Apep

By: Benjamin Maguire

Apep was an evil demon/godf of chaos and darkness, and opposed light and order. He was Ra, the sun god’s, greatest enemy, and he hated the order and balance embodied by Ma’at. He was often referred to as a giant snake, crocodile, or dragon. His roar would cause the underworld to be rumble.

Before time, Apep was formed from Neith’s saliva, which she spat into the primordial soup embodied by Nu, the god of chaos. Some myths depict Apep as a former sun god that was replaced by Ra, which shows why Apep hates him. He was introduced to Egypt during the Middle Kingdom, and most of the stories were made during the New Kingdom.

Every night Apep would try to destroy light and order by devouring Ra’s Sun Boat, which was called the “Boat of Millions of Years”, as it passed through the underworld. In some stories Apep waited for Ra inside of a mountain in the west called Bakhu, and in others he hid just before dawn in the “Tenth Region of the Night”. If Apep defeated Ra, darkness and chaos would win, and the result was a thunderstorm, earthquake or a solar eclipse. But Ra’s defenders would free the boat from Apep’s belly.

Apep would use his “magical gaze” to hypnotize Ra and his army, while stopping the river with his coils to try and devour the sun boat. Many other gods helped Ra to defeat Apep, of which the most powerful was Set, who sat at the helm of the boat and injured Apep. Apep was the only “all powerful god” to the Egyptians. He couldn’t ever really be defeated, only defeated for the rest of the day. In later traditions, Set became an evil god, taking on Apep’s characteristics. Other defenders included Mehen, Serket, Maahes, Shu and Bastet. These gods used magic spells to fend off Apep, along with spears and knives to chop him into pieces. In spite of the punishment, Apep would return to try again the next day. “The Book of the Dead” describes how Ra defeats Apep. In other stories it’s Aten, who was a later form of Ra, who slays the great snake. Other myths tell of Apep being in prison in the underworld. In others he is condemned by Atum in “Gate 2” of the underworld.

Apep’s defeat was made certain by the prayers of priests and worshipers at the temples. The Egyptians practiced many rituals to fend off Apep and help Ra to continue his path across the sky. In an annual ceremony called the “Banishing of Apep”, the priests would build a statue of Apep that contained all of the evil in Egypt, and then burn it to protect the people from Apep’s influence for another year. The Egyptian priest had a detailed guide about how to fight Apep, called “The Books of Overthrowing Apep” or “Book of Apophis”. Along with stories about his defeats, it had instructions on how to make a wax model or a drawing of the snake, which would then be spat on, decapitated and burned while casting spells that would help Ra. These are the chapters in it:

* Chapter of Spitting Upon Apep
* Chapter of Defiling Apep with the Left Foot
* Chapter of Taking a Lance to Smite Apep
* Chapter of Fettering (Restraining) Apep
* Chapter of Taking a Knife to Smite Apep
* Chapter of Putting Fire Upon Apep

The dead needed protection as well, so sometimes they were buried with spells to help destroy Apep. Afraid that even the image of Apep could give him power, any picture would always be of him being killed.