the powerful Theban priests to elevate and honor the god Amun, formerly a relatively minor member of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad. Although he remained in that divine group, the Theban priests claimed that he had a dual character that made him special. Essentially, they merged Amun's traditional human image with the personality and role of the falcon-headed sun god, Ra. Thereafter, that deity was worshipped as Amun-Ra and touted as the loftiest god in the pantheon.

In the new twist imparted to Egypt's collected myths, Amun was the chief god because he was the true creator. First, the Theban priests asserted, he existed *before* the Ogdoad's other members, and he fashioned both them and the other gods. Second, at some point Amun-Ra decided to create a race of mortal worshippers, as well as many different kinds of animals. But instead of doing the job himself, he ordered a local Theban deity named Khnum to accomplish that important task. Usually depicted in

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