

OSIRIS AND THE DECEASED

أوزيريس و المتوفى

*Mark Smith*

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## OSIRIS AND THE DECEASED

### أوزيريس و المتوفى

Mark Smith

Osiris und der Verstorbene

Osiris et le mort

*For the Egyptians, the god Osiris provided a model whereby the effects of the rupture caused by death could be totally reversed, since that deity underwent a twofold process of resurrection. Mummification reconstituted his “corporeal” self and justification against Seth his “social” self, re-integrating him and restoring his status among the gods. Through the mummification rites, which incorporated an assessment of the deceased’s character, the Egyptians hoped to be revived and justified like Osiris. These rites endowed them with their own personal Osirian aspect or form, which was a mark of their status as a member of the god’s entourage in the underworld. Thus the deceased underwent a twofold resurrection as well. Not only were their limbs reconstituted, and mental and physical faculties restored, but they entered into a personal relationship with Osiris that simultaneously situated them within a group.*

اعتبر المصريين القدماء الإله أوزيريس مثلاً أن الانقطاع الذي يسببه الموت يمكن عكسه تماماً حيث تم بعث الإله بعد الموت مرتين حيث أعاد التحنيط جثمانه الإنساني و إنتصاره على أخيه ست أعاد له كونه الإجتماعي وأعاد إدماجه كما أعاد له مقامه وسط الآلهة. تمنى المصريون القدماء ان يبعثوا- مثل أوزيريس- من خلال مراحل التحنيط التي تضمنت تحليل شخصية المتوفى. وهذه الطقوس اتاحت لهم خصائص أوزيرية خاصة بهم مما كان إشارة لمكانتهم كأفراد من مجموعة اتباع الإله في العالم الآخر و بذلك يمر المتوفى هو الآخر بمرحلتى بعث حيث تم إعادة تجميع أعضائه و قواه العقلية و البدنية إلى جانب بدئ علاقة تجمع بينهم و بين الإله أوزيريس.

**A**ccording to a widespread Egyptian tradition, the god Osiris was born in Thebes on the first epagomenal day, the 361<sup>st</sup> day of the year, as the eldest child of Geb and Nut, although some variant accounts provide different details about the day and place of his birth and his parentage (Derchain 1965: 31; Gutbub 1973: 13; Herbin 1988: 99). At delivery, he measured one cubit (52.3 cm) in length (Szczudłowska 1970: 62). As an adult his full height was eight cubits, six palms, and three fingers, or approximately 4.7 m (Yoyotte 1977: 145, 147). Like other Egyptian deities,

his hair was blue-black in color (de Rochemonteix and Chassinat 1897: 149, line 9; Smith 2005: 210). He married his younger sister Isis, with whom he had initiated a sexual relationship while both were still in their mother’s womb (Quack 2004: 328 - 330), and was crowned king of Egypt in succession to his father in Herakleopolis, adopting the fivefold titulary “Horus powerful of arms, Two Ladies mighty in valor, Horus of Gold Osiris, King of Upper and Lower Egypt Osiris, Son of Ra Wennefer the triumphant” (Yoyotte 1977: 145 - 148). One source records that he held the offices of vizier, chief priest

of Heliopolis, and royal herald before his assumption of the throne (Osing 1992: 51 - 54); another, that he had instigated a rebellion against Shu prior to his accession (Derchain 1965: 31 - 34).

At the age of 28 the god was murdered by his brother, Seth (Quack 2004: 330 - 331). According to some sources, the killer justified his act with the claim that he had acted in self-defense (Mathieu 1998: 71 - 78). According to others, he took retribution because Osiris had engaged in an illicit affair with his wife, Nephthys (Spiegelberg 1902: 21 and pl. 95, lines 12 - 15; Von Lieven 2006: 141 - 150). The offspring of this adulterous union was Anubis, who is sometimes called the eldest son of Osiris (Smith 2005: 203). A few texts say the god also had a daughter or daughters, without indicating who their mother was, by one of whom he fathered additional sons (Meeks 2006: 21 - 23, 49 - 50, 104, 151). After the murder of her husband, Isis searched for and discovered his corpse, which was then reconstituted through mummification. Using her potent spells and utterances, she was able to arouse Osiris and conceive her son Horus by him. Thus a sexual relationship that began before either deity was actually born continued even after one of them had died.

The child Horus was raised in secret by his mother in the marshes of Khemmis in the delta, where he was safe from Seth's attempts to find and kill him. On reaching adulthood, he avenged the crime committed against Osiris. Seth was brought to justice, found guilty, and punished for his deed, while Horus was acclaimed as king and rightful successor to his father. Now vindicated against his enemy, and with the legitimacy of his heir firmly established, Osiris himself was installed as ruler of the underworld and its inhabitants.

This brief sketch is a composite assembled from a number of Egyptian sources of different dates and from different parts of the country. It illustrates one salient fact, however. Osiris is one of the few Egyptian divinities of whom it is possible to write even the outline of a biography. More personal details about him are extant than about any

other god or goddess. This is not simply an accident of preservation. The Egyptians considered some deities important because of their impersonal attributes and powers, the roles they were believed to play in the maintenance of the cosmos. But the crucial significance of Osiris for them lay in what he personally had done and undergone. His life, death, and resurrection were perceived to be particularly momentous in relation to their own fates, and thus they figure more prominently in the textual record than do accounts of the exploits of other divinities. Moreover, because so much importance was invested in the fact that these were events actually experienced by a real individual, and not merely abstractions, personal detail was essential in recounting them.

To understand why the life, death, and resurrection of Osiris were so significant, one must first grasp how the ancient Egyptians conceived of the human being. Their conception was essentially a monistic one. They did not divide the person into a corruptible body and immortal soul. They did, however, perceive each individual as having a "corporeal self" and a "social self" (Assmann 2001: 118 - 120). For both, "connectivity" was an essential prerequisite. Just as the disparate limbs of the human body could only function effectively as parts of a properly constituted whole, so too could the individual person only function as a member of a properly structured society. Death brought about a twofold rupture, severing the links between the constituent parts of the body while at the same time isolating the deceased from the company of his or her former associates. In effect, it was a form of dismemberment, both corporeal and social (Assmann 2001: 35 - 39).

Osiris provided a model whereby the effects of this rupture could be reversed, for the god underwent a twofold process of resurrection. Just as mummification restored his corporeal integrity, so too justification against Seth and the events that followed it restored his social position and re-integrated him within the hierarchy of the gods. These two concepts, mummification and justification, are

intimately linked. The latter has been described, with good reason, as “moral mummification” (Assmann 2001: 103). In obtaining justice against Seth, Osiris regained full life, since his death was an injustice. By his justification, he gained total mastery over death. In the same way that Osiris was restored to life and declared free of wrongdoing, so all who died hoped to be revived and justified, as a result of the mummification process and its attendant rituals. These actually incorporated an assessment of the deceased’s character, which prefigured the one conducted in the underworld (Assmann 2001: 102 - 105, 372 - 393; 2002: 53). A favorable assessment helped to ensure their integration into the society of gods and blessed spirits in the afterlife, just as the embalming restored their corporeal integrity. Conversely, an unfavorable assessment resulted in torment, which began even while the victim still lay on the embalmer’s table (Stadler 2003: 189 - 196). From this it should be evident that, if justification can be described as “moral mummification,” it is no less accurate to speak of mummification as “corporeal justification.”

At the end of the embalming rites, having been returned to life and freed from imputation of wrongdoing, the deceased was endowed with an Osiris-aspect. In fact, the performance of such rites was sometimes described as “giving an Osiris to” someone. Many Egyptian texts for the afterlife are addressed or refer to “the Osiris of” an individual—that aspect or form which the dead person acquired through the efficacy of the rituals performed for his benefit in the embalming place, and in which he was supposed to endure for the rest of eternity (Smith 2006: 333 - 334).

Acquisition of this Osiris-aspect did not involve identification with the deity himself, contrary to what is said in many books on Egyptian religion. Rather, it meant that the deceased was admitted to the god’s following and became one of his devotees in the underworld. Thus it was a *unio liturgica* rather

than a *unio mystica*. Unlike the latter, the former does not involve a personal, individual identification with a deity, but rather adherence to that deity’s sphere. It means being admitted to a body of worshippers, a cultic community, whose members perform the “liturgy” of a deity. In this particular instance, the community was composed of the inhabitants of the next world. By participating in their worship, the dead person acquired the same status as theirs. Since they were, in the first instance, divine beings themselves, the deceased acquired divine status as well, and with it, immortality. Thus, the concept of *unio liturgica* involves an element of identification, but this is collective rather than individual. The deceased was identified with a constellation of adoring deities, not the object of their devotion (Smith 2006: 334 - 335).

The Osirian form was an outward mark of an individual’s status as a member of this community of worshippers. Both men and women could be endowed with the form in question. The gender difference between the latter and the god posed no obstacle to a woman’s acquisition of an Osirian aspect, since females as well as males were eligible to join in his worship. This sort of relationship between form and status has a striking parallel in Papyrus Louvre E 3452, a demotic collection of transformation spells written for a priest named Imhotep who died in 57 or 56 BCE (Legrain 1890). By virtue of these spells, he was supposed to be able to assume various non-human forms in the afterlife—falcon, ibis, phoenix, dog, and serpent—each associated with a particular deity. But assumption of such a form does not result in him becoming that deity. Instead, the text says that he will follow or serve the god in question. In fact, its title states specifically that the purpose of undergoing such transformations is to enable the deceased to “follow any god of any temple and to worship him according to his wish in the course of every single day” (Legrain 1890: pl. 1, lines 2 - 3). Here too, acquisition of a form associated with a particular deity results not in identification but in assumption of the role of devotee.

As the evidence of this text shows, the Egyptian verb that best describes the relationship between the god Osiris and the Osiris of a deceased person is not *hpr*, “become,” but rather *šms*, “follow” (Smith 2006: 335). The dead person can be said to follow the deity in two distinct senses: on the one hand, he joins the retinue of Osiris’s worshippers; on the other, through the efficacy of the mummification rites, which reconstitute his corporeal and social selves, he follows in Osiris’s footsteps by undergoing the same twofold process of resurrection previously undergone by that god.

Some have attempted to minimize the distinction between “becoming” and “following” in this context. Assmann (2001: 282 - 283), for instance, claims that becoming Osiris and being introduced to that god’s cultic sphere are simply “two faces of the same medal,” both being parts of the deceased’s initiation into the underworld. This assessment is influenced unduly by Greek mystery religion, in which a devotee is actually identified with the divinity he worships. The Egyptian conception is very different. The Coffin Texts include a number of spells for becoming various deities, including one, Spell 227, with the title “Transformation into Osiris” (De Buck 1935 - 1961, III: 265e). This utterance was supposed to ensure the beneficiary’s identification with that deity, yet it was to be employed by someone who had already been endowed with an Osirian form

(*ibid.*, III: 264g, 265c). If that form was, in itself, sufficient to ensure identification with the god, what was the purpose of the spell? In another utterance, Spell 4, the Osiris of a deceased person is addressed with the words “You will become Osiris” (*ibid.*, I: 12d). Once again, the individual already possesses an Osirian form, yet his becoming Osiris is treated as a future event, something that has not yet taken place. These examples show clearly that, from an ancient Egyptian perspective, acquisition of an Osirian form and identification with that deity are two totally separate things.

We have seen that the Egyptian conception of the individual, although essentially monistic, nevertheless comprised two elements: a corporeal self and a social self. Death destroyed the integrity of both, and in order for the deceased to return to full life, both had to be reconstituted. It was not sufficient for a dead person to recover the use of his mental and physical faculties; he had to undergo a process of social reintegration as well, being accepted among the hierarchy of gods and blessed spirits in the afterlife. With corporeal and social “connectivity” thus restored, he acquired a new Osirian form. In this form the deceased enjoyed not only the benefits of bodily rejuvenation, but also the fruits of a relationship with a specific deity that simultaneously situated him within a group.

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For Egyptian ideas about death and resurrection and the central role of the god Osiris in these, a good survey is Assmann (2001 and English translation of 2005). On the relationship of Osiris with the deceased in the afterlife, see Smith (2006). A comprehensive study of Egyptian beliefs about this deity, utilizing all available evidence, has yet to be written.

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