

APPENDIX A

Isis had a great influence on the rights that were accorded to the women of ancient Egypt. She was respected and honoured in every part of life, and it can therefore be deduced that she helped establish the extensive rights of women, that were not equalled in the rest of the Ancient Near East.

THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF ISIS ON THE LEGAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN

According to Hollis (1987 : 496), one should ideally look at all the female deities who fill cosmogonic roles and/or act as mother goddesses and consider them within the context of the culture's history when addressing the issue of the relationship of the goddesses of a culture to the status of women. She comes to the conclusion in her article that there may exist a connection between the respected position of women and the cosmogonic sky goddess and other dominant Egyptian goddesses, but that further research is necessary to confirm such a relationship (Hollis 1987 : 501).

Herodotus (1972 : 142) noted earlier, although he made no mention of a deity, that the Egyptians:

“... made all their customs and laws of a kind contrary for the most part to those of all other men. Among them, the women buy and sell, the men abide at home and weave; ...Men carry burdens on their heads, women on their shoulders”.

Diodorus Siculus suggested that the dominant position of women which he observed resulted from:

“...the success attained by Isis...(who) avenged the murder of her husband and reigned all her days over the land with complete respect for the laws, and... became the cause of more and greater blessings to all men than any other”¹.

And also that:

“ ...she continued for the rest of her life to reign in perfect justice and to excel all monarchs in kindness to her subjects”.

Moret (2001 : 87) states that Isis was the helper of Osiris in various aspects, and that:

“... as an experienced queen she made codes of law, and ruled Egypt in person while her husband was conquering the world”.

Moret (2001 : 96) adds that Isis is the prototype of woman in Egypt. She:

“... shares the authority with Osiris, she inspires his government... ; in her are revealed the authority and intuitive knowledge which primitive men invest in woman ...”.

In the Hymn to Osiris², it is said that Isis reigned together with Osiris:

“His sister has protected him, she who keeps the enemy far off, who wards off the acts of the Evil Ones by the charms (uttered by) her mouth, she whose tongue is subtle, whose words do not fail, accomplished in command”.

The myth of Osiris and Seth, indicates that Isis went out to sought justice, to avenge her husband’s death and to have the murderer be punished for the crime he had committed. It must not be seen that she took the law into her own hands, but rather

¹ As translated by Murphy (1985 : I,27).

² A stela of the 17th Dynasty, previously in Bibliotheque Nationale, but now in the Louvre , as translated by Moret (2002 : 98).

that she acted as investigator and judge in this matter.³ Moscati (1963 : 115) claims that the Egyptian people saw in this myth a triumph of the ideals they held dear:

“Justice and loyalty, the victory of good over evil, and the profound faith in survival”.

“You have made a power for the women equal to that of men.”⁴

Watterson (1990 : 27) comments that this above mentioned extract from a hymn to Isis, the faithful wife of Osiris, shows the position of women in Ancient Egypt, including their legal status and their rights before and after they were married. She also remarks that the women of Ancient Egypt enjoyed the same rights as the men under the law and that this fact can be explained by the abovementioned quotation.

In another hymn to Isis⁵ it is stated that she is the one:

“Who issues orders among the divine Ennead, according to whose command one rules”.

Zabkar (1983 : 132) states that she (Isis) reigns supremely over the temple and palace, as can be asserted from the phrase:

“...according to whose command one rules.”

Zabkar (1983) further states that Isis was very closely associated with the sun-god and with the royal palace, from where she exercised her godly power over the Two

³ For the Myth of Osiris and Seth, see Pritchard (1955 : 15-16) and also Zandee (1965 : 121-122).

⁴ P. Oxy.

⁵ Hymn III, as translated by Zabkar.

Lands and therefore also over the king. According to him, the above mentioned quotation is highlighted only in other texts at Philae and he proposes that Isis took hold of the land and ruled over it, just as the Pharaoh did at the time of his accession.

In the story of “Horus and Ptah are One”⁶, Isis speaks to Horus and Seth:

“Make peace...”.

It is thus clear that Isis undertook the role of peacemaker in the absence of her husband and brother, and that she even may have acted as judge.

According to White (2002: 169), a woman:

“...basked in the luster shed on her by the first wife of all, the goddess Isis, tenderest and most fruitful of ladies. It is Isis whom, we remember, journeyed as far afield as Syria and throughout the length and breath of Egypt in order to retrieve the portions of her husband’s dismembered body. There was nothing feeble about Isis, and she set an example to future wives that encouraged them to be equally robust and practical”.

In the *Wortebuch Der Mythologie*⁷, it is mentioned that Isis was the goddess of shelter and protection - thus drawing on her properties of justice for the weak, guardian of rights and a place of peace.

Spence (1930 : 82) is of the opinion that:

“... as the air-god Tezcatlipoca was identified with justice, so Isis is identified with Ma’at, the goddess of justice”.

⁶ The Shabaka Stone, British Museum No. 498. Lichtheim, Vol I, 53 (29b).

⁷ Haussig (1965 : 327).

and according to Spence (1930 : 83) the myth of Isis became the truth for the people of Ancient Egypt; therefore they regarded her very dearly and believed that she had been a real person once.

“Words of great and compelling power were hers”.

The above mentioned quotation must not only be seen as pertaining to the magical powers she possessed, but also to the power she had in the proclamation of law.

It is also said of Isis that she possessed great wisdom, as can be asserted from the contest between Ra and Isis⁸:

“Now Isis was a clever woman. Her heart was craftier than a million men; she was choicer than a million gods; she was more discerning than million of noble dead. There was nothing which she did not know in heaven and earth, like Re, who made the content of the earth.”

Moscatti (1963 : 117) also mentions that in the contest between Ra and Isis⁹, she was determined to learn the name of the supreme god, and she poisoned him until he gave her an answer, thus obtaining the knowledge she needed

Spence (1930 : 66)¹⁰ also maintains that Isis ruled and governed the land so well in the absence of Osiris that the wicked plans of Seth to take over the government could not be realized. It can thus be assumed that Isis undertook every aspect of the governing of the country, including those of peace, law and order. Although Osiris instilled the laws, it was Isis who actually enforced and upheld the law and justice.

⁸ As translated by Pritchard (1955 : 12).

⁹ P. Turin & P. BM 10691 (Formerly known as P Chester Beatty XI).

In certain scenes of the judgment of the dead, Isis is almost always present, and the assumption can be made that she probably assisted Osiris in the judging of the deceased person and also provided Osiris with legal advice.

Moret (2001 : 83) argues that Plutarch was a good interpreter of Egyptian thought when he said that:

“Isis did not wish that the battles and hardships which she had faced and all her acts of wisdom and courage should be buried in forgetfulness and silence. She therefore instituted very holy mysteries, which were to be images, representations and acted scenes of the sufferings of that time, to be a lesson of piety and consolation to the men and women who undergo the same trials”.

Frazer (1949 :383) considers that:

“We need not wonder, then, that in a period of decadence, when traditional faiths were shaken, when systems clashed, when men’s minds were disquieted, when the fabric of empire itself, once deemed eternal, began to show ominous rents and fissures, the serene figure of Isis with her spiritual calm, her gracious promise of immortality, should have appeared to many like a star in a stormy sky, and should have roused in their breasts a rapture of devotion not unlike that which was paid in the Middle Ages to the Virgin Mary”.

Murray (1962 : 95) adds:

“ With Isis, the divine wife and mother, as their model, women were held in great respect. Even in the late times, when foreign ideas were beginning to influence Egypt, there is a charming record of a beloved lady. She was “profitable of speech, agreeable in her conversations, of good counsel in her writings, all that passes her lips is like the work of the Goddess of Truth, a perfect woman, greatly praised in her city, giving the hand to all,

¹⁰ Also see Zandee (1965 : 121). See also Budge (1961 : 2) and Frazer (1949 : 363).

saying that which is good, repeating what one loves, giving pleasure to all, nothing evil ever passed her lips, most beloved by all”.

From the above mentioned quotations it is clear that Isis exerted a large influence on the thoughts of the Egyptian men, and therefore helped establish the rights which the ancient Egyptian women possessed. It can be deduced that Isis was the reason why women were treated with such respect. Isis was honoured and respected in every way of life. This led to the unusual rights women had in ancient Egypt and also to the high position women held in family life.