BOOK THIRD

OSIRIS
CHAPTER I

THE MYTH OF OSIRIS

In ancient Egypt the god whose death and resurrection were annually celebrated with alternate sorrow and joy was Osiris, the most popular of all Egyptian deities; and there are good grounds for classing him in one of his aspects with Adonis and Attis as a personification of the great yearly vicissitudes of nature, especially of the corn. But the immense vogue which he enjoyed for many ages induced his devoted worshippers to heap upon him the attributes and powers of many other gods; so that it is not always easy to strip him, so to say, of his borrowed plumes and to restore them to their proper owners. In the following pages I do not pretend to enumerate and analyse all the alien elements which thus gathered round the popular deity. All that I shall attempt to do is to peel off these accretions and to exhibit the god, as far as possible, in his primitive simplicity. The discoveries of recent years in Egypt enable us to do so with more confidence now than when I first addressed myself to the problem many years ago.

The story of Osiris is told in a connected form only by Plutarch, whose narrative has been confirmed and to some extent amplified in modern times by the evidence of the monuments.1 Of the monuments which illustrate

the myth or legend of Osiris the oldest are a long series of hymns, prayers, incantations, and liturgies, which have been found engraved in hieroglyphics on the walls, passages, and galleries of five pyramids at Sakkara. From the place where they were discovered these ancient religious records are known as the Pyramid Texts. They date from the fifth and sixth dynasties, and the period of time during which they were carved on the pyramids is believed to have been roughly a hundred and fifty years from about the year 2625 B.C. onward. But from their contents it appears that many of these documents were drawn up much earlier; for in some of them there are references to works which have perished, and in others there are political allusions which seem to show that the passages containing them must have been composed at a time when the Northern and Southern Kingdoms were still independent and hostile states and had not yet coalesced into a single realm under the sway of one powerful monarch. As the union of the kingdoms appears to have taken place about three thousand four hundred years before our era, the whole period covered by the composition of the Pyramid Texts probably did not fall short of a thousand years. Thus the documents form the oldest body of religious literature surviving to us from the ancient world, and occupy a place in the history of Egyptian language and civilization like that which the Vedic hymns and incantations occupy in the history of Aryan speech and culture.1

The special purpose for which these texts were engraved on the pyramids was to ensure the eternal life and felicity of the dead kings who slept beneath these colossal monu-

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1 J. H. Breasted, Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt (London, 1912), pp. vii sqq., 77 sqq., 84 sqq., 91 sqq. Compare id., History of the Ancient Egyptians (London, 1908), p. 68; Ed. Meyer, Geschichte des Altertums, 9 i. 2. pp. 116 sq.; E. A. Wallis Budge, Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection (London, 1911), i. 100 sqq. The first series of the texts was discovered in 1880 when Mariette’s workmen penetrated into the pyramid of King Pepi the First. Till then it had been thought by modern scholars that the pyramids were destitute of inscriptions. The first to edit the Pyramid Texts was Sir Gaston Maspero.
ments. Hence the dominant note that sounds through them all is an insistent, a passionate protest against the reality of death: indeed the word death never occurs in the Pyramid Texts except to be scornfully denied or to be applied to an enemy. Again and again the indomitable assurance is repeated that the dead man did not die but lives. "King Teti has not died the death, he has become a glorious one in the horizon." "Ho! King Unis! Thou didst not depart dead, thou didst depart living." "Thou hast departed that thou mightest live, thou hast not departed that thou mightest die." "Thou diest not." "This King Pepi dies not." "Have ye said that he would die? He dies not; this King Pepi lives for ever." "Live! Thou shalt not die." "Thou livest, thou livest, raise thee up." "Thou diest not, stand up, raise thee up." "O lofty one among the Imperishable Stars, thou perishest not eternally." Thus for Egyptian kings death was swallowed up in victory; and through their tears Egyptian mourners might ask, like Christian mourners thousands of years afterwards, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

Now it is significant that in these ancient documents, though the myth or legend of Osiris is not set forth at length, it is often alluded to as if it were a matter of common knowledge. Hence we may legitimately infer the great antiquity of the Osirian tradition in Egypt. Indeed so numerous are the allusions to it in the Pyramid Texts that by their help we could reconstruct the story in its main outlines even without the narrative of Plutarch. Thus the discovery of these texts has confirmed our belief in the accuracy and fidelity of the Greek writer, and we may accept his account with confidence even when it records incidents or details which have not yet been verified by a

1 J. H. Breasted, Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt, pp. 91 sq. Among the earlier works referred to in the Pyramid Texts are "the chapter of those who ascend" and "the chapter of those who raise themselves up" (J. H. Breasted, op. cit. p. 85). From their titles these works would seem to have recorded a belief in the resurrection and ascension of the dead.

2 This has been done by Professor J. H. Breasted in his Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt, pp. 18 sqq.
comparison with original Egyptian sources. The tragic tale runs thus:

Osiris was the offspring of an intrigue between the earth-god Seb (Keb or Geb, as the name is sometimes transliterated) and the sky-goddess Nut. The Greeks identified his parents with their own deities Cronus and Rhea. When the sun-god Ra perceived that his wife Nut had been unfaithful to him, he declared with a curse that she should be delivered of the child in no month and no year. But the goddess had another lover, the god Thoth or Hermes, as the Greeks called him, and he playing at draughts with the moon won from her a seventy-second part of every day, and having compounded five whole days out of these parts he added them to the Egyptian year of three hundred and sixty days. This was the mythical origin of the five supplementary days which the Egyptians annually inserted at the end of every year in order to establish a harmony between lunar and solar time. On these five days, regarded as outside the year of twelve months, the curse of the sun-god did not rest, and accordingly Osiris was born on the first of them. At his nativity a voice rang out proclaiming that the Lord of All had come into the world. Some say that a certain Pamyles heard a voice from the temple at Thebes bidding him announce with a shout that a great king, the beneficent Osiris, was born. But Osiris was not the only child of his mother. On the second of the supplementary days she gave birth to the elder Horus, on the third to the god Set, whom the Greeks called Typhon, on the fourth to the goddess Isis, and on the fifth to the goddess Nephthys.

1 In Plutarch, Isis et Osiris, 12, we must clearly read ἢθεδοκενθων δεήρον with Scaliger and Wytenbach for the ἢθεδοκενθων of the MSS.
2 Herodotus, ii. 4, with A. Wiedemann's note; L. Ideeler, Handbuch der mathematischen und technischen Chronologie (Berlin, 1835-1826), i. 94 sqq.; A. Erman, Ägypten und ägyptisches Leben im Altertum, pp. 468 sq.; G. Maspero, Histoire ancienne des Peuples de l'Orient Classique, i. 208 sq.
3 The birth of the five deities on the five supplementary days is mentioned by Diodorus Siculus (i. 13. 4) as well as by Plutarch (Isis et Osiris, 12). The memory of the five supplementary days seems to survive in the modern Coptic calendar of Egypt. The days from the first to the sixth of Amshir (February) are called "the days outside the year" and they are deemed unlucky. "Any child begotten during these days will infallibly be misshapen or abnormally tall or short. This also applies to animals so that cattle and mares are not covered during these days; moreover, some say (though
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Afterwards Set married his sister Nephthys, and Osiris married his sister Isis.

Reigning as a king on earth, Osiris reclaimed the Egyptians from savagery, gave them laws, and taught them to worship the gods. Before his time the Egyptians had been cannibals. But Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris, discovered wheat and barley growing wild, and Osiris introduced the cultivation of these grains amongst his people, who forthwith abandoned cannibalism and took kindly to a corn diet. Moreover, Osiris is said to have been the first to gather fruit from trees, to train the vine to poles, and to tread the grapes. Eager to communicate these beneficent discoveries to all mankind, he committed the whole government of Egypt to his wife Isis, and travelled over the world, diffusing the blessings of civilization and agriculture wherever he went. In countries where a harsh climate or niggardly soil forbade the cultivation of the vine, he taught the inhabitants to console themselves for the want of wine by brewing beer from barley. Loaded with the wealth that had been showered upon him by grateful nations, he returned to Egypt, and on account of the benefits he had conferred on mankind he was unanimously hailed and worshipped as a deity. But his brother Set (whom the Greeks called Typhon) with seventy-two others plotted against him. Having taken the measure of his good brother's body by stealth, the bad brother Typhon fashioned and highly decorated a coffer of the same size, and once when they were all drinking and making merry he brought in the coffer and jestingly promised to give it to the one whom it should fit exactly. Well, they all tried one after the other, but it fitted none of them. Last of all Osiris stepped into it and lay down. On that the conspirators ran and slammed the lid down on him, nailed it fast, soldered it with molten lead, and flung the

Egyptian custom of Osiris Introduces the cultivation of corn and of the vine.

His violent death.

others deny) that neither sowing nor planting should be undertaken." However, these unlucky days are not the true intercalary days of the Coptic calendar, which occur in the second week of September at the end of the Coptic year. See C. G. Seligmann, "Ancient Egyptian Beliefs in Modern Egypt," Essays and Studies presented to William Ridgeway (Cambridge, 1913), p. 456. As to the unluckiness of intercalary days in general, see The Scapegoat, pp. 339 sqq.

1 Plutarch, Isis et Osiris, 13; Diodorus Siculus, i. 14, 17, 20; Tibullus, l. 7. 29 sqq.
coffer into the Nile. This happened on the seventeenth day of the month Athyr, when the sun is in the sign of the Scorpion, and in the eight-and-twentieth year of the reign or the life of Osiris. When Isis heard of it she sheared off a lock of her hair, put on mourning attire, and wandered disconsolately up and down, seeking the body.¹

By the advice of the god of wisdom she took refuge in the papyrus swamps of the Delta. Seven scorpions accompanied her in her flight. One evening when she was weary she came to the house of a woman, who, alarmed at the sight of the scorpions, shut the door in her face. Then one of the scorpions crept under the door and stung the child of the woman that he died. But when Isis heard the mother’s lamentation, her heart was touched, and she laid her hands on the child and uttered her powerful spells; so the poison was driven out of the child and he lived. Afterwards Isis herself gave birth to a son in the swamps. She had conceived him while she fluttered in the form of a hawk over the corpse of her dead husband. The infant was the younger Horus, who in his youth bore the name of Harpocrates, that is, the child Horus. Him Buto, the goddess of the north, hid from the wrath of his wicked uncle Set. Yet she could not guard him from all mishap; for one day when Isis came to her little son’s hiding-place she found him stretched lifeless and rigid on the ground: a scorpion had stung him. Then Isis prayed to the sun-god Ra for help. The god hearkened to her and staid his bark in the sky, and sent down Thoth to teach her the spell by which she might restore her son to life. She uttered the words of power, and straightway the poison flowed from the body of Horus, air passed into him, and he lived. Then Thoth ascended up into the sky and took his place once more in the bark of the sun, and the bright pomp passed onward jubilant.²

¹ Plutarch, Isis et Osiris, 13 sq.
² A. Erman, Ägypten und ägyptisches Leben im Altertum, p. 366; id., Die ägyptische Religion² (Berlin, 1909), p. 401; A. Wiedemann, Religion of the Ancient Egyptians (London, 1897), pp. 213 sq.; E. A. Wallis Budge, The Gods of the Egyptians, i. 487 sq.; ii. 206-211; id., Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection (London, 1911), i. 92-96, ii. 84, 274-276. These incidents of the scorpions are not related by Plutarch but are known to us from Egyptian sources. The barbarous legend of the begetting of Horus by the dead Osiris is told in unambiguous language in the
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Meantime the coffer containing the body of Osiris had floated down the river and away out to sea, till at last it drifted ashore at Byblus, on the coast of Syria. Here a fine erica tree shot up suddenly and enclosed the chest in its trunk. The king of the country, admiring the growth of the tree, had it cut down and made into a pillar of his house; but he did not know that the coffer with the dead Osiris was in it. Word of this came to Isis and she journeyed to Byblus, and sat down by the well, in humble guise, her face wet with tears. To none would she speak till the king's handmaids came, and them she greeted kindly, and braided their hair, and breathed on them from her own divine body a wondrous perfume. But when the queen beheld the braids of her handmaids' hair and smelt the sweet smell that emanated from them, she sent for the stranger woman and took her into her house and made her the nurse of her child. But Isis gave the babe her finger instead of her breast to suck, and at night she began to burn all that was mortal of him away, while she herself in the likeness of a swallow fluttered round the pillar that contained her dead brother, twittering mournfully. But the queen spied what she was doing and shrieked out when she saw her child in flames, and thereby she hindered him from becoming immortal. Then the goddess revealed herself and begged for the pillar of the roof, and they gave it her, and she cut the coffer out of it, and fell upon it and embraced it and lamented so loud that the younger of the king's children died of fright on the spot. But the trunk of the tree she wrapped in fine linen, and poured ointment on it, and gave it to the king and queen, and the wood stands in a temple of

Pyramid Texts, and it is illustrated by a monument which represents the two sister goddesses hovering in the likeness of hawks over the god, while Hathor sits at his head and the Frog-goddess Heget squats in the form of a huge frog at his feet. See J. H. Breasted, Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt, p. 28, with note 2; E. A. Wallis Budge, Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection, i. 280. Harpocrates is in Egyptian Her- pekhered, "Horus the child" (A. Wiedemann, Religion of the Ancient Egyptians, p. 223). Plutarch, who appears to distinguish him from Horus, says that Harpocrates was begotten by the dead Osiris on Isis, and that he was born untimely and was weak in his lower limbs (Isis et Osiris, 19). Elsewhere he tells us that Harpocrates "was born, incomplete and youthful, about the winter solstice along with the early flowers and blossoms" (Isis et Osiris, 65).
Isis and is worshipped by the people of Byblus to this day. And Isis put the coffer in a boat and took the eldest of the king's children with her and sailed away. As soon as they were alone, she opened the chest, and laying her face on the face of her brother she kissed him and wept. But the child came behind her softly and saw what she was about, and she turned and looked at him in anger, and the child could not bear her look and died; but some say that it was not so, but that he fell into the sea and was drowned. It is he whom the Egyptians sing of at their banquets under the name of Maneros. But Isis put the coffer by and went to see her son Horus at the city of Buto, and Typhon found the coffer as he was hunting a boar one night by the light of a full moon. And he knew the body, and rent it into fourteen pieces, and scattered them abroad. But Isis sailed up and down the marshes in a shallop made of papyrus, looking for the pieces; and that is why when people sail in shallops made of papyrus, the crocodiles do not hurt them, for they fear or respect the goddess. And that is the reason, too, why there are many graves of Osiris in Egypt, for she buried each limb as she found it. But others will have it that she buried an image of him in every city, pretending it was his body, in order that Osiris might be worshipped in many places, and that if Typhon searched for the real grave he might not be able to find it. However, the genital member of Osiris had been eaten by the fishes, so Isis made an image of it instead, and the image is used by the Egyptians at their festivals to this day. "Isis," writes the historian Diodorus Siculus, "recovered all the parts of the body except the genitals; and because she wished that her husband's grave should be unknown and honoured by all who dwell in the land of Egypt, she resorted to the following device. She moulded human images out of wax and spices, corresponding to the stature of Osiris, round each one of the parts of his body. Then she called in the priests according to their families and took an oath of them all that