

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE EGYPTIAN MOTHER GODDESS.

Nut, the great mother goddess of the ancient Egyptians, is a personification of the heavens, and there are many pictures of her extant. She is commonly represented as star-spangled and bending over in such a way that both her hands and her feet touch the ground. Under her lies Seb, her husband, the god of earth. His body is painted over with plumes. Nut and Seb were once united in close embrace, but Shu interfered and separated the two, producing a space between them and thus dividing the watery mass above the firmament from the dry land below.

Shu, as well as his female counterpart Tefnut, originated from Tem, one of the several forms of the sun-god. Shu means "dry, empty" and personifies the empty space between heaven and earth, while Tefnut is derived from the root *tef* or *tef tef*, "to spit, to be moist."

Tem, the sun-god, was one god—indeed he is called "the one god," and by emitting the two gods, Shu and Tefnut, he became three, as we read in the second hymn to Amen-Ra, where Tem is addressed: "Thou art the one god who didst form thyself into two gods, thou art the creator of the egg and thou didst produce thy twin gods."

The word *ashesh*, "to emit," means also "to bear," and it seems that the light emitted or poured forth from the sun, as incorporated in Shu, was at the same time conceived as lifting up the sky, as if the sky were resting upon the rays of the sun. Nevertheless, while Shu is said to support the sky Nut is supposed to be leaning on herself, for her two hands and her two feet are called the four pillars of the heavens.

The story of the separation of Seb and Nut by Shu was a favorite subject of Egyptian artists. There are a great number of pictures of the scene, and in our frontispiece we reproduce one of them as presented by E. A. Wallis Budge in his *Gods of the Egyptians* (Vol. II, colored plate facing p. 964). Here the goddess bends over Seb who lies prostrate on the ground. Ra goes up over the body of Nut in his solar barge and goes down again over her neck and head on the other side where Osiris awaits his entry into the Tuat with open arms. In other presentations of the same scene the solar barge is sometimes supported by Shu underneath Nut.

Seb is the son of Shu and Tefnut and at the same time both brother and husband of Nut, and father of Osiris and Isis, Set and Nephthys. Yet in addition he played an important part in the Egyptian doctrines of life after death. The deceased says: "My father is Seb and my mother is Nut," which expression identifies the deceased with Osiris. Thereupon Nu, the overseer of the house of the seal, is made to say,

"The doors of heaven are opened for me,
The doors of earth are opened for me,
The bars and bolts of Seb are opened for me,
I exchange speech with Seb."

In Heliopolis Nut is said to have laid from Seb the great egg from which came forth the sun-god in the shape of a phoenix, the bird Bennu, representing the daily rebirth of the sun. As the father of this egg the god Seb is called "the great cackler" (Kenken-ur) and his sacred animal is the goose. The deceased says: "Hail thou god Tem, grant unto me the sweet breath which dwelleth in thy nostrils. I embrace that great throne which is in the city of Hermopolis, and I keep watch over the egg of the Great Cackler which has come into being wherewith the god Seb has opened the earth. I germinate as it (the earth) germinateth; I live, as it liveth; and my breath is its breath" (*Book of the Dead*, Chapters 54, 56, 59).

The deceased usually identifies himself with the powers that have overcome death, with Osiris, with Benu, with Horus, etc., and he argues that as Seb helped Osiris in the passage through the underworld, so he should now help him.

Nut has always been regarded as a protector of the dead. She is prayed to as a mother in tones of affection and confidence. We read for instance: "Mother Nut hath spread herself over thee in her name of 'Coverer of the sky,'" and she is assumed to feed the soul from sacred sycamores. In the *Book of the Dead* allusions to Nut are frequent, and she is supposed to provide the soul with meat and drink. The text seems to refer to sycamore trees under which the surviving members of the family of the deceased offered water and food, as we read in one place: "Hail, thou sycamore of the goddess Nut! Grant thou to me of the water and of the air which dwell in thee. I embrace the throne which is in Unnu (Hermopolis), and I watch and guard the egg of the Great Cackler. It groweth, I grow; it liveth, I live; it snuffeth the air, I snuff the air" (Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol. II, p. 107).

Nut survived after the abolition of Egyptian polytheism in Christian legends, as explained by Professor Budge (pages 107-108):

"Since the mythological tree of Nut stood at Heliopolis and was a sycamore it may well have served as the archetype of the sycamore tree under which tradition asserts that the Virgin Mary sat and rested during her flight to Egypt, and there seems to be little doubt that many of the details about her wanderings in the Delta, which are recorded in the Apocryphal Gospels and in writings of a similar class, are borrowed from the old mythology of Egypt. Associated with the sycamore of Nut were the plants among which the Great Cackler Seb laid the egg of the sun, and these may well be identified with the famous balsam trees, from which was expressed the oil which was so highly prized by the Christians of Egypt and Abyssinia, and which was used by them in their ceremony of baptism; these trees were always watered with water drawn from the famous 'Ain Shems (a name really meaning the "eye of the sun"), i. e., the well of water which is fed by a spring in the immediate neighborhood, and is commonly called the "Fountain of the Sun." We may note in passing another legend, which was popular among the Copts, to the effect that the Virgin Mary once hid herself and her son from their enemies in the trunk of the sycamore at Heliopolis, and that it is based upon an ancient Egyptian myth recorded by Plutarch which declared that Isis hid the body of Osiris in a tree trunk."