

Folktales: Myths from around the world

The Egyptian myth of Isis and the seven scorpions

1. A woman in rags emerged from the swamp flanked by seven giant scorpions. Carrying a baby, she headed for the nearest village to beg for food. She approached a magnificent mansion, but the mistress of the house took one look at her grimy clothes and unusual companions and slammed the door in her face.
2. So she continued down the road until she came to a cottage. The woman there took pity on the stranger and offered her what she could: a simple meal and a bed of straw. Her guest was no ordinary beggar. She was Isis, the most powerful goddess in Egypt.
3. Isis was in hiding from her brother Set, who murdered her husband and wanted to murder her infant son, Horus. Set was also a powerful god, and he was looking for them. So to keep her cover, Isis had to be very discreet— she couldn't risk using her powers.
4. But she was not without aid. Serket, goddess of venomous creatures, had sent seven of her fiercest servants to guard Isis and her son.
5. As Isis and Horus settled into their humble accommodation, the scorpions fumed at how the wealthy woman had offended their divine mistress. They all combined their venom and gave it to one of the seven, Tefen. In the dead of night, Tefen crept over to the mansion. As he crawled under the door, he saw the owner's young son sleeping peacefully and gave him a mighty sting.
6. Isis and her hostess were soon awakened by loud wailing. As they peered out of the doorway of the cottage, they saw a mother running through the street, weeping as she cradled her son. When Isis recognised the woman who had turned her away, she understood what her scorpions had done.
7. Isis took the boy in her arms and began to recite a powerful spell: "O poison of Tefen, come out of him and fall upon the ground! Poison of Befen, advance not, penetrate no farther, come out of him, and fall upon the ground! For I am Isis, the great Enchantress, the Speaker of spells. Fall down, O poison of Mestet! Hasten not, poison of Mestetef! Rise not, poison of Petet and Thetet! Approach not, poison of Matet!"
8. With each name she invoked, that scorpion's poison was neutralised. The child stirred, and his mother wept with gratitude and lamented her earlier callousness, offering all her wealth to Isis in repentance. The woman who had taken Isis in watched in awe— she had had no idea who she'd brought under her roof.
9. And from that day on, the people learned to make a poultice to treat scorpion bites, speaking magical incantations just as the goddess had.

Alex Gendler. *TedEd Myths from Around the World*. Available from:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jycXLG6GeYk&list=PLJicmE8fK0EjW2AVwcSc4NvGyJaw7bzh&index=30&t=0s> [accessed 14 August, 2020]

Questions:

- a) Why did the first woman refuse to help the woman in rags?
- b) What is surprising about the woman begging for food?
- c) Explain why Isis was fleeing.
- d) Explain why Isis, the most powerful goddess of Egypt, could not use her powers to feed and protect her son.
- e) Quote one word from paragraph 5 that shows that the scorpions were angered by the wealthy woman's actions.
- f) Quote one word from paragraph 5 that shows that the scorpion Tefen was sneaking into the house of the wealthy woman.
- g) Do you feel sorry for the wealthy woman when her son is stung? Explain your answer.
- h) Who is Isis referring to in her incantation (Befen, Mestet, Mestetef, Petet, Tefen, Thetet and Matet)?
- i) What lesson can we learn from the story? Explain your answer.