

# ASPECTS OF NEPHTHYS

by David A. Cintron

Nephthys is one of the the nine Gods of the Ennead of Heliopolis. As such she holds a position as one of the most important gods of ancient Egypt. Yet ancient literature leaves the role of Nephthys largely undefined. For one thing, no cult center or temple has ever been found for Nephthys. We also know that her name means “Lady of the Mansion” or “Lady of the Temple”. And we know that she was, in a mythological sense of course, wife of Seth, sister of Isis and Osiris and mother of Anubis. But little else is said about this Goddess. Can we find a more significant role for her?

Two sources we can study to better understand the original character and meaning of Nephthys are the Pyramid texts and Coffin texts. These must be supplemented with a study of Osirian mythology because this shows how Nephthys is intimately connected with Isis, Seth and Osiris.

The two caveats we must keep in mind are the length and breadth of Egyptian history because the mythology that has survived comes from different areas of Egypt during the New Kingdom and Late period, whereas the Pyramid and Coffin texts are Old and Middle Kingdom. Also bearing in mind that Egyptian theology evolved over time, these references must be examined to explore Nephthys’ original role as a Goddess in the Old Kingdom.

A thorough analysis shows eight separate recurring themes involving Nephthys.

1. Isis and Nephthys summon the deceased.
2. Isis and Nephthys gather the members of the deceased together to make him hale.
3. Nephthys comes from the West and goes behind the deceased, joining Isis who comes from the East and goes before the deceased.
4. The hair of Isis and Nephthys are tied together, the hair of Nephthys binding the deceased.
5. Nephthys awakens the deceased so he may live again.
6. Both Isis and Nephthys give the deceased his heart for his body.
7. Nephthys inflicts a wound with the knife and arrows of Neith.
8. The hand of Nephthys is prevented from “taking action”, probably against the Eye of Horus

Passages from these texts give us specific insights into the nature of Nephthys. Yet this leaves us with only a partial picture of her role. Lacking contemporary mythology we are left with only later mythology in which to orient the concept of Nephthys as a divinity within the context of these several themes. So we will proceed by working backwards.

From around 500 B.C. we have Plutarch’s rendering of the myth of Isis and Osiris along with other stories such as “the Battle of Horus and Seth”. This Greek historian has fortunately given us the clearest picture we have of the roles of Isis, Osiris, Seth and Nephthys from any period in Egyptian history. And in spite of these stories coming to us from later periods many parts of them can be correlated with passages in the Pyramid and Coffin texts. This shows us that these stories really did exist in some form throughout Egyptian history, and that, like the funerary texts, their roots can be traced back to the Old and Middle kingdoms.

## **Nephthys as a member of the Ennead**

The familiar “genealogy” of the Heliopolitan Ennead can be reconstructed from the Pyramid Texts and their roles in the creation of the world can be determined in some detail.

*Atum*  
*Shu – Tefnet*  
*Geb – Nut*  
*Isis – Osiris – Seth – Nephthys*

The father of all the Gods is Atum, who is the one being in this scheme who has no complement, as all existence sprang forth from Atum.

From Atum came Shu and Tefnet. As found in the Litany of Shu (Coffin Texts 76-80) these two can be said to represent infinity and order, concepts which have continued to exist in our scientific view of the universe.

From Shu and Tefnet came Geb and Nut, symbolizing Earth and Sky, Earth being the place that provided for the life of Man, and Sky as the place that provided for the life of Gods.

From Geb and Nut came Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephthys. These four are the basis of life. Osiris is the immortal spirit of man. In the tale of Isis and Osiris, his body has just died and he is now a helpless spirit. Seth is the force of nature which caused this physical death and which now attempts to also annihilate the spirit. This leaves us with Isis and Nephthys.

## **Nephthys through the Ages**

Plutarch’s work on Isis and Osiris states that Isis symbolized knowledge. True, this was a Late Period work by a Greek author, so cannot be relied upon to represent Old or Middle Kingdom beliefs. But if we look back we can find evidence of Plutarch’s message in Old and Middle Kingdom works. The Pyramid Texts constantly foreshadow pieces of the tale as told by Plutarch. Coffin Text 312 specifically refers to the mysteries of Isis stating,

I come today from the House of the Double Lion, I have come forth from it to the House of Isis, to the secret mysteries, I have been conducted to her hidden secrets, for she caused me to see the birth of the great god.

Isis clearly holds the mystery that when known allows the king to be reborn as the god Osiris, at least in the Middle Kingdom. And this rebirth is the goal stated time and time again for the Osiris King. To be reborn as a God in the afterlife.

In the Old Kingdom version there is no direct reference to secrets. But it is stated that Isis and Nephthys are complementary forces as regards their function in the underworld, Isis being positive and Nephthys negative. Utterance 222 states,

Ascend and descend; *descend with Nephthys*, sink into darkness with the Night-bark.  
Ascend and descend; *ascend with Isis*, rise with the Day-bark.

This is clearly in respect to the Osiris King's voyage from death to rebirth, beginning in the west to confront the forces of the dark underworld with the setting sun, then having survived the challenges of night then returning in the morning with the rising sun to the land of the living. It appears that Nephthys role here is to guide the deceased to the underworld, and Isis role to bring him back. So is Nephthys good or bad?

### **Positive and Negative Aspects of Nephthys**

Nephthys definitely has a negative aspect to her function as stated in several places.

- a) PT 71 states, "O Osiris the King, take the hand of Nephthys(?), prevent her from putting it on them." The question is, on what? This is clarified by CT 858 and 859 as the Eyes of Horus. And the Eyes of Horus symbolize the perception of the spirit. Not so much a visual, but an intellectual perception and awareness that is needed to navigate the underworld and arrive in the afterlife. It appears Nephthys must be kept away from this as symbolized by the Eyes of Horus. Thus it appears that the hand of Nephthys blinds spiritual awareness.
- b) PT 553 states, "Raise yourself, throw off your dust, remove the mask(?) which is on your face, loosen your bonds, for they are not bonds, they are the tresses of Nephthys." This certainly a very old utterance because if its referral to dust and a funeral mask, as this type of burial has only been found in the predynastic cemeteries of Hierakonpolis. What kind of bonds does this refer to? Evidently they keep the spirit from moving on as PT 665 states, "Raise yourself, O King, that you may see your Horite mounds and their tombs, that you may see your Sethite mounds and their tombs. Loose your bonds, O Horus who is in his house". So it also appears the tresses of Nephthys bind against spiritual movement.

But it cannot be denied that Nephthys also helps:

- a) PT 5 states, "O King, I have given to you your sister Nephthys, that she may lay hold of you and give to you your heart for your body." What does this mean? CT 62 states, "I put your heart into your body for you, that you may remember what you have forgotten."
- b) PT 565 states, "Nephthys [*var. Selket*] has set her hands on me, she has extended her breast to my mouth; ... it is my rebirth ..." and in the Coffin Texts we have CT 53, "Awake to life ... Nephthys has favored you, you being renewed daily in the night-time .... Nephthys has favored you and you shall not lose your house of joy ... Nephthys has favored you and you shall not lose your house of life, of life." And CT 67 states, "Awake, awake, O N! Awake, Osiris; awake, Anubis, at his death! Your kite(s) are Isis and Nephthys", and CT 74, "I am Nephthys; wake up!"
- c) Another set of texts shows Isis and Nephthys putting the deceased back together just the way Plutarch's tale tells.

So does Nephthys harm or help? Both, depending on what is being harmed or helped.

Let's try to put Nephthys actions into perspective. Nephthys calls to the deceased, comes to the deceased and helps to gather their members; this last act relating to the tale of Isis and Osiris. She takes their hand, cleanses and even suckles the deceased to give them a spiritual rebirth. But the conditions of this spiritual rebirth may not be everything the dead king wants to happen. Her tresses bind the deceased, she inflicts a wound with a knife, she takes the deceased into the darkness and she must be prevented from touching the Eyes of Horus. The dead king has been brought back to life, but his spiritual identity is definitely threatened.

## **Symbolic Nephthys**

The Pyramid Texts specifically tell us that Isis and Nephthys came together, mourned the dead King, called to him, found him, assembled him, gave him his heart for his body, cleansed him, nursed him, restored his health and guided him. But there are three key differences between Isis and Nephthys:

- Isis comes from the East and Nephthys from the West.
- Isis goes before and Nephthys goes after.
- The king ascends with Isis and descends with Nephthys.

If Isis comes from the East with spiritual knowledge, why does Nephthys come from the West? Can it be that Nephthys assisted the achievement of eternal life but at the expense all things that belonged to the world of the living? The qualities represented in these three points – the light of day, spiritual perception and knowledge – was it Nephthys role to take these from the deceased?

PT 532 states: Isis comes and Nephthys comes, one of them from the west and one of them from the east, one of them as a 'screecher' (of falcon), (Nephthys comes) one of them as a kite; they have found Osiris, his brother Seth having laid him low in Nedit; when Osiris said 'Get away from me', when his name became Sokar.

The Pyramid Texts tell us time and time again that Isis and Nephthys both escort the deceased. If we look closely we see that they come at a very specific moment. This is when Osiris regains control, when he can stand up, throw off his dust, his death mask, break his bonds and tell the force of death to leave. At that moment they assume their roles, Nephthys to escort the spirit to the West, where he would face the Gods of the underworld and, after passing through the night, meet Isis who would escort him to a rebirth in the East. This passage describes that moment.

It was certainly the goal of the deceased King to become a God in the afterlife. Keeping in mind that these texts span hundreds, if not thousands, of years, this goal did change in form over time. But the conclusion can be drawn that from the beginning that once the deceased conquered Seth, the force of death, it was Nephthys role to take them into darkness, to cloud the Eyes of Horus and bind the deceased while she did her work in taking the deceased to the underworld. If the deceased was able to survive until daybreak, then Isis would help him to return to the world of the Gods.

Nephthys' role began as may have all of the roles of her siblings, a benevolent force of nature. For even Seth, who eventually became the personification of evil itself, is a necessary force in the universe because physical immortality is simply impossible. Since everyone must die, the cycle of life demands a way out and, if there is an afterlife or another life, a way back in.

On this basis we can proffer a context in which Nephthys can be understood, which reveals that a seemingly passive goddess on closer study, in fact had a very active role.

---

### Repeated themes:

Isis and Nephthys summon the deceased

PT 437, PT 461, PT 468, PT 482, PT 665, PT 666, PT 674, PT 718, PT 720

Nephthys comes from the West and goes behind the deceased,  
joining Isis who comes from the East and goes before the deceased.

PT 218, PT 477, PT 505, PT 532, PT 720

The hair of Isis and Nephthys are tied together, the hair of Nephthys binding the deceased.

PT 553

CT 168, CT 531, CT 562

Isis and Nephthys gather the members of the deceased together to make him hale.

PT 219, PT 258, PT 259, PT 357, PT 363, PT 364, PT 366, PT 670, PT 676

CT 754, CT 778

Nephthys awakens the deceased so he may live again.

PT 565

CT 53, CT 67, CT 74

Both Isis and Nephthys give the deceased his heart for his body.

PT 5, PT 628

CT 62, CT 526

Nephthys inflicts a wound with the knife and arrows of Neith.

CT 473, CT 474, CT 476, CT 479

The hand of Nephthys is preventing from “taking action”, probably against the Eye of Horus

PT 71E

CT 858, CT 859

### Key passages:

PT 222:

Ascend and descend; *descend with Nephthys*, sink into darkness with the Night-bark.

Ascend and descend; *ascend with Isis*, rise with the Day-bark.

CT 157:

... and Horus cried out because of the condition of his injured Eye, saying: ‘Behold, me Eye is like that first wound which Seth inflicted on my Eye’, and Horus became unconscious [*m ib*] in his [*Re’s*] presence.

CT 312:

I come today from the House of the Double Lion, I have come forth from it to the House of Isis, to the secret mysteries, I have been conducted to her hidden secrets, for she caused me to see the birth of the great god.

CT 373:

‘Hidden are the ways for those who pass by; light is perished and *darkness comes into being*’ – so says Nephthys.