Egyptian Gods

Although the Egyptians worshipped hundreds of gods and goddesses, a few were central to their religion. However, the gods that were central changed several times over the kingdom’s long history.

The god of the sun was almost always a key figure in Egyptian religion. In the Old Kingdom, the sun god Ra (RAH), who was worshipped in Lower Egypt, was the most important god in Egypt, and was associated with kingship and the afterlife for the rest of Egyptian history. However, during the Middle Kingdom, political power moved to Upper Egypt, and the Pharaohs there promoted a different god, Amun, the ram-horned god of the sky and hidden power. By the New Kingdom, the two gods had been merged into one god, Amun-Ra, the King of the Gods.

Also central were the trio of Osiris, Isis, and Horus. According to legend, the god Osiris introduced civilization into Egypt. Shortly afterward, however, Osiris was killed by his brother Seth, who cut the god’s body into pieces that he scattered around Egypt. Isis, the wife and sister of Osiris, sought out the pieces of his body, reassembled them, and
brought Osiris back to life. Afterward, they had a child, Horus, who grew up and sought revenge on his uncle Seth. Later, Osiris became the new judge of the dead, replacing Anubis, Isis became known as a goddess of nature and renewal, and Horus became the first king of Egypt.

One reason for the pharaoh’s great power was the belief that he was a god. Especially during the Old Kingdom, Egyptians believed that the pharaoh was really a god in human form, a representation of Horus. As such, people thought that the pharaoh was responsible for Egypt’s prosperity. He and his priests had to perform elaborate rituals every day to ensure that the sun would rise, the Nile would flood, and crops would grow. For his role in keeping Egypt safe and secure, people honored the pharaoh

Monotheism in Egypt During the New Kingdom, around 1353 BC, a new pharaoh took power in Egypt. His name was Amenhotep IV, but he changed his name to Akhenaten, which means beloved of Aten. Egyptians had been worshipping many gods for centuries, but Akhenaten changed that. He worshipped only one god, Aten the sun god, and thought everyone should do the same.

As part of the changes he introduced in Egypt, Akhenaten banned the worship of any gods but Aten. He stripped power from the priests of other gods and ordered the gods’ images destroyed. Out of respect for his god, he built a new capital called Akhetaten. He built a temple there to Aten and is thought to have written beautiful hymns to the god.

The worship of Aten did not survive Akhenaten’s death. When his son, Tutankhaten, became the new pharaoh, he changed his name to Tutankhamun (known today as King Tut), recognizing the old God Amun instead of Aten. He restored the worship of Egypt’s traditional gods and moved the kingdom’s capital back to Thebes.