

EGYPTIAN RELIGION

Egyptian religion was similar to Mesopotamian belief, however, in that human beings were co-workers with the gods to maintain order. The principle of harmony (known to the Egyptians as *ma'at*) was of the highest importance in Egyptian life (and in the afterlife) and their religion was fully integrated into every aspect of existence. Egyptian religion was a combination of magic, mythology, **science**, **medicine**, psychiatry, spiritualism, herbology, as well as the modern understanding of 'religion' as belief in a higher power and a life after death. The gods were the friends of human beings and sought only the best for them by providing them with the most perfect of all lands to live in and an eternal home to enjoy when their lives on earth were done.

The first written records of religious practice in Egypt come from around 3400 BCE in the Predynastic Period of Egypt (6000-3150 BCE). Deities such as Isis, **Osiris**, Ptah, **Hathor**, Atum, Set, **Nephthys**, and Horus were already established as potent forces to be recognized fairly early on. The Egyptian Creation Myth is similar to the beginning of the Mesopotamian story in that, originally, there was only chaotic, slow-swirling waters. This ocean was without bounds, depthless, and silent until, upon its surface, there rose a hill of earth (known as the ben-ben, the primordial mound, which, it is thought, the **pyramids** symbolize) and the great god Atum (the sun) stood upon the ben-ben and spoke, giving birth to the god Shu (of the air) the goddess Tefnut (of moisture) the god Geb (of earth) and the goddess Nut (of sky). Atum had intended Nut as his bride but she fell in love with Geb. Angry with them for falling in love, Atum separated them by stretching Nut across the sky high away from Geb on the earth. Although they were separated during the day, they came together at night. Nut bore three sons, Osiris, Set and Horus, and two daughters, Isis and Nephthys. Osiris, as eldest, was announced as 'Lord of all the Earth' when he was born and was given Isis as a wife. Set, consumed by jealousy, hated his brother and killed him to assume the throne. Isis then embalmed her husband's body and, with powerful charms, resurrected Osiris who returned from the dead to bring life to the people of Egypt. Osiris later served as the Supreme Judge of the souls of the dead in the Hall of Truth and, by weighing the heart of the soul in the balances, decided who was granted eternal life.

The Egyptian afterlife was known as the Field of Reeds and was a mirror-image of life on earth down to one's favorite tree and stream and dog. Those one loved in life would either be waiting when one arrived or would follow after. The Egyptians viewed earthly existence as simply one part of an eternal journey and were so concerned about passing easily to the next phase that they created their elaborate tombs (the pyramids), temples, and funerary inscriptions (the **Pyramid** Texts, the Book of the Dead) to help the soul's passage from this world to the next. The gods cared for one after death just as they had in life from the beginning of time. The goddess **Qebhet** brought water to the thirsty souls in the land of the dead and other goddesses such as Selket and Nephthys cared for and protected the souls as they journeyed to the Field of Reeds. An ancient Egyptian understood that, from birth to death and even after death, the universe had been ordered by the gods and everyone had a place in that order.