Name: _____ Date: _____

# Ra and the Night Boat

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 957 words

In ancient Egypt, where the sun shines hot over the desert and the great river Nile, people loved the morning. Every day the sun rose in the east, climbed the sky and sank in the west, and every day they asked themselves how it was done. The people of Egypt told a story to answer that question, and it was a story about a god named Ra and a golden boat.

Ra was the god of the sun, and the sky, they said, was a great river, like the Nile, only far above the earth. Ra sailed on it in his boat. In the morning he rose from the eastern edge of the world in the day boat, and he sailed slowly up the sky toward noon. Then he changed into a second boat, and he went on down toward the west.

All day long Ra's light fell on the fields and the river and the people. Farmers watched the bright boat cross the sky from the corn and the reeds along the Nile. They knew every hour of it, from the warm morning and the blazing noon to the long gold afternoon. But when the sun grew low and red, they knew that Ra's boat was about to leave the sky, and that the long night was coming.

At sunset Ra's boat slipped down behind the western hills and into a hidden land called the Duat, a land of darkness under the earth. The Egyptians told how Ra had to sail through it every night, for twelve long hours, to come out again on the far side. Each hour had a great gate, and the gates had to be opened one after the other, before the boat could pass.

In the Duat there was no wind, and there was no water for sails or oars. So the gods who lived there took up a long rope and towed Ra's boat along the dark river, just as people on the bank of the Nile sometimes towed a heavy barge. The boat was golden, and its light was the only light in all that land. Where it passed, it shone on the walls of the caves.

The dwellers in the Duat had been sleeping in the dark, and when the golden boat floated past, they woke up. They lifted their faces and saw Ra, and they were glad. Ra spoke to them from his boat, and told each of them what to do. Then the boat sailed on, and the dark and the silence closed in behind it again, and the sleepers lay down once more.

Now, in the deep of the night, the boat came to the place where an enemy was waiting. It was the great snake Apep, who hated the light. Apep was as long as a river and as thick as a hill, and he lay coiled across the road of the boat so that the boat could not pass. If Apep could stop Ra, the sun would never rise, and the world would be dark forever.

The old storytellers said that Apep fought with the weapons of darkness, which are mist and cloud and rain. He hissed and he writhed, and he opened his huge mouth to swallow the light. The boat stopped. The gods who towed it stood still on the bank. The Duat was silent, and the

golden glow from the boat grew dim, as if a great cloud had come over the sun.

But Ra had friends with him. One of them was the goddess Isis, and she knew the words of power, which were the old words that make a thing happen when they are spoken. Isis lifted her head, and in a clear, strong voice she said them out loud. They rang through the cavern like bells, and the echoes ran away down the dark river. The snake Apep flinched, and the gods on the bank looked up in hope.

Ra himself stood up, tall and bright, in the front of his golden boat. He had a weapon too, and it was the burning heat of the sun, and the darts of its light. He raised them against the snake. The words of Isis and the light of Ra together were more than Apep could bear. He coiled back, and he shrank away, and he slid down into the darkness, driven back from the road.

The snake did not give up for good, for he was never quite beaten. The Egyptians said that Apep could always gather himself together again, and that was why there were clouds and mist and rain, and why there were storms and darkness. But each night, as the stories said, the golden boat sailed past, and each night Apep was driven off. And once the road was clear, the gods took up the rope again.

The boat went on through the last hours of the night. The gates opened one after another, as Ra came near, and at the twelfth hour there was a long, bright passage ahead and a thin silver glow in the sky. The gods put down their rope. Ra's boat rose up out of the darkness and came out into the world again at the eastern edge of the earth, just as the sky began to grow pink.

Up came the sun, round and gold, over the desert and the river. Birds began to sing. The farmers by the Nile lifted their faces, and they knew that Ra had come through the night once more. That is the story the people of ancient Egypt told about the sun, a story about a golden boat and a great snake and a long, dark night that always ended in the morning.

## Questions

**1. How did Ra's boat travel through the Duat?**

A. Gods pulled it along with a rope
B. It was pushed by the wind
C. Ra rowed it alone

**2. Who was the great snake that stood in the way of the boat?**

A. Apep
B. Isis
C. Ra

**3. What drove the snake back?**

A. The words of Isis and the light of Ra

B. A strong wind

C. The towing gods' rope

**4. The people of Egypt told this story. What did it explain?**

A. Why the sun comes back every morning

B. Why the Nile floods

C. Why people sleep

**5. The boat was "towed." What does towed mean?**

A. Pulled along

B. Painted gold

C. Sunk

## Words to know

Duat: the dark land

towed: pulled by a rope

coiled: wound in rings

gate: big door

barge: flat river boat

# Answer key: Ra and the Night Boat

1. A. Gods pulled it along with a rope
2. A. Apep
3. A. The words of Isis and the light of Ra
4. A. Why the sun comes back every morning
5. A. Pulled along