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# Bes: The Ancient Egyptian Way of Initiation

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## ABSTRACT

### AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

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#### BES: THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN WAY OF INITIATION

Committee Chair: Daniel Black, Ph.D.

Thesis dated May 2018

The purpose of this thesis is to explore Osiris's role in the *Book of the Dead*<sup>1</sup> to unearth the ancient Egyptian connotation for the term death. This study contends that western scholars have debased the arcane expression of death to literal interpretation. The basic function of ancient Egyptian scripture was to instruct man's soul into deity—in the earthly realm. This investigation suggests the ancient Egyptian priesthood instituted this esoteric philosophy in scripture to adumbrate this grand idea death, which was *Bes* to be initiated. The third century A.D. witnessed the development of Christianity in northeast Africa and subsequent rise of the Western world, delivering the fatal blow to ancient theology and sending the art of esotericism into obscurity for centuries. The discovery of the Rosetta Stone would help to reestablish portions of this lost science. Thus, this inquiry aims to restore the sublime philosophy to the *Book of the Dead* so that its purpose is properly understood.

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<sup>1</sup> The indigenous term for the *Book of the Dead* is *prt m hrw* or *Book of Coming Forth by Day*.

BES: THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN WAY OF INITIATION

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

ORLANDO RAWLS

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES, AFRICANA

WOMEN'S STUDIES, AND HISTORY

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I would like to acknowledge my ancestors for their determination and sacrifice, which made this work even possible, and for their commitment to excellence and their vision, which prepared the way for me and others. To family and friends who continue to pour love into me, thank you. To my beautiful parents, Angela Mae Rawls and Raymond Rawls, Jr., I am eternally grateful. In strength I am established. To my sister, Dorissa Junette Rawls, there is always more work to be done. To my children, Camille and Tijuan, may this work be a constant reminder that the divinity humanity seeks lies within. Anything is possible—find the path and leave a mark on the world.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Purpose of the Study .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Methodology .....	12
Theoretical Framework.....	13
Significance of Research.....	14
Limitations of Research .....	15
Questions.....	16
II. LITERATURE REVIEW OF OSIRIS.....	17
III. HISTORY OF OSIRIS .....	41
IV. BES .....	61
V. CONCLUSION.....	86
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	92

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to explore the role of Osiris in the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* in order to rediscover the ancient Egyptian priesthood's interpretation of death. The question motivating this inquiry is this: Was the ancient Egyptian theory of becoming one with the Creator obtainable in the earthly existence? In case one takes pause at the suggested approach as another nebulous exploration into ancient Egyptian mythology, rest assured this is not the case. This study will examine cultural formalities constructed by the ancient Egyptian priesthood in order to express its notion of the divine.

#### Statement of the Problem

This study argues that traditional analyses of Osiris have misconstrued his function within the *Book of the Dead*; this makes it impossible to properly express the esoteric meaning of death he symbolizes in the book. This examination contends that among the ancient priestly cast, the true expression of death was not comprehended as the termination of physical life; rather, it was the incubation of the soul in its earthly

tabernacle, i.e., the body. The misunderstanding of the ancient Egyptian concept of death stems from modern scholars' inability to discern the ancient method of scriptural interpretation—esotericism. Herein lies the line of demarcation that separates the ancient and modern world as far as the elucidation of scripture is concerned. The cause of this disillusionment was the development of Christianity in northeast Africa and the subsequent rise of the western world empire. Consequently, the theological scene of the ancient world became fertile ground for scriptural debate. On one side, there was the interpretation of those initiated<sup>1</sup> into the ancient way, i.e., the Mystery System. This philosophy contended that the soul of man was deity and that salvation was contingent upon one's ability to transcend one's own worldly fetters. Directly opposing this point of view was the birth of a new religion, Christianity, which was constructed on the remnants of the preceding philosophy, but soon lost its way to the comprehension of the profane who argued that the divinity of humanity was dependent upon the life of one historical figure, Jesus—not one's self.

Casually, the religious landscape became infused with more fervent dogmatism, tilting the religious scale in the favor of literalism and casting the art of esotericism into the darkness for centuries. This would, eventually, spark the Dark Ages. Contrary to some historical explanations, the ancient Egyptian priestly class constructed its religious text using allegorical techniques in order to convey their sublime thoughts concerning the deification of man. They believed the human soul was immortal and through divine instruction man could transform from the level of a human to that of a deity—in the

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<sup>1</sup> In ancient Egyptian grammar, the term *to initiate* is *Bes*. “Bes” is the basis of this thesis because it is the perspective of the *initiated ones* that this research seeks to articulate.



physical realm. This work suggests that Osiris's legend embodied this creed.

Furthermore, it is expected this sacred doctrine is woven into ancient Egypt's most prized spiritual heirloom (*Book of the Dead*). The premise of this investigation is to unearth this august philosophy in this holy manuscript.

Ancient Egyptian civilization flourished along the banks of the Nile River, approximately 5,000 years ago; the civilization was one of the founding pillars of the ancient world. Aside from their agriculturally based society, ancient Egyptians were practitioners of architecture, astronomy, engineering, literature, music, and other disciplines. Their artistic and scientific methods were the result of keen observation of the cosmos. These expressions were an attempt to describe what ancient Egyptians considered to be an intimate relationship between themselves and the world around them. From this survey, ancient Egyptians developed a sophisticated theology that attempted to convey their understanding of the sacred bond between the human soul and the Creator. Encoded within their reasoning were notions that expressed beliefs that humans possessed the ability to function like a *netcher* (god) and were fashioned in the living image of the one Almighty God, a term the ancient Egyptians called *senw netcher*.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, these concepts laid the foundation for ancient Egyptian religious principles—particularly their view concerning resurrection or life beyond the grave. Although their spiritual philosophy clearly illustrated the belief in resurrection, one component of ancient Egyptian spirituality remained theologically peculiar, and that was the representation of Osiris's resurrection as a model for human transformation.

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<sup>2</sup> Maulana Karenga, *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt* (Los Angeles, California: University of Sankore Press, 2006), 225.

Osiris's presence within ancient Egyptian cosmology was paramount in that a significant proportion of their cultural traditions was predicated around his character. However, his role varied considerably. In his notable work *Man, God, and Civilization*, eminent historian John G. Jackson illustrates Osiris as the benefactor of high culture to a savaged Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Another work, *Kingship and the Gods*, describes Osiris's impact on the functionality of kingship throughout ancient Egypt.<sup>4</sup> The preceding manuscripts show Osiris's humanistic traits; yet it is his role as "Ruler of the Those who are There" that produced his greatest influence upon ancient Egyptian culture. And it is this part of his character that will be explored here.

Osiris's story of life, death, burial, and resurrection served as the modeling agent for cultural practices, embodying a unique perception of reality that merged physical and spiritual spaces. W. Max Muller's *Egyptian Mythology* does a fairly of decent job of accentuating the fluidity of Osiris's character; he writes,

At a rather early date he (Osiris) became a cosmic deity, and after oscillating between symbolizing either the sun or sky, he finally developed into the god of changing nature in the widest sense. Thus he could become the divinity of the most important change, i.e., death, and could be evolved into the patron of the souls of the departed and king of the lower world, being at the same time the lord of resurrection and of new and eternal life.<sup>5</sup>

While noting the ubiquity of Osiris's personae, Muller's quote also highlights Osiris's position as the muse of transformation for ancient Egypt by depicting the various roles he occupied at various points in their cosmology.

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<sup>3</sup> John G. Jackson, *Man, God, and Civilization* (Chicago, Illinois: Lushena Books, 2000), 105.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), 146.

<sup>5</sup> W. Max Muller, *Egyptian Mythology* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004), 93.

Ancient Egyptians' general elucidation of deification is highlighted in their mythology of Isis, Osiris, and Horus. And an even more critical interpretation of the same was rooted in their sacred text, the *Book of the Dead*. Their religious philosophy should not be reduced merely to an interest in fantasy or magical practicality; rather, one does better to comprehend the idea as a commitment to knowing the complete parameters of existence. African American psychologist Wade W. Nobles maintains this point of view: "Reality for the ancients was always conceived as the synthesis of the visible and the invisible, the material and immaterial, the cognitive and emotive, the inner and the outer."<sup>6</sup> In this connection, ancient Egypt's religious thoughts represented a people who sought for theoretical and practical means to answer the age-old question: Is the human soul immortal?

The hope for eternal life permeated every facet of ancient Egyptian culture and served as the core of its religious ideology. Belief in life after death can be traced back to the inception of ancient Egypt. Renowned Egyptologist E. A. Wallis Budge validates this viewpoint in his translation of the *Book of the Dead*: "In this introduction the term (*Book of the Dead*) is intended to include the general body of religious texts which deal with the welfare of the dead and their new life in the world beyond the grave, and which are known to have existed and to have been in use among the Egyptians from about 4000 B.C. to the early centuries of the Christian era."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wade Nobles, *African Psychology: Toward Its Reclamation, Reascension & Revitalization* (Oakland, California: A Black Family Institute Publication, 1986), 40.

<sup>7</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1999), 3.

It is within the ancient Egyptian priesthood's understanding of resurrection that Osiris enters this inquiry. Could Osiris's role within the *Book of the Dead* have yielded other interpretations of soul transcendence? The key to answering the question is to thoroughly re-examine ancient Egyptian customs that might have influenced religious texts regarding the revivification of Osiris. For clarity, this study strongly advocates the idea that Osiris's character represented two truths—macrocosmic and microcosmic—concerning the divine nature of the human soul.

From a macrocosmic lens, Osiris was viewed as a cosmic being or savior archetype represented by the sun.<sup>8</sup> The populace in ancient Egypt comprehended Osiris through this framework. Macrocosmic, here, refers to *exotericism* or a realization of truth outside of personal experience. This was the rudimentary interpretation of Osiris in ancient Egyptian religion. The lay follower's belief in eternal life was based upon a religion constructed for them by priests in which the priests never revealed the full meaning of the tenets of the Osirian faith.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, this common ideology of salvation, practiced by the masses, deflected the responsibility of transformation solely onto Osiris. They believed Osiris had *literally* risen from the dead and their salvation was assured. Therefore, there was no need for an individual to strive to obtain his or her own divinity because that fate was sealed, previously, by Osiris.

Nevertheless, to Osiris's more intimate followers, particularly those who belonged to the priesthood, the legend of Osiris was merely a manifestation of an inner

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<sup>8</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963), 446.

<sup>9</sup> Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (Bensenville, Illinois: Lushena Books, 2006), 374.

truth. Among ancient Egypt's virtuous ideologies was the idea that a human's soul, like its flesh, can evolve, mature, and transform. This philosophical understanding was the microcosmic truth. Microcosmic is to be comprehended as *esotericism*, knowledge that was reserved for an elite class, i.e., the priesthood. Microcosmically, the myth of Osiris symbolized a process of initiation that led to the "Osirian," or awakened, state of consciousness. Analyzing Osiris through this context denoted a progression of the human soul into the premier state of human awareness. Initiation was perceived to be the *beginning*—the beginning of one's route to divinity.

What caused the ancient Egyptian priesthood's perception of reality to be molded in such a fashion? Why did they insist the human soul could advance into higher stages of consciousness culminating in divinity? Beneath the common religion, the priesthood held that there was a sacred science of the soul, knowledge of things unseen, and there was a possibility of extending the boundaries of consciousness beyond the limitations of the bio-physicality of the brain. Because ancient Egyptians' perception of reality was drawn from an inclusive description of physical and spiritual actualities, the ability of an individual to transform from mortal to immortal was not only seen as theoretical, but practical as well. The ancient Egyptian priesthood identified this as the process of deification, which also included its idea of salvation. George G.M. James's work, *Stolen Legacy*, sums up this spiritual philosophy: "The ancient Egyptians had developed a very complex religious system, called the Mysteries, which was also the first system of salvation. As such, it regarded the human body as a prison house of the soul, which could

be liberated from its bodily impediments, through the disciplines of the Arts and Sciences, and advance from the level of a mortal to that of a God.”<sup>10</sup>

Within the Mysteries, initiates embarked on the path of initiation, literally reshaping their lives to align with the mythological life of the great god, Osiris. The ancient Egyptian priesthood did not believe in death, only transmutation. Mystic scholar Albert Pike suggests that, “Everywhere, and in all their forms, the Mysteries were funereal; and celebrated the mystical death and restoration of some divine or heroic personage: and the details of the legend and the mode of death varied in the different countries where the Mysteries were practiced.”<sup>11</sup> Ancient Egyptian priests understood that it was impossible for the finite mind to grasp the infinite by means of theory alone; rather, one had to *experience* the Creator. And initiation was the means whereby one came to know God intimately, internally. This experience was identified as a beatific vision, the ultimate direct self-communication between God and the human soul.

Moreover, this holy experience, a means of human perfectibility according to ancient Egyptians, was not limited to Osiris alone. Anyone who was duly and truly prepared, worthy, and well-qualified could seek the process that led to the realization of divinity within oneself. Requirements for initiation entailed that some initiates display qualities that included, but were not limited to, control of thought, control of action, steadfastness of purpose, and freedom from resentment.<sup>12</sup> Prerequisites assisted, helping to mold the candidate into the likeness of deity. The foundation of such human

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<sup>10</sup> George G.M. James, *Stolen Legacy* (Drewryville, Virginia: Khalifah’s Booksellers & Associates, 2005), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 375.

<sup>12</sup> James, *Stolen Legacy*, 106.

development was to instruct the fragmented soul into a state of holism, i.e., human perfection. Ancient Egyptian spiritual philosophy did not support the idea that the human soul was innately flawed. Instead, the human soul experienced *isft* (chaos/wrong-doings), which could be amended through moral reformation. This is a very important distinction in relationship to Judeo-Christian tradition, which claims that the essence of the human soul is sinful by nature. Once again, initiation provided the platform whereby a student could be restored to the point until he/she was in harmony with the Creator and creation. Transformation was characterized not only by a renewing of mind, body, and soul but, more importantly, *kd* (character).

The word death also was given much emphasis to aspirants and was defined according to its ancient cryptic terminology as the soul's experiences in the body.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to popular belief, initiates did not interpret death as the soul's exit from the human body. Instead, they perceived it to be the exact opposite: death was expressed as the *arrival* of the soul in its earthly tomb, i.e., the body. Ancient sagacity, including that of ancient Egypt, professed the soul was dead in the human body because, upon its descent from celestial origins, the fleshly garb (the body) reduced the once-vibrant expression of deity to the lowest (earthly) form of existence. Hence, death is the forgotten theme woven throughout all ancient typology, ritual, and religious literature. The initial thrust of this exploration is to examine the Osirian theology and elucidate this ecclesiastical idea regarding death within the ancient Egyptians' religious text—the *Book of the Dead*.

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<sup>13</sup> Alvin Boyd Kuhn, *Alvin Boyd Kuhn's Collection* (ZuuBooks.com Publication, 2011), 25.

Although ancient Egyptian religious customs are steeped in mythology, their authenticity should not be repudiated. There are some perspectives that consider mythology as a byproduct of superstitious -cultures. However, mythology has a subtle way of veiling higher truths that are accessible only to those who earnestly seek them. An attempt to trace the sacred thread that unifies all aspects of reality is the signature of ancient Egyptian thought. More importantly, ancient Egyptian theologians never created distinctions between secular and sacred knowledge.

Ancient Egyptians retained an extensive portion of their most intimate religious ideologies in documentations such as *The Pyramid Texts*, *Coffin Texts*, and *Book of the Dead*, which, unlike many documents from other societies of the third millennium BCE, have survived to the present day. As stated before, this investigation will concentrate on the *Book of the Dead*. Functioning as a key source of spiritual documentation during the New Kingdom, the *Book of the Dead* was not an actual book per se; instead, it was a compilation of spiritual writings extending from the Old Kingdom that produced the foundation of a profound religious literary tradition. These spiritual writings took on various forms: prayers, hymns, parables, instructions, and incantations. Their primary function was to ensure the soul's preservation through tribulations until it was born anew into the light of eternal life.

Why the *Book of the Dead*? To begin, it was primarily Osirian and is easily considered the most prominent religious text from ancient Egypt. Secondly, succeeding the *Pyramid Texts* and *Coffin Texts*, the *Book of the Dead* embodied an evolution of religious philosophy in ancient Egypt commencing an era saturated with the notion of



human perfectibility. Lastly, during the New Kingdom, the idea of soul transcendence was not limited to the pharaohs only, as in the Old Kingdom. The *Papyrus of Ani*, for example, a New Kingdom text, demonstrated the soul transfiguration of priests. This indicates that the idea of deification was democratized during the New Kingdom.

Historically, analyzing religious writings has always presented two levels of understanding—exoteric and esoteric. The former mostly produces a myopic understanding, at best, and is tailored to the general population, or to those who interpret religious texts literally. This phenomenon occurred in ancient Egypt as well because the priests created the writing system and reserved the underpinnings of their sacred writings for the initiated. Furthermore, it is suggested by the researcher that traditional Egyptologists have used an exoteric viewpoint when examining the *Book of the Dead*. They are seemingly that this Holy Grail was a whimsical representation of ancient Egypt's eschatological doctrine regarding the soul departing the earthly realm. Herein lies the fundamental problem that has hindered the opportunity to expand the understanding of one of ancient Egypt's most prominent religious texts.

The latter, esoteric viewpoint produces a more developed, intricate process concerning scripture. "Along with the popular traditions and public cults of their time, there existed an inner organization of religion—the Mystery Institution—which was the channel of secret traditions," asserts Rev. Charles H. Vail when discussing ancient cultures.<sup>14</sup> It is highly probable that these priests, architects of the writing system and keepers of arcane knowledge, encoded their spiritual philosophy within the *Book of the*

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<sup>14</sup> Charles H. Vail, *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry* (New York, New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2005), 13.

*Dead*. And for ages the proper understanding of this ancient heirloom has been at the mercy of mediocre modern exegeses. It is the aim of this research to excavate the *Book of the Dead* for hints of arcane material that offer a fuller sense of the proportions of Osiris's position in ancient Egyptian thought toward deification. The next chapter of this thesis will compare and contrast various literatures in order to note whether or not certain works are germane to this comprehensive investigation.

### Methodology

The core of this research will be conducted using content analysis. Because the root of this inquiry pertains to a translation of the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, which is textual, it is only proper that a content examination be applied to fully investigate this subject. A quantitative approach would limit the depth of this work because the objective of quantitative research is to employ numerical data to arrive at a conclusion. Moreover, the exploration of the *Book of the Dead* concerns the religious ambit of ancient Egyptian culture, which does not lend itself efficient to quantitative analysis. In this instance, a quantitative investigation is insufficient.

On the other hand, though a comparative literary methodology seems plausible for this research, it is too broad; the intent of this study is to critique only a single version of the *Book of the Dead*. Some form of comparative literary analysis will be employed in the literature review (chapter 2) and findings (chapter 4), but the method of choice for this inquiry is content analysis. In this instance, content analysis allows the research to be focused on a single interpretation of a particular text and also leaves room for an

inspection of the meta-textual framework supporting the connecting ideologies of Osiris and the *Book of the Dead*.

### Theoretical Framework

Hermeneutics will be the principal framework for this research. Hermeneutics is the process by which one interprets a sacred text that includes biblical text, philosophical text, religious text, and wisdom literature. More importantly, hermeneutics not only allows the exegete space to elaborate on text, but it also yields more opportunity to excavate and rediscover cultural characteristics that may have contributed to the construction of a particular text.

The primary artifact of this investigation is an ancient religious text—the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Emphasis also will be placed on Osiris’s functionality within this ancient document. From this spiritual text, an inquiry will be conducted in order to illumine verbal and non-verbal features encoded within ancient Egypt’s religious ideology. Similarly, it is imperative to highlight practicalities of ancient Egyptian culture in order to obtain theological comprehensiveness in this study. It is because of these research requirements that hermeneutics serves as the most conducive framework for the lensing of this thesis.

Consideration was given to alternative theoretical frameworks, including symbolic convergence and symbolic interactionism. However, both structuring models undermine the initial thrust of this research by marginalizing the scope of interpretation. For example, symbolic convergence theory and symbolic interactionism theory both

emphasize the nature and function of symbols and how they are interpreted within communities, in this case a particular deity, Osiris. These theories explain the legitimacy of Osiris's role in ancient Egyptian society, but only from an emblematic standpoint. In contrast, these theories do not accentuate social phenomena from a textual point of view. Herein lies the cause for a hermeneutical approach because it stresses the interpretation of ancient scripture and symbols, which are the result of regenerative vector forces within developing cultural systems.

#### Significance of Research

This research is significant because it will challenge traditional religious viewpoints concerning Osiris's role in the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, which have customarily asserted that his character is only concerned with the resurrection of the soul subsequent to physical death. Instead, this inquiry will utilize elements within ancient Egyptian culture that accentuate Osiris's function within its holy scripture, which reflected the involution of the soul into its earthly form and the process whereby one transcended to the level of deity prior to physical death.

As a contribution to African American Studies, this work offers an intensive reassessment of an ancient African spiritual tradition based upon ethical practices that not only built magnificent civilizations, but also constructed great archetypical models for the sustainability and evolution of existential efficacy. With that stated, the expectation of this study is to initiate an effort by African American Studies programs to implement much needed courses related to ancient Egyptian civilization, which would assist in the

strengthening and resurgence of institutionalized African American Studies departments. It is further expected that this inquiry can suggest practical ways for African American communities to institute African moral principles in order to initiate communal healing. This study aspires to ignite the conscious spark whereby African Americans peruse their ancient spiritual traditions in order to discover the divinity within themselves.

Similarly, this research complements scholarship in the field of Egyptology because it necessitates an unorthodox approach to ancient scripture and asks different questions concerning ancient Egyptian ideology. Take Maulana Karenga, for example. His detailed work, *Maat: The Moral Idea in Ancient Egypt*, is an elegant attempt to address the idea of Maat concerning ethical practices in ancient Egypt.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, Karenga's insight into African values, ethics, and traditions illumines abstruse components of Maat never before explicated by Egyptologists. Likewise, the research presented here is an effort to expand upon the position of Osiris within the *Book of the Dead* in order to rediscover sacred components of his functionality. Ultimately, this work aims to shift the lensing of the interpretation of scripture from its current mundane elucidation back to the lofty philosophical lens<sup>16</sup> of olden times, and to redirect the comprehension of the Divine from an archetypical personage to the human soul.

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<sup>15</sup> Maulana Karenga, *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt* (Los Angeles, CA: University of Sankore Press, 2006)

<sup>16</sup> The philosophical lens of olden times refers to the meta-textual system of thought concerning scripture constructed by the intelligences of the ancient world, i.e., the cultures of the Nile Valley, Greece, Mesopotamia, and southeastern Asia.

## Limitations of Research

There are some apparent limitations concerning this investigation. Being that the nucleus of this inquiry is derived from the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, a proper transliteration and translation is needed. Since I am not a full-fledged Egyptologist, my assessment of this ancient text is limited. Thus, the essential evaluation is dependent upon Thomas George Allen's interpretation of the said text. In addition to this, I have employed the assistance of my committee member, Thomas Scott, Th.D. Professor Scott's in-depth background in ancient Egyptian culture and language allowed him to cross-check any passages or references that I cited. As for sources regarding the cultural and textual background of the *Book of the Dead*, and Osiris, there are many. The combination of these factors allows for a comprehensive examination; however, the basis of analyses relies heavily upon secondary translations and symbolic expressions, hence the usage of a hermeneutic lens of investigation.

## Research Questions

1. What are the arcane dimensions of Osiris's role within the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*?
2. What is the existential meaning of Osiris's character?

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW OF OSIRIS

The primary objective of this section is to expound on specific literatures that focus on Osiris's role in ancient Egyptian religious customs and spiritual texts. It is conventional to begin a review of literature by analyzing recent related works. Considering the nature of this research, though, it is necessary to explore several monumental compositions that are dated but have assisted in the shaping of this research, namely the exploration of Osiris's role in the *Book of the Dead* in order to elucidate ancient Egyptians' proclivity for apotheosis.

In this light, the works of various scholars that will not be assessed in this literature review are nevertheless of equal value for the construction of this thesis. To include every major literary work related to the choice of research is impossible; however, here are the names of a few intellectual giants who have contributed significantly to the study of deification in ancient Egyptian religion: Gerald Massey, Sir Godfrey Higgins, James Breasted, Henri Frankfort, and Maulana Karenga. Each of these researchers developed his own niche as it relates to the interpretation of ancient Egyptian religion. Of these researchers, this study endorses the likes of Gerald Massey, Sir Godfrey Higgins, and Maulana Karenga. Gerald Massey's intellectual fortitude and insight in his comprehensive work *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World* is

time when the notion of an African origin of anything civilized was shunned by mainstream academia.<sup>1</sup> Sir Godfrey Higgins's extensive volume, *Anacalypsis*, is valuable, for he adumbrates symbolic expressions used throughout the ancient world, hinting at a cohesive spiritual system in various parts of antiquity.<sup>2</sup> And Maulana Karenga's *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt*, is priceless because it offers an intensive and broad exploration of the moral ideals situated within ancient Egyptian religious philosophy.<sup>3</sup> These viewpoints support the initial purpose of this investigation into Osiris's role within the *Book of the Dead*. Moreover, they help this research extend beyond the traditional perception of Osiris's function within ancient customs and infuse *unorthodox* paradigms that offer a fuller, more complete interpretation of this enigmatic figure in the ancient world.

In the tradition of hermeneutical exegeses, Charles H. Vail's *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry* is an insightful examination of the process of deification in ancient Egypt. Published in 1909, Vail's work on - soul transcendence remains, arguably, one of the most profound investigations in this field of study during his era. Reverend Vail records his understanding of soul regeneration as it relates to initiation in the second lecture of his inquiry:

Undoubtedly the ceremonies of Initiation were originally few, and all were intended to symbolize the progress of the human soul—they were the outward signs of an inward fact. Initiation, as we shall see in a subsequent lecture, was regeneration—a real spiritual “new becoming” or re-birth. The candidate himself became the thing symbolized—Hermes, Buddha,

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Massey, *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World* (New York, New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Sir Godfrey Higgins, *Anacalypsis* (Brooklyn, New York: A&B Publishers Group, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> Maulana Karenga, *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt* (Los Angeles, California: Sankore Press, 2006)



Christ, etc. This state was the result of real Initiation—an evolution of the human into the divine.<sup>4</sup>

Even more significant concerning Vail's viewpoint is that he demonstrates a firm understanding of allegorical methods; his work is in accordance with the priestly method of writing and interpreting ancient scripture. In the sixth lecture, Vail explains the "true meaning of initiation" as described in the "Secret Sermon on the Mount" in G. R. S. Mead's *Thrice Great Hermes*. Vail explicates the symbolic elements of this particular passage: "But the real *Mount* was no physical elevation, it was the "height of contemplation, an inner state of spiritual consciousness."<sup>5</sup> Again, Vail's methodology of deciphering the Mysteries parallels with the procedure of the ancient priests, a technique only discerned by the initiated.

With regard to the Egyptian Mysteries, Vail introduces the myth of Osiris through the Grecian philosopher Plutarch, who, Vail assumes was an initiate of the ancient Egyptian Mysteries.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the author uses a quote from Plutarch that denotes death as a metaphysical idea versus an actuality. Plutarch's paradigm concerning death displays a strong similarity to ancient Egyptian priests' concept of death in that death is viewed as merely a means of transformation. More directly, death is not necessarily viewed as the extermination from physical existence. This abstract point of view concerning death will be the common theme threaded throughout this research.

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<sup>4</sup> Charles H. Vail, *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry* (New York, New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Vail, *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*, 115.

<sup>6</sup> Vail, *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*, 34.

Vail's effort to clarify the ambiguous meaning of initiation is largely successful.

The usage of Osiris as a medium to convey the notion of soul perfectibility is demonstrated well. Nevertheless, the crux of his work is more aligned with cryptic explanations of Judaic and Christian texts. He never fully expands his evaluation of soul transformation into the religious writings of the ancient Egyptians and their *Book of the Dead*. Herein lies the line of demarcation that separates his work from the core of this thesis, which is to peruse the *Book of the Dead* in order to discover various dimensions of Osiris's character concerning death.

Published in 1922, *The Golden Bough* by celebrated scholar, James Frazer is considered one of the greatest works of western thought. Frazer outlines the evolution of human worship from early nature stages to the beginning of modern spiritual customs. Within this extensive text, Frazer offers his perspectives on Osiris. He places great emphasis on the legend of Osiris as it relates to ancient Egyptian's notion of life, death, and resurrection. More importantly, Frazer's ability to associate Osiris with multiple areas of ancient Egyptian society, such as agriculture, cosmology and funerary rites, is exceptional.

Again, Frazer's critique of primitive forms of worship among the ancients assists in his accentuation of Osiris. Indeed, ancient cultures' methods of worship were the result of a synchronized reality of human psychology and the natural world. *The Golden Bough* examines this realism through a range of topics that include the magical control of weather, taboo, and even the worship of trees. Through Frazer's assessment, it is evident that the residue of primitive worship is connected with later forms of the Osirian religion

because of Osiris's association with the tree-spirit, which is exemplified in Denderah: "In the hall of Osiris at Denderah the coffin containing the hawk-headed mummy of the god is clearly depicted as enclosed within a tree, apparently a conifer, the trunk and branches of which are seen above and below the coffin."<sup>7</sup> All of these facets Frazer describes well, which highlight only portions of the evolution of ancient Egyptian cosmology concerning the veneration of Osiris.

Yet, there remains a void in Frazer's examination of Osiris. Frazer's scope of investigation limits Osiris's role to mere external formalities such as a king, sun-god, and god of vegetation. *The Golden Bough* does represent Osiris as a means of transformation; however, this work neglects to illustrate Osiris's character as a process for apotheosis. There are certain instances when Frazer describes Osiris's influence upon ancient Egyptian religion and ceremonies, but, again, they are typical outward celebratory expressions. For instance, Frazer equates Osiris's persona to a corn-god:

The Foregoing Survey of the myth and ritual of Osiris may suffice to prove that in one of his aspects the god was a personification of the corn, which may be said to die and come to life again every year. Through all the pomp and glamour with which in later times the priests had invested his worship, the conception of him as the corn-god comes clearly out in the festival of his death and resurrection, which was celebrated in the month of Khoiak and at a later period in the month of Athyr.<sup>8</sup>

In the preceding quote, Frazer acknowledges that the concept of Osiris as a corn-god denoted the concept of death and resurrection. Still, he never alludes to Osiris as any representation of the deification of man.

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<sup>7</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1922), 441.

<sup>8</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 438.

Frazer also makes it his business to make a distinction between what he considers popular and official rites of ancient Egypt. Both rites were contingent upon the natural shift of annual seasons. The popular rites, he suggests, were the rituals and customs carried out by the populace of ancient Egypt. More than likely, popular rituals were conducted by farmers who planted crops with hopes of a plentiful harvest. These farmers were not usually initiated into the mystical interpretations of the priesthood. On the other hand, there were the official rites, or priestly inspired ceremonies and festivals. The priests aligned their rituals with what was considered the sacred calendar. More importantly, Frazer's work takes an abrupt turn when he asserts that the priestly rites of ancient Egypt emerged from the traditions of the populace. This is a courageous suggestion in that the phenomenon of incorporating general rites was usually carried out by the elite of social hierarchy.

*The Golden Bough* is a profound work written by a great scholar. James Frazer exhibits the competences of a historical specialist. Nevertheless, this work is more of a historical, anthropological study, and his research of Osiris is restrictive, offering minimal comprehension of the arcane nature of the ancient god. Frazer's inquiry is of great value to this research because it functions as a comparative work, meaning it serves as a means of juxtaposing exoteric and esoteric conceptions of Osiris. Indeed, the lack of investigation into the cryptic nature of Osiris creates an opportunity for a more in-depth study into the mystic character of Osiris regarding the deification of man.

Nearly a decade later (1931), Harold P. Cooke published his insightful book, *Osiris: A Study in Myths, Mysteries and Religion*. Cooke's assessment of Osiris is more

expansive and intricate than Frazer's. In fact, Cooke's work commences where James Frazer's ends. In chapter 3, Cooke states, "The 'gods' were incarnate in matter—at least in a good many cases, becoming incarnate for man, to bestow all their riches upon him. They dwelt in the same world as he but were also his living precursors. They became, metaphorically, 'men' and were, therefore, supposed to submit to the terms of all mortal existence."<sup>9</sup> Cooke's previous quote parallels with the ancient Egyptian priests' cabalistic meaning of death, which referred to death as the descent of the soul into physical nature. Cooke further clarifies, "So man, though he died, was immortal; he, too, had a soul, like to theirs."<sup>10</sup>

This work definitely specifies the sacred interpretation of death, a clarification that the present study assumes is lodged in the *Book of the Dead*. Within the same chapter, Cooke goes on to state that he disagrees with James Frazer's interpretation of Osiris's role in life, death, and resurrection. Cooke frames his argument with a quote from Frazer: "In laying their dead in the grave they [the worshippers, that is, of Osiris] committed them to his keeping who could raise them from the dust to life eternal, even as he caused the seed to spring from the ground. Of that faith, the corn-effigies of Osiris found in Egyptian tombs furnish an eloquent and unequivocal testimony. They were at once an emblem and an instrument of resurrection."<sup>11</sup> Frazer's point of view typifies the general comprehension of Osiris concerning death in ancient Egypt—physical transition. Contrary to this viewpoint, Cooke argues that the corn-seed is metaphorical for the soul

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<sup>9</sup> Harold P. Cooke, *Osiris: A Study in Myths, Mysteries, and Religion* (Chicago, Illinois: Ares Publishers Inc., 1931), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Cooke, *Osiris: A Study in Myths, Mysteries, and Religion*, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Cooke, *Osiris: A Study in Myths, Mysteries, and Religion*, 46.

being immersed into matter and the grain that surfaced from the ground was the soul being restored to the light (original essence). Cooke claims that Osiris's invention of agriculture was part of his mythical history as well, which further hints that the entire story surrounding Osiris is metaphysical and cannot be taken literally unless the divine revelations are understood and manifested through daily life. By this it is meant that one was initiated into the way or understanding of the ancient Egyptian priests and applied the mystery teachings to shift character or way of being.

In terms of its relevance, Cooke's *Osiris: A Study in Myths, Mysteries and Religion* is definitely appropriate because of its meticulous and thorough approach to Osiris. His work not only complements *The Golden Bough* but also enhances the entire study of Osiris because of its eclectic approach. For anyone interested in studying Osirian religion, Cooke's book is a must-have because his research synchronizes the natures of man and the divine. Yet, *Osiris: A Study in Myths, Mysteries, and Religion* fails to delineate the process of apotheosis in the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the template of the priesthoods' sacred religion.

Extensive research on Osiris remained a primary focus for areas of study such as comparative religions and Egyptology during the 1940s. Nonetheless, the next major work concerning the Mysteries of Osiris was not written until 1954, when Professor George G.M. James released his highly-scrutinized document, *Stolen Legacy*. This epic work is a fine exhibition of courageous intellectualism that challenged the *status quo* of academic traditions. The main premise of James's work maintains that the basis of Greek philosophy is nothing more than a reproduction of ancient Egyptian philosophy. James

also asserted that ancient Egyptians developed a very complex religious system called the Mysteries (Osirian religion), which was the first system of salvation. This system of salvation enabled the human soul to transcend from the level of a mortal to that of a god.<sup>12</sup>

Because racial tension dominated the social landscape and academia in the United States of America during the 1950s, *Stolen Legacy* became a cornerstone work in the creation of the Afrocentric paradigm. Because of this work, scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Yosef Ben-Jochannon, and Maulana Karenga were able to mold the structure for Afrocentric thought and produce major works related to the field of Egyptology. The presence of *Stolen Legacy* was perceived as a threat to the well-established Eurocentric paradigm, which, as of then, had molded the reality of the modern world concerning history and contributions of the human family, specifically ancient Egypt. Consequently, there has been much speculation about the connection between the publication of *Stolen Legacy* and James's violent, untimely death. Yet, James's masterful study proved to be a focal point of reference for millions of black intellectuals whose voices had been muffled by the loud presence of racial discrimination.

James's knowledge of the Mysteries allowed him to present a systematic approach concerning the process of deification. Indeed, his investigation undergirds the crux of this thesis, which is to examine the process whereby ancient Egyptians pursued immortality in the physical realm. *Stolen Legacy*'s framework for spiritual ascension is comparable to Charles H. Vail's in the sense that both describe their idea of soul

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<sup>12</sup> George G.M. James, *Stolen Legacy* (Drewryville, Virginia: Khalifah's Booksellers & Associates, 2005), 1.

progression in stages. Conversely, James presents his investigation from an academic perspective concerning the process of deification whereas Vail interprets strictly from an allegorical position. “Neophytes were graded according to their moral efficiency and intellectual competence, and had to submit to many years of tests and ordeals, in order that their eligibility for advancement might be determined,” states James in chapter seven of his research.<sup>13</sup> James’s depiction of deification in ancient Egypt is very descriptive: “The ancient Egyptians had developed a very complex religious system, called the Mysteries, which was also the first system of salvation. As such, it regarded the human body as a prison house of the soul, which could be liberated from its bodily impediments, through the disciplines of the Arts and Sciences, and advanced from the level of a mortal to that of a God.”<sup>14</sup> James’s statement adumbrates the African notion of human transformation. In terms of its significance, *Stolen Legacy*’s impact concerning this research is immense because of its theory of developing the divinity within man, but James’s work could have been more useful had he illustrated his method clearly within the *Book of the Dead*. Thus, there is space for additional investigation.

Shortly after *Stolen Legacy*, Egyptologist E. A. Wallis Budge published *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*. Although dated (1961), this well-constructed text underlines the evolution of Osiris and his impact upon ancient Egypt’s doctrine of resurrection. The author takes a multifaceted approach, in terms of his technique of analyzing Osiris, by instituting anthropological, historical, linguistic, and religious methods. Budge’s vast research is ideal because it enables one to pinpoint the genesis of

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<sup>13</sup> James, *Stolen Legacy*, 133.

<sup>14</sup> James, *Stolen Legacy*, 1.



Osiris and trace his functionality throughout ancient Egyptian eschatological customs. What illuminates this work even more is that Budge highlights Osiris's character as an ancestral spirit. This belief in ancestral spirit and worship thereof are customs relative to Africa. For example, he states, "Like so many modern African peoples, Egyptians worshipped the spirits of their ancestors, and that early in the Dynastic Period Osiris became the great ancestor of all Egypt, and was worshipped as such."<sup>15</sup>

Budge's connection between Osiris and Africa continue: "Osiris was, I believe, an African, though not necessarily a Nilotic god, and the birthplace of his cult seems to have been Upper Egypt."<sup>16</sup> Though his synopsis of the African influence upon Osiris and Egyptian theology is intricate, his interpretation of Osiris is distorted in that his work does not present Osiris as a means of human perfectibility; rather, Osiris is limited to a profane way of reasoning and associated with external formalities. This type of rationale is problematic because, when discussing the impact Osiris had on believers, it places less emphasis on the human transmutation and more emphasis on blind faith in Osiris.

Budge's inability to pierce into the sacred underpinnings of ancient Egyptian philosophy, in light of the statement concerning human transformation, may be a reflection of the educational and/or spiritual cultivation he experienced in *Western* academia. This research contends that many Western scholars suffer from *literalism* because of their Western education or, for better words, *indoctrination*. *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection* is a great source for analyzing Osiris's role within

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<sup>15</sup> E.A. Wallis Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection* (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, Inc., 1961), 300.

<sup>16</sup> Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*, xxii.

various texts, but the author's lack of interpretation of Osiris's cryptic meaning heightens the necessity for this thesis, which will explore a new means of understanding deification in the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.

Dr. Yosef Ben-Jochannon articulates his thoughts on deification in his phenomenal work, *Understanding the African Philosophical Concept Behind the "Diagram of the Law of Opposites"* (1974). Ben-Jochannon advocates that the ancient Egyptian philosophy of soul transmutation was predicated upon one's mastery of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences. Like George G.M. James, Ben-Jochannon makes clear distinctions between ancient Egyptian philosophy and Greek philosophy, highlighting that the former birthed the latter. Exhibiting competences of a theologian, Ben-Jochannon explicates, exceptionally well, the notion of the deification of man through comparative texts. He asserts that ancient Egyptians developed a system that explained the transmutation of the mind, which was based upon the doctrine of *Supreme Good*. Furthermore, he makes this assertion: "In case of the *Human Person* in *Man* becomes as much *Christ* as was the Christians' God-Head called *Jesus*. Thus, it is that so many believe that the *Transmutation* of his life became the *Transmigration* of his soul; this being also the split difference of time between life and death—the *Process of Purification* that caused his *Deification*."<sup>17</sup> Ben-Jochannon's statement is audacious; it deconstructs the notion of attaining deification from a concept associated with an external, historical character and presents it on an intimate, personal level. Moreover, his assertion, which is assumed, parallels with the spiritual concepts in the Osirian religion and sheds light on

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<sup>17</sup> Yosef Ben-Jochannon, *Understanding The African Philosophical Concept Behind The "Diagram of The Law of Opposites"* (Baltimore, Maryland: Black Classic Press, 2005), 5.

the religion's meaning of deification. Ben-Jochannon's priestly interpretation of deification is a key point in the development of this research.

Ben-Jochannon's work is unique because it is a compilation of his work and research conducted by three of his students. *Understanding the African Philosophical Concept Behind the "Diagram of the Law of Opposites"* also specifies that the students' research was the result of a course taught by Dr. Ben-Jochannon, which included the appraisal of works related to the idea of soul transmigration. With this type of format, one is able to observe various interpretations of deification. On the other hand, although this investigation is substantial, it is comparable to *Stolen Legacy* in that it does not demonstrate the idea of soul transmutation in the *Book of the Dead*, which is the foundation of this inquiry.

John Gwyn Griffiths's *The Origins of Osiris and his Cult* is perhaps one of the most important documents concerning the Osirian religion since Budge's *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*. Distributed in 1980, this detailed work exhibits a thorough understanding of the history, language, and religion associated with Osiris. These attributes make Griffiths's research serviceable for the investigation of Osiris.

Griffiths begins by addressing ancient Egypt's treatment of myth. Here, Griffiths initiates an exceptional investigation into the nuances of ancient belief, asserting that they anthropomorphized Osiris's personality and never related to him as a human figure. One key component of ancient Egypt's belief system is explained in the introduction of this work: "The firm bond which links Osiris and kingship is one of the outstanding differences that demark the Egyptian myth from those of Mesopotamia and Syria relating

to Tammuz and Adonis respectively. In those countries the status of the kings differs from that which prevailed in Egypt; their kings were associated with the world of the gods, but were not regarded, as were the Pharaohs, as gods themselves.”<sup>18</sup> Griffiths’s statement exhibits an understanding regarding human deification in ancient Egypt that is central to this research. Furthermore, he demonstrates that this concept is autonomous to ancient Egypt only.

Griffiths and Budge share similar critiques of Osiris’s influence upon ancient Egyptian religion. However, Griffiths’s perspective concerning Osiris’s role within ancient Egyptian religion is more intricate than Budge’s because Griffiths’s proficiency in ancient Egyptian language is more reliable than Budge’s. Nevertheless, Griffiths’s conception of Osiris is typical for an Egyptologist because his depiction of Osiris fails to typify Osiris as a symbol of deification for the earthly realm. Griffiths claims that rites of Osiris were intended for the dead. His assessment is plausible, but only for certain aspects of ancient Egyptian customs. Common knowledge asserts that the rites of Osiris also extended to the priests (living) whose spiritual commitment inculcated Osiris as a means of deification in the physical realm. Neither Griffiths’s nor Budge’s elucidation of Osiris seems to be concerned about this portion of Osiris’s role in ancient Egyptian religion.

Some Egyptologists are unsuccessful at conceptualizing Osiris through a metaphysical lens because the ancient denotation of death has been replaced with literalism. In addition, some have gone on to totally dismiss the notion of a symbolic interpretation of death because of religious prejudices. As theosophical scholar Alvin

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<sup>18</sup> John Gwyn Griffiths, *The Origins of Osiris and his Cult* (London, 1980), 3-4.

Boyd Kuhn puts it, “Death to the soul is to descend into matter and be entirely subjected to it. This is what is meant by falling asleep in Hades.”<sup>19</sup> Kuhn clearly demonstrates the esoteric concept of death. Unlike this interpretation, Griffiths’s work rationalizes Osiris through personalities and rituals. Griffiths does not illustrate Osiris as a means of soul transformation for one striving for soul perfectibility. Yet, Griffiths’s work remains a landmark for the field of Egyptology because of its expansive approach to various fields of study concerning the Osirian religion. *The Origins of Osiris and his Cult* is a book that should be recommended by Egyptologists to anyone who desires knowledge of the Osirian belief system. However, Griffiths’s work is significantly dissimilar from this thesis concerning Osiris’s role in soul perfection.

In 1980, the same year as the publication of Griffiths’s seminal work, Miriam Lichtheim published *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The New Kingdom*. This is the second volume of a series of interpretations of ancient Egyptian literature. Her explanations of New Kingdom texts include a chapter titled “The Book of the Dead.” This chapter also contains other literature from this time period, including *The Great Hymn to Osiris*, which was crafted by an official, Amenmose, dating from the Eighteenth Dynasty.

Before her examination of the *Book of the Dead*, Lichtheim begins her research with a brief assessment of *The Great Hymn to Osiris* on the stela of Amenmose, which she introduces with a short summary regarding the importance of the Osirian myth in ancient Egyptian literature. The author’s appraisal is vital in that she explains the function of Osiris as he relates to the process of kingship in ancient Egypt. Nevertheless, this is the

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<sup>19</sup> Alvin Boyd Kuhn, *Alvin Boyd Kuhn’s Collection* (Zuubook.com Publication, 2011), 25.

limit of Lichtheim's analysis of Osiris; she never alludes to any metaphysical interpretations of Osiris regarding soul transcendence. Rather, her focus consists of meshing the role of the redeemer Horus and responsibilities of the reigning king. Although her scholarship is valuable for the study of ancient Egyptian kingship, it is of limited use because she fails to deduce priestly interpretations from Osiris.

In same manner, Lichtheim's elucidations of the *Book of the Dead* are vague. Lichtheim's interpretation of the *Book of the Dead*, like that of many traditional Egyptologists, only offers outward expressions of eternal life, failing to pierce the veil of literalism in order to explain the mystic nature of Osiris's character. In her introduction to the *Book of the Dead*, Lichtheim states, "Eternal life had come to be conceived in the most grandiose terms: the dead were to become godlike and join the company of the gods."<sup>20</sup> Clearly, she fails to grasp the sacred connotation of the term *dead* by equating it to physical means, whereas the meaning of *dead*, according to this research, is understood as the arrival of the soul from celestial origins into earthly manifestation. With such a viewpoint, Lichtheim's technique of interpreting sacred texts contradicts the esoteric method implemented by Charles H. Vail in his work, *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*. Thus, the ultimate aim of this thesis is to merge the usage of ancient Egyptian literature with Rev. Charles H. Vail's esoteric assessment in order to identify the clerical meaning of Osiris.

Eight years later (1988), Normandi Ellis issued her ground-breaking, autobiographical work, *Awakening Osiris*. Ellis's eloquent usage of poetry describes her

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<sup>20</sup> Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The New Kingdom* (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1976), 119.

self-awakening through her understanding of the *Book of the Dead*. She exhibits a keen understanding of ancient Egyptian philosophical concepts, which she briefly mentions in her introduction: “Osiris, the god of the dead, is a green god, an image of the seed waiting in the dark to burst forth into renewal. His symbol was the growing corn. His death and rebirth illuminated the path from darkness to light, from unconsciousness to enlightenment. In that light, I called this book *Awakening Osiris* for I thought of it as a call to consciousness and spiritual awakening. We are all Osirises.”<sup>21</sup> This statement proves instrumental to this research because it not only signifies Osiris as a mode of enlightenment, but also typifies him as a means of personal transformation—for someone living.

For this particular reason (personal transformation), Ellis’s book stands apart from traditional works concerning the mystic meaning of Osiris. “I rise from a buried egg. Give me my mouth; I want to talk. Give me iron words forged in fire that I may speak the language of earth. In the dark house I stand at the top of the stairs. I am I. I am Osiris. I have come because I wish to have come. My two hands cling like ancestors.”<sup>22</sup> Ellis’s usage of symbolic expression is beautiful; it expresses her personal transformation. What does it mean for one to rise from the buried egg? This could be interpreted as one who has come into a new way of life or one who has converted from old, habitual means of living. Could being given a mouth to speak be viewed as one who has transformed one’s self so that her speech mirrors the unwavering, divine speech of the gods? For one to

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<sup>21</sup> Normandi Ellis, *Awakening Osiris* (Boston, Massachusetts: Phanes Press, 1988), 15.

<sup>22</sup> Ellis, *Awakening Osiris*, 108.

operate in such high character would, indeed, display one's ability to function like the great god, Osiris.

It is obvious that Ellis grasps the sacred meaning of death. According to the ancients, the obscure meaning was the transmutation of the soul from spirit into its material form. "The great Plato is himself found saying that 'men are placed in the body as in a prison' and that he considered the body as the sepulcher of the soul,"<sup>23</sup> articulates Alvin Boyd Kuhn in his article, *The Lost Meaning of Death*.<sup>23</sup> Osiris, who is God (spirit) in body or mummy form, is the potential spiritual perfection lying dormant within every human soul. Ellis's work is an ideal document for the clarification of this research because it demonstrates the usage of Osiris as a possible means for soul perfection.

Ayi Kwei Armah's *Osiris Rising* is an astounding literary work that portrays the restoration of Osiris.<sup>24</sup> Although a novel, this manuscript establishes Osiris as a theory and cultural practice within a traditional West African space. Armah utilizes his intuitive wisdom to articulate a story that has existed since the dawn of time. Like *Awakening Osiris*, *Osiris Rising* illustrates a transformation of spirit; however, *Awakening Osiris* addresses an individual change whereas *Osiris Rising* depicts the transformation of a community.

Although Armah's communal depiction of Osiris contradicts the more personal transmutation imposed by this thesis, the work remains useful for the construction of this

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<sup>23</sup> Kuhn, *Alvin Boyd Kuhn's Collection*, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *Osiris Rising*. (Per Ankh Press, 1996).



research because it shows the implementation of Osiris in a traditional African space, outside of ancient Egypt. One is able to compare and contrast the character of Osiris through a West African lens. This heightens the importance of this academic inquiry because there may be clarifications in African cultures outside of ancient Egypt that may validate unexplained aspects of the role of Osiris in the *Book of the Dead*.

Furthermore, Armah's view of Osiris resonates with the troublesome plight of African Americans, a predicament that consists of the horrific dismemberment, enslavement, and re-membering of a people. Osiris's communal relevance in *Osiris Rising* seeks to re-member a community. Likewise, this template of old can be used by African Americans in the reconstruction of their communities and as a means to heal and reform the individual self.

Ideally, the interpretation or authoritative voice concerning Osiris has been the pharaoh, priesthood, or elite class of societies. *Osiris Rising* demonstrates the opposite; it stresses the meaning of Osiris through a commoner. Similarly, the idea of Osiris as a means of transformation is depicted from ancient Egyptian literature such as the *Pyramid Texts*. However, Armah brings Osiris to life as he shapes the legend of the ancient god from a West African perspective. *Osiris Rising* and *Awakening Osiris* offer a relevant perspective of Osiris because they offer a practical means of his (Osiris's) interpretation; they demonstrate Osiris's transformative power in earthly manifestation.

The next noteworthy work to address Osiris in a significant manner is Jan Assman's *The Mind of Egypt* (2002). This effort is an extensive work that adumbrates the cultural memory of ancient Egypt. Published in 2002, Assman's work is a recent study

directed toward the reconfiguration of ancient Egyptian philosophy. Although this inquiry is not predicated around Osiris entirely, Assman does, however, devote considerable attention to Osiris in chapter 6, entitled “Re-Membering Osiris.”

In his assessment, Assman addresses the transformation of the rites of Osiris during the Late Period, particularly during the incursion of the Persians and Greeks. Assman asserts that the Osirian rites practiced in the forty-two nomes of ancient Egypt represented the body of Osiris. During invasions by foreigners in the Later Period, the ritual of Osiris, which included his mutilation, represented the division of Egyptian culture. This is the cohesion between the historical experience and cultural construction in ancient Egypt that Assman avers. Moreover, the re-membering of Osiris was synonymous with the unification of ancient Egypt and the defeat of foreign rule.<sup>25</sup> Assman’s valuation of cultural unification parallels that of Ayi Kwei Armah’s in *Osiris Rising* in that both authors compare the re-membering of Osiris to the re-formation of culture.

In addition, Assman connects Osirian mysteries with the daily life of the priesthood during the New Kingdom, proposing priests that were solely responsible for the rites and ceremonies of Osiris. Assman also posits that individual agendas eventually led to the priests’ domination of ancient Egyptian society:

Their marked need for self-segregation had other motives. They avoided contact with foreigners and the impure, led strictly cloistered and regimented lives, and devoted all their time to worship, meditation, and cultivation of the scriptures. For those reasons alone, they were bound to steer clear of the profane business of the world. In addition—and perhaps

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<sup>25</sup> Jan Assman, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 409-411.

even more crucial—the priests of the Late Period saw themselves as Egypt's social and intellectual elite.<sup>26</sup>

Naturally, the priesthood's greed set in and led to the dismantling of the ancient Egyptian age, and with it the destruction of the Osirian religion.

In either case, *The Mind of Egypt* is a commanding work that elucidates hidden components of ancient Egyptian wisdom. Yet, this work does not perpetuate Osiris as a medium whereby one may obtain what ancient Egyptians considered human perfectibility; rather, *The Mind of Egypt* is a general study on Osiris as a source of cultural reconstruction. Still, *The Mind of Egypt* is a notable reference source whereby one may gauge the evolution of ancient Egyptian thought and the influence foreign invasion had on the shaping of the Osirian mysteries.

In 2009, Ra Un Nefer Amen issued *Metu Neter, Vol.2: Anuk Ausar, The Kamitic Initiation System*, which labels and outlines stages in the ancient Egyptian process of spiritual perfection. According to this book, the summit of spiritual excellence is characterized as the *Ausar* (Osiris) man. *Metu Neter* masterfully illustrates the legend of Osiris as an allegory to portray the evolution of the soul. Amen further explains various stages of initiation through which the soul progresses in order to arrive at the *Ausarian* level, or state of perfection. The author hints at the suggested esoteric method of instruction employed by the sages of old.

Unlike many traditional Egyptologists who have perceived the legend of Osiris as mere folklore and magical spells, Amen is clearly insightful when he describes the tale of Osiris as the maturation of the fragmented soul into perfection. In the context of soul

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<sup>26</sup> Jan Assman, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, 414.

transformation, the premise of Amen's work and Reuben Clymer's *The Philosophy of Fire* parallel. Clymer has this to say regarding initiation: "All real Initiation is an internal, not an external or formal process. The outer ceremony is useful only in so far as it symbolizes and illustrates, and thereby makes clear the inward change taking place."<sup>27</sup> Clymer further suggests, "It is thus that man must work out his own salvation. The Consummation of Initiation is Mastership to the 'degree' the Neophyte has been able to transmute the carnal within his nature and has been able to bring the *Christos* into consciousness. This is the goal, the perfect consummation of human evolution through conscious development."<sup>28</sup> *Metu Neter* definitely embodies Clymer's spiritual philosophy.

More importantly, Amen provides a step-by-step process whereby certain attributes are associated with various levels of soul development; he explains that Osiris is the fulfillment of one's spiritual excellence and that initiation, or transformation of one's mind and spirit, is necessary for the attainment of that ideal. Outlining the core argument of this thesis, Amen's work is undeniably germane to the foundation of this proposed research, which seeks to highlight the process of apotheosis. The only contrasting point between Amen's research and the suggested thesis is that Amen's ideological framework is restricted to the legend of Osiris and is not demonstrated within *The Book of the Dead* or any other piece of ancient Egyptian literature. This research will

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<sup>27</sup> Reuben Swinburne Clymer, *The Philosophy of Fire* (Quakertown, Pennsylvania: Beverly Hall Corporation, 1964), 166.

<sup>28</sup> Clymer, *The Philosophy of Fire*, 166.

attempt to expand Amen's work by revealing elements of soul transcendence, as related to Osiris, within the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.

More recently, Thom F. Cavalli's *Embodying Osiris: The Secrets of Alchemical Integration* (2010) proves to be a substantial work for the purposes of this thesis. A certified clinical psychologist, Cavalli utilizes his professional expertise to acquaint the reader with ancient Egyptian philosophy. Like the main argument of this thesis, the gist of Cavalli's work suggests that the legend of Osiris was a blueprint for spiritual transformation—*for the living*. Cavalli's psychological prowess enables him to lift the covers of literalism and expose the sacred philosophy of soul regeneration that undergirded the Osirian religion for centuries.

Using his eclectic abilities, Cavalli approaches the legend of Osiris from an alchemical perspective, highlighting the unification of Osiris that, he believes, represents the integration of the various parts of a human being such as body, ego, self, and soul. He further claims that unification of these faculties, or oneness, constitutes one's immortality in the present—prior to physical death.

Cavalli's assertions are definitely relevant to this research because they support the suggested ancient Egyptian practice of the deification of man—in the earthly realm. In his introduction, for example, Cavalli quotes from the *Corpus Hermeticum*: "If you don't make yourself equal to God, you can't perceive God; for like is known by like. Leap free of everything that is physical, and grow as vast as that immeasurable vastness; step beyond all time and become eternal; then you will perceive God."<sup>29</sup> The quote

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<sup>29</sup> Thom F. Cavalli, *Embodying Osiris: The Secrets of Alchemical Transformation* (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 2010), 4.

illuminates the notion emphasized in this thesis: Man is the earthly reflection of the divine. Like similar texts regarding the apotheosis of man, *Embodying Osiris: The Secrets of Alchemical Transformation* does not demonstrate the process of deification within the *Book of the Dead*, however.

The primary source for this inquiry is Thomas Allen's text, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day: Ideas of the Ancient Egyptians Concerning the Hereafter as Expressed in Their Own Terms* (1974). Allen's version of this ancient literary treasure remains one of the most comprehensive translations in the field of Egyptology because of its eclectic nature and linguistic proficiency. Unlike Budge's version of the *Book of the Dead*, which contains translation errors, Allen's work exudes a more precise interpretation of the ancient Egyptian language. Allen's grasp of ancient Egyptian culture is proficient and allows him to explicate the fullness of this religious text. Allen's research displays linguistic and cultural proficiencies that are necessary tools to illuminate symbolic expressions of Osiris's role regarding soul transcendence in the *Book of the Dead*. Yet, like many traditional Egyptologists, Allen's interpretation of the *Book of the Dead* is subject to mistranslations. In addition, his work does not employ an esoteric method of interpreting Osiris. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to employ a hermeneutical lens in order to find traces of an esoteric meaning of *death* in this ancient scripture. The next chapter of this study will attempt to rediscover this ancient usage.

### CHAPTER III

#### HISTORY OF OSIRIS

Osiris is one of the most important deities in the ancient Egyptian pantheon. He is associated with death, resurrection, and fertility in ancient Egyptian culture. Also, he is usually portrayed as a mummy whose hands protrude through his wrappings in order to hold the royal emblems of crook and flail. It is his character that has most impacted ancient Egyptian religion, which endured for several millennia; this religion even had a lasting impression upon succeeding religious systems. This section of this thesis will outline the evolution of Osiris's personality throughout ancient Egyptian history and religious tradition.

It must be said that much of the knowledge pertaining to Osiris has been taken from the works of classical writers such as Herodotus, Plutarch, and Diodorus Siculus. There is valuable information within their manuscripts regarding Osiris; on the other hand, inconsistencies and suggestions incorporated within their work contradict some of the facts drawn from ancient Egyptian monuments. Still, these writers wrote accurately enough to convey a good sense of who Osiris was. Since the age of these classical writers, the field of Egyptology has matured to the point that many of the false assertions made by past scholars have been corrected.

Some sense of Osiris's personality can be gained from a paraphrase of his legend. In the beginning, Osiris and his wife, Isis, established their dominance by introducing high culture to a "barbaric" people. According to the legend, Osiris was great in wisdom and carried his knowledge of civilization to other nations of the ancient world. In Osiris's absence, Isis ruled the throne of ancient Egypt. Osiris's noble work of spreading civilization caused a great stir among some, particularly his brother Set. Because of these uncontrolled emotions, Set, along with seventy-two accomplices, conspired to murder Osiris.

Upon Osiris's return to ancient Egypt, Set and his conspirators held a feast in honor of Osiris. With malice in his heart, Set constructed a chest in the precise measurements of Osiris's body. After partaking in libations and other festivities, Set deceived Osiris and persuaded him to get into the chest. Set then slammed the lid, nailed it, and threw the chest into the Nile River. The chest holding the body of the slain king washed ashore in the eastern Mediterranean at Byblos, where it was discovered by the local king. Because the king found the chest to be aesthetically pleasing, he erected it as a pillar in his kingdom.

Isis was informed about this tragedy and recovered her husband's body. However, upon her return to Egypt, Set recognized the chest containing the remains of Osiris. In rage, Set dismembered the chest into fourteen pieces and heaved them into the Nile River. Again, Isis lamented the brutal treatment of her husband and set out to find the missing pieces of his body in hope of re-membering them. With the assistance of Anubis



and her sister Nephthys, Isis relocated and restructured all the portions of Osiris's body except his phallus. This troubled Isis because she was never able to consummate her marriage with Osiris. Therefore, she prayed to Ra and implemented *heka* (spiritual powers) in order to conjure the spirit of Osiris. Isis then transfigured into a hawk, hovered over the area of the missing phallus of Osiris's body and was impregnated by his spirit, thereby having an immaculate conception.

From this holy union, Horus was born. Horus matured into a fine warrior who, as *ndty* (avenger), revenged his father's death by conquering Set and his conspirators at a great battle in *Amenta*. After overcoming Set, Horus restored order in ancient Egypt by resurrecting Osiris from the dead. From this point, Osiris and Horus are perceived as one being, which explains the epithet *Osiris-Sahu*, or the risen one. Osiris would go on to live forever, ruling the next phase of existence—the afterlife—while Horus maintained order in the earthly realm and began his work by implementing the divine plans of his father. According to the *Book of the Dead*, Horus “makes the word of Osiris truth against his enemies.”<sup>1</sup> Within this capacity Horus operates as one who adheres to and applies sacred instruction to daily life. This manifestation is Horus as *Ma'at-Kheru*, or “true of voice.”

The previous outline of the legend of Osiris is the foundation of ancient Egyptian religion, specifically the Osirian Mysteries. And in this light, it is imperative to note the ancient Egyptians' treatment of Osiris. As it is with all cultures, there was a polarizing viewpoint concerning the authenticity of Osiris's character. There were those who believed in the human history of Osiris, attributing the rise of ancient Egyptian culture to

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Massey, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead & the Ancient Mysteries of Amenta* (Brooklyn, New York: A&B Publishers Group), 83.

his wisdom and exceptional kingship, and then there were those who associated Osiris's personality strictly with legend. Egyptologist E.A. Wallis Budge takes the human approach: "All tradition makes Osiris a king, and it is certain that he must have lived at an early period. This being so, we should expect him to be represented in the form of an early king, and to occupy the throne of a king, and to sit under a royal canopy."<sup>2</sup> Contrary to this vantage point, Osirian scholar J. Gwyn Griffiths states his opinion regarding Osiris and myth in *The Origins of Osiris and his Cult*.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, this study perceives Osiris's personality as myth. Yet, there was a portion of Osiris's persona that gave the ancient god human qualities. Although this aspect of Osiris will be addressed later, it is important first to delve into the cultural background of one of ancient Egypt's most revered deities.

There are facets of Osiris's nature that developed prior to his evolution into the principal god of the ancient Egyptian religion. To begin, the name Osiris was a designation given by the Greeks. The indigenous title is *Asari (Usari)*, which means "he who takes his seat or throne."<sup>4</sup> Discussions surrounding the correct meaning of his name have taken place, but the most accurate and consistent implication that aligns with his cultural and religious influence is "he who takes his seat or throne." As for cultural influence, Osiris had an everlasting impact on a deceased king and his ability to rule the living from the land of the ancestors. This was a focal point in ancient Egyptian culture as it depended heavily on kingship, i.e., the throne, for guidance toward righteousness. Equally important was Osiris's role as Ruler of the Dead, "the one who judged from the

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<sup>2</sup> Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*, 37.

<sup>3</sup> J. Gwyn Griffiths, *The Origins of Osiris and his Cult* (London, 1980), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*, 25.

throne,”—a pivotal position in ancient Egyptian religion and pertinent for those who desired salvation. Both points highlight Osiris’s most valued roles in ancient Egyptian society and, more than likely, were the deciding factors that contributed to the definition of his name. Many epithets such as Lord of Eternity, Everlasting God, and Lord of Life were linked to the great god. Titles played a significant part in ancient Egyptian traditions because, as will be explored later, they were a medium whereby followers could identify themselves with Osiris.

Osiris was, arguably, one of the earliest gods of ancient Egypt. Scholars Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson note that Osiris was probably originally regarded simply as a chthonic deity—a fertility-god overseeing the growth of crops. This context connected Osiris’s character to the inundation as a source of the fertile alluvium.<sup>5</sup> Their assertions are highly plausible since ancient Egyptian culture was agrarian. It makes further sense that the two most ancient elements associated with Osiris’s nature were husbandry and the Nile River.

Fragments of Osiris’s association with agriculture are apparent in his mythology. Accordingly, Egypt was founded upon Osiris’s ability to use agriculture as a means of evolving a people from barbarism to civilization. Plutarch’s *Moralia* indicates the value ancient Egyptians placed upon the relationship between Osiris and agriculture:

In this way we shall undertake to deal with the numerous and tiresome people, whether they be such as take pleasure in associating theological problems with the seasonal changes in the surrounding atmosphere, or with the growth of the crops and seedtimes and ploughing; and also those who say that Osiris is being buried at the time when the grain is sown and

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Nicholson and Ian Shaw, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* (New York, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 213.

covered in the earth and that he comes to life and reappears when plants begin to sprout.<sup>6</sup>

Plutarch's reference, in this case, is essential, first because his work is a primary source regarding the role of Osiris in ancient Egyptian civilization and, second, because he mentions Osiris's cultural linking to horticulture. In addition to Plutarch's point of view, noteworthy scholar James Frazer offers his opinion regarding this matter: "The foregoing survey of the myth and ritual of Osiris may suffice to prove that in one of his aspects the god was a personification of the corn, which may be said to die and come to life again every year."<sup>7</sup> Frazer further suggests that a more intimate alliance existed between Osiris and the farmers than with the rest of the inhabitants:

Through all the pomp and glamour with which in later times the priests had invested his worship, the conception of him as the corn-god comes clearly out in the festival of his death and resurrection, which was celebrated in the month of Khoiak and at a later period in the month of Athyr. That festival appears to have been essentially a festival of sowing, which properly fell at the time when the husbandman actually committed the seed to the earth. On that occasion an effigy of the corn-god, molded of earth and corn, was buried with funeral rites in the ground in order that, dying there, he might come to life again with the new crops. The ceremony was, in fact, a charm to ensure the growth of the corn by sympathetic magic, and we may conjecture that as such it was practiced in a simple form by every Egyptian farmer on his fields long before it was adopted and transfigured by the priests in the stately ritual of the temple.<sup>8</sup>

Frazer's estimation yields a radical angle concerning the customs of the Osirian rites.

Where it is usually assumed that the religious ceremonies of Osiris were instituted by priests, Frazer proposes the opposite. His way of thinking supports a communal interpretation of Osiris and his rites.

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<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936), 153.

<sup>7</sup> James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1996), 438.

<sup>8</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 438.

Keeping the focus on Osiris and agriculture, one of his oldest associations is with the Nile River. As for the Nile, it was the life source for the entire Nile Valley and even more so for Egypt, a country surrounded mostly by desert. This sacred river, stretching over 4,000 miles, provided proper sustenance for Egypt, helping it develop into an agriculturally-based society. Without the Nile River, ancient Egypt would not have existed. Moreover, the Nile River was so vital to ancient Egypt that it was the premier factor in determining the indigenous name for Egypt. For thousands of years, inhabitants of Northeast Africa observed the rich, black alluvium left behind on the land after the receding of the Nile River and the name *Kemet* was given. Thus, the name Kemet means black land.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to some opinions, which assume Kemet referred to the people of this region, this word is, more than likely, an agricultural term attributed by farmers over an extensive period of time. Hence, the skin of Osiris was sometimes shown as black to signify the fertile Nile alluvium or green to allude to his regenerative power, which was reflected in vegetation.<sup>10</sup>

Eventually, the people of ancient Egypt connected the inundation and receding of the Nile River with the epic of Osiris's life, death, and resurrection. When the Nile River was low, it was perceived to be the death of Osiris because the river did not extend to barren land and yield produce. During its inundation, the Nile was conceived as Osiris rising from the dead. Comparative linguist W. Max Mueller confirms the joining between this natural phenomenon and cultural identification: "The rising Nile likewise reminds the faithful of him because it is an annual calendric phenomenon of reviving nature, side

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<sup>9</sup> Nicolson and Shaw, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 148.

<sup>10</sup> Nicolson and Shaw, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 213.

by side with other explanations of this event as Osirian.”<sup>11</sup> The new offspring created from the union of earth (Isis) and the Nile’s residue (Osiris) was called Horus, which is the manifestation of the latter. Mueller then transitions to say this:

Osiris can also be compared to or identified with the water of the summer inundation because it enables the crops to grow again, and both ideas are combined in a picture which shows how the Nile-god awakens to life the soul (i.e. manifestation) of the “Phoenix-Osiris” in the new plants. The rebirth of the life-giving river reveals Osiris himself; or the water flows from his wounded or dismembered body in mysterious depths, or he causes it through the tears of Isis (and Nephthys) which flow for and over him.<sup>12</sup>

In his previous statement, Mueller makes a subtle gesture about Osiris and the idea of awakening the life of the soul. Though Mueller refers to the soul of nature, eventually this ideology would extend to the personality of the human soul. It is from this unitary point of view that the ancient Egyptian religion was able to take root and influence the psychology of most of its devotees. Remember, there was no distinction between sacred and secular, physical or spiritual, so the idea of developing a human soul was plausible.

Of his formalities in environmental representations, Osiris’s influence is nowhere more potent than the symbol of the sun. Initially, the sun was represented by the deity Ra, who was the creator-god of the ancient Egyptian pantheon. His center of worship was Anu or Heliopolis, (“The City of the Sun”). Over time, the priests from each sect (Osiris and Ra) merged the two deities to create one religion. Mueller explains this phenomenon precisely: “His worship at the ‘City of the Sun,’ Heliopolis, was less distinct, although

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<sup>11</sup> W. Max Mueller, *Egyptian Mythology* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2004), 94.

<sup>12</sup> Mueller, *Egyptian Mythology*, 94.

the old solar symbols of this earliest of the holy cities later received explanations in great part from the Osirian myth.”<sup>13</sup>

The evolution of local and state religions was a recurring theme in ancient Egypt. In *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, James Breasted discusses this matter: “There is a certain body of beliefs regarding the hereafter which we may designate as Solar, and another group which are unquestionably Osirian, but the two faiths have so interpenetrated each other that there is much neutral territory which we cannot assign to either, to the entire exclusion of the other.”<sup>14</sup> Breasted’s remark concerning the transformation of the Osirian religion reveals the tolerance and continuity that existed between various religious centers in ancient Egypt, specifically Heliopolis and Abydos. These religious centers served as the focal points of religion that promulgated the direction and manner of Kemetic spirituality throughout the ages. Max Mueller, a specialist in comparative languages and religions, expresses his point of view concerning this cultural dynamic: “At Memphis he (Osiris) was soon identified with the local god of the necropolis, the hawk Sokari, and then with Ptah and the deities identified or associated with him, such as the local sacred bull Apis (Hap).”<sup>15</sup> Fluidity of ancient Egyptian spiritual structures laid the foundation for a sustainable Osirian religion.

The “Watchers of Heaven” (astronomers) were the priests of Heliopolis and the most revered priests of ancient Egypt. They calculated and valued every aspect of the sun. What was it about the sun that these holy men revered so intimately? First, they

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<sup>13</sup> Mueller, *Egyptian Mythology*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> James Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (Lexington, Kentucky, 2014), 62.

<sup>15</sup> Mueller, *Egyptian Mythology*, 98.

recognized the sun's life source throughout nature. By observing the sun, they were able to witness its life-giving force and its impact on vegetation. The cycle of the sun was gradually infused into ancient Egypt's legend of Osiris. The Heliopolitan priests mystified the sun as a representation of the soul and eventually merged Osiris into this ideology. The sun's daily and annual revolution became synonymous with the evolution of the soul. There are instances where the sun is given divine attributes in ancient Egyptian cosmology. Nonetheless, Osiris is unique in that he was personified in both natural and spiritual manifestations. And his affiliation with natural phenomena played a significant role in ancient Egyptian religious structure. By the dawn of the pre-dynastic era, the veneration of Osiris was already prevalent throughout ancient Egypt, and his dominance as Ruler of the Dead had already absorbed the powers of local gods. This is key because the first religious texts to appear (*Pyramid Texts*) were considered Heliopolitan, and Osiris's character had already made an imprint as a principal figure in this spiritual text.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, this outlook of natural and spiritual expressions became pivotal, in terms of the Osirian Mysteries, when the primary goal was for initiates to transform their human consciousness from a physical to a spiritual nature. It is here where aspirants devoted their lives to Osiris—the god-man.

The rudimentary stages of the Osirian cult are said to have taken root in two regions of Egypt: Busiris and Abydos. The original home of Osiris as god of the North was at a place in the Delta, a city called Busiris, *pr* (house) of Osiris or “Home of Osiris.”<sup>17</sup> Here, historians have found early representations of Osiris in the form of

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<sup>16</sup> Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*, xiv-xv.

<sup>17</sup> Mueller, *Egyptian Mythology*, 92.



strangely shaped pillars, which depicted Osiris as god of stability. It seems likely that the insignia of Osiris were assimilated from Andjety, a local god of Busiris, which existed prior to Osiris's cult. Validating this crucial point, Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson write, "It is likely that the legend of Osiris as the dead form of an earthly ruler was also taken over from Andjety's cult. Subsequently, when various sites claimed to be associated with the individual parts of Osiris' dismembered body, Busiris claimed his backbone, the DJED pillar, a symbol that had many other connotations and was simply assimilated into the cult of Osiris, perhaps losing its original meaning in the process."<sup>18</sup> Nicholson and Shaw claim that Osiris is a reflection of ancient Egyptians' symbolic representation in that they were able to graft connotations of various divine personalities into one form of deity.

The main center of worship for Osiris was located in Abydos (*Abdju*), Southern Egypt (Upper Egypt). According to ancient Egyptian mythology, Isis found Osiris's head at Abydos when she was reassembling his dismembered body. In commemoration, she consulted the priests of Abydos and constructed a temple in his honor. Consequently, Abydos became the sacred city, holy land of Osiris. Renowned scholar W. Max Mueller explicates this mythological sentiment:

Osiris had once been buried there; and after the dispersion of members the head at least had remained behind at Abydos, where it was worshipped as the holiest of all relics of the "good god." The tomb where his body once had lain (or still was preserved) was found later in a royal tomb of the earliest period, whose owner had been forgotten. This nearness of Osiris made all Egyptians wish to find immortality by being buried at Abydos, so that an immense cemetery developed there.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Nicholson and Shaw, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 213-214.

<sup>19</sup> Mueller, *Egyptian Mythology*, 98.

Mueller's assertion confirms the sacredness of Osiris to Abydos and instructs the reader on ancient Egyptians' amalgamation of mythology with geographical locations.

However, the unidentified tomb in Mueller's report has since been recognized as belonging to the First Dynasty ruler Djer.<sup>20</sup>

The city of Abydos thrived from the Pre-dynastic era until the dawn of Christianity and remained one of the focal centers for the cultivation of ancient Egyptian spirituality. The earliest temple at this site was dedicated to an early form of Osiris, the canine god Osiris-Khentimentiu, who was also known as the god of the dead. Osiris's prominence as primary deity soon made the former subordinate. The most dominant representation of Osiris at Abydos are in the temples of Seti I (1294-1279 BC.) and his son Rameses II (1279-1213 BC.). The temple of Seti I is famous for its iconography and beautifully painted reliefs, which have been used by scholars to interpret sacred rituals once enacted there.

Still, Osiris's most prevailing influence in Abydos was his ability to attract followers to the city for burial rites, which ultimately turned Abydos into a pilgrimage city. Abydos is the earliest known holy city, preceding the establishment of Jerusalem and Mecca by a thousand years, at least. Personal identity with Osiris was a gradual process for commoners; yet, the collapse of the Old Kingdom sparked a change in religious customs that would shift the religious landscape, permanently.

Perhaps the most influential part of Osiris's character was his role as the Great Ancestor. But his position as the Great Ancestor has remnants in settlements south of

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<sup>20</sup> Nicolson and Shaw, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 214.

Abydos. Budge records this title of Osiris in his detailed work, *Osiris: The Egyptian*

*Religion of Resurrection:*

Osiris as the typical god-man who died and rose again is represented in the form of a mummy, or, at all events, in the form of a dead man who has been made ready for burial. This form is a development of an ancient presentment of a dead chief or ancestor, for Osiris took the place of the tutelary ancestor-god who was honored and worshipped in every village of the Sudan of any size from time immemorial.”<sup>21</sup>

Budge’s comment reveals the adaptation of Osiris into African culture prior to ancient Egypt. He also has this to say in another section of his work: “The spread of the cult was rapid, both in Upper Egypt and in the Delta, because no other cult offered to its adherents the hope of the resurrection and immortality. Among the tribes of Egypt in general, the cult of Osiris took the place of the cult of ancestral spirits, which was universal in the Nile Valley in primitive times, but the people lost nothing by the exchange, for became the divine ancestor of them all.”<sup>22</sup>

There is no denying the African origins of Osiris; Budge admits this in the introductory chapter.<sup>23</sup> However, there remains a delineation between this allotment of the actual rites and ceremonies of this African messiah: “As it has always been the custom to reserve ceremonial burial for the bodies of kings, chiefs, and men of high rank it is clear from the traditional accounts of the burial of Osiris, and of the numerous ceremonies which were performed in connection with it, that he must have been a great and powerful king.”<sup>24</sup> Budge’s account is correct in that only persons of high rank

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<sup>21</sup> Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*, xxiii.

<sup>23</sup> Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*, xxii.

<sup>24</sup> Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*, 30.

received burial ceremonies; however, this thesis departs from Budge on his view concerning the authenticity of Osiris's character.

In the Old Kingdom, only royalty had authoritative command of representing Osiris in the land of the dead. For example, the *Pyramid Text* of Teti states, in utterance 337, "Heaven shouts, earth trembles in dread of you, Osiris, at your coming!"<sup>25</sup> Here is an instance when divine personage was relegated to royalty; this act was prevalent throughout the duration of ancient Egyptian culture. This particular text (*Pyramid Text*) is from the Old Kingdom and was instrumental to the political construct because Osiris was said to rule from the afterlife. And since it was the deceased king who represented Osiris, like Osiris who ruled from the realm of the dead, it was he (the deceased king) who influenced the succeeding monarch from the ancestral realm.

Social unrest inaugurated the collapse of the Old Kingdom and brought about a shift in religious ideology and personal piety among ancient Egyptians. Most knowingly was the change in the way Osiris's followers perceived him. Ancient Egyptian social tradition suggested that the living be governed by a dead monarch (the Osiris). However, the Old Kingdom pharaohs abused their power and their leadership faltered to the point where they lost the respect of the living and their right to rule the Egyptian state from the afterlife. Their Osirian role diminished to assisting souls in the afterlife only. The power to rule the living now resided in the living monarch who was the embodiment of Horus.

This abrupt shift in social ideology directly affected ancient Egyptian religious philosophy. Whereas the *Pyramid Texts* of the Old Kingdom emphasized the deceased

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<sup>25</sup> Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Old and Middle Kingdoms, Vol. I.* (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2006), 40.

king's identification as Osiris, the commencement of the Middle Kingdom and the *Coffin Texts* held Horus as the central figure of importance, particularly in his role as the avenger of his father Osiris. Ancient Egyptian scholar Maulana Karenga labels the *Coffin Texts* the "Texts of Vindication" because of the overwhelming presence of Horus throughout the text.<sup>26</sup> This is not to suggest that the Osirian religion died, but instead a transition in social and religious ideologies had occurred. In addition, the exclusive burial rites once reserved for kings had become democratized and open to the commoner. Evidence of the transference in personal piety is stressed in the Middle Kingdom *Coffin Texts* where the phrase "Osiris of X" is frequently used to identify the deceased commoner with the god.<sup>27</sup>

The city of Abydos was directly influenced by this religious ideological shift, and from a financial standpoint it benefitted immensely. Once a community where only royalty was buried, Abydos begin to witness a significant increase in the number of commoners being brought for the purpose of funerary rites. Although few commoners during the Middle Kingdom could afford final burial rites in Abydos, many managed to erect simple cenotaph or funerary stela dedicated to Osiris in the city, assuring their resurrection in the afterlife with the great god.

Because of the momentous rise of the Osirian religion in Abydos, much consideration has to be given to economic factors that played a part in one's final resting place. In *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, German

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<sup>26</sup> Maulana Karenga, *The Book of Coming Forth by Day* (Los Angeles, California: University of Sankore Press, 1990), 20.

<sup>27</sup> Nicolson and Shaw, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 214.

Egyptologist Jan Assman indicates that wealth was a factor in determining one's final resting place.<sup>28</sup> Assman's position causes readers to reshape their understanding of the role of social and economic hierarchy and the idea of salvation. What was the result for common people of ancient Egypt in general, and Abydos specifically, who did not have the financial means for a proper burial? According to ancient Egyptian customary standards, they would not have received proper burial rites. This should not come as a surprise when considering Budge's remark on burial rites in ancient Egypt. Budge contends that the land was too precious and needed for agricultural purposes. He claims that only the bodies of kings, chiefs, and noblemen were buried, and at one time it must have been thought that only members of the elite would enjoy a future existence. The bodies of the general population, however, were usually laid in shallow graves easily targeted by wolves, foxes, and jackals.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the Middle Kingdom introduced a modification in this concept. And the transference of sacred texts from pyramids to coffins and papyri made burial rites with the Lord of Abydos (Osiris) more affordable for the general populace.

Undoubtedly, the most distinguishable feature of the Osirian cult at Abydos was the Great Procession, a local festival celebrated by believers who came from all across Egypt to partake in its festivities. Scholars Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson describe in detail this magnificent event:

This involved the procession of the god in his Bark, known as *neshmet*, preceded by his herald, the jackal-god Wepwawet. Scenes from Osiris' triumph over enemies were enacted in the course of the journey before the

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<sup>28</sup> Jan Assman, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 159.

<sup>29</sup> Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*, xxiii-xxiv.

god returned to his sanctuary for purification. The rites connected with the 'mysteries' of Osiris were enacted in the temple, probably celebrating his original function as a fertility god, although little is known of these rituals.<sup>30</sup>

Such commemorations had a powerful traditional nature, and their significance preserved certain characteristics of the royal funerals, which mimicked early royal burials.

An increase in personal piety caused commoners to adopt the same royal burial customs, at least for those who could afford it. In *Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Interpretation*, Henri Frankfort points out this critical phenomenon: "The consequences of this identification were far-reaching; it made appropriate for everybody the use of texts, rites, and emblems used hitherto only in royal funerals. The immense prestige of the royal prerogatives, their undoubted potency, led to a wholesale usurpation by common men."<sup>31</sup> Frankfort assigns this cultural occurrence to the turmoil that shook the foundation of the Egyptian state at the close of the Old Kingdom. In another work, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature*, Frankfort explains that as early as the Fifth Dynasty commoners undertook nautical voyages to participate in the Great Procession, all of which show the major impact Osiris had on ancient Egypt's early culture.

The progression of the Osirian religion continued into the New Kingdom and was illustrated in the *Book of the Dead*. By then, the sacred text once inscribed on pyramids and coffins had been transferred to papyri. More importantly, this transition symbolized something greater: the democratization of the Osirian religion. Teachings, rituals, and

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<sup>30</sup> Nicolson and Shaw, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 214.

<sup>31</sup> Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Interpretation* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2000), 104-105.

symbols once reserved for the elite now became accessible for commoners. In addition, the transference from pyramids and coffins to papyri made possible the transcription of the sacred doctrine.

Still, the New Kingdom brought about a change in the interpretation of the Osirian religion, and incursion from foreign invaders would help reshape the meaning of the salvation. With the constant invasion that followed the New Kingdom, the Osirian Rites represented more than the renewal of life for an individual; it now signified the reconstitution of a dismembered nation. Jan Assman gives his report of this cultural occurrence: "Perhaps the most impressive Egyptian response to the experience of foreign rule was the transformation that the ancient rituals of the Osirian mysteries underwent in the temples of the Greco-Roman Period. It is also a very striking instance of the connection between historical experience and the cultural construction of meaning."<sup>32</sup> Whereas Seth imposed the mutilation of Osiris and functioned as his archenemy, ancient Egyptians associated foreign rule with the role of Seth in the dismantling of Egypt, i.e., Osiris. The reconstitution of the body of their *great lord* (Osiris) was now symbolically seen as the mending of a fragmented culture.

Centuries of invasion by outsiders left ancient Egypt vulnerable; more so, their cultural gems once revered by subordinate outcasts now had become susceptible to external forces. The Osirian Religion would take another turn, this time for the worse. The inability of Osiris to deliver the ancient Egyptians out of the hands of invaders caused the fidelity of his followers to sway and eventually they found refuge in a foreign

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<sup>32</sup> Jan Assman, *The Mind of Egypt*, 409.



version of Osiris—*Serapis*. Serapis would become the avenue that marked the roadway to salvation. With the spiritual landscape of ancient Egypt in such a feeble state, the influx of Christianity into northeast Africa would deliver the fatal blow to ancient religions, sending the Osirian Religion into the abyss of human thought.

Herein lies the focus of this research. This study contends that beneath the general history of Osiris was a more intimate history, a history highlighting, not a historical figure, but instead, in its place the evolution of the human soul. This religious creed probably was charted by Osiris's cherished devotees in the *Book of the Dead*. George G.M. James adumbrates this ancient viewpoint in his epic work, *Stolen Legacy*: "The ancient Egyptians had developed a very complex religious system, called the Mysteries, which was also the first system of salvation. As such, it regarded the human body as a prison house of the soul, which could be liberated from its bodily impediments, through the disciples of the Arts and Sciences, and advanced from the level of a mortal to that of a God."<sup>33</sup> The entry of Christianity into northeast Africa would harness and eventually obliterate this concept, and, from an exegetical stance, the method for interpreting ancient script plummeted from arcane philosophy to literalism.

It is well-known that ancient Egyptians used symbolic expressions to convey their innermost thoughts concerning deification. Chapter eleven of Jan Assman's *The Mind of Egypt* alludes to this detail: "The advent of Osirianism opened up a new path to salvation over and above the lithic route of Imhotep. Monumental tombs continued to be part of the Osirian faith, but now alongside such dicta as 'The [true] tomb is built by doing right' or

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<sup>33</sup> George G.M. James, *Stolen Legacy* (Drewryville, Virginia: Khalifah's Booksellers & Associates, 2005), 1.

‘The [true] monument to a man is his virtue.’”<sup>34</sup> The previous statement yields a clear, concise theory of Osiris representing one’s ability to become immortal through moral reformation. This is the more profound history of Osiris, the advent of the soul. The next stage of this investigation will excavate the *Book of the Dead* in order to illumine this grandiose idea.

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<sup>34</sup> Assman, *The Mind of Egypt*, 159.

## CHAPTER IV

### BES

The initial thrust of this research is to explore the role of Osiris's personality in the *Book of the Dead* in order to revive the theme of death in a forgotten ancient philosophy; this theme, once uncovered, will bring the ancient Egyptian spiritual text into a new light, highlighting its ancient priesthood's *true* notion of deification. The first portion of this chapter is dedicated to two things: (1) the ancient Egyptians' method whereby humans achieved soul perfection and (2) this notion of soul perfectibility characterized as the personage of the great god, Osiris. Ultimately, these explorations will attempt to answer the question: What are the dimensions of the interpretation of Osiris in the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*? The second part of this investigation will address the following inquiry: What was the existential function of Osiris?

There are various works concerning the spiritual dynamism of the ancient Egyptians, and many of these texts have hinted at the notion of a mystic cult or group of priests positioned within ancient Egyptian culture who were responsible for shaping the culture's spiritual philosophy, in general, and their notion of soul perfectibility, specifically. This is an important factor to consider, especially when exploring a canonical heirloom of such magnitude as the *Book of the Dead*. In order to properly engage this ancient Egyptian spiritual text, one must first understand the context in which

it was written. This work proposes that the ancient Egyptian priests were responsible for the construction and dissemination of the *Book of the Dead*, and therefore it is their spiritual ideology that will be examined.

To begin, the function of a priest, *hem netjer*<sup>1</sup>, or “servant of god,” in ancient Egyptian society has been totally misconstrued with the role of modern-day clergymen. Though it has been perceived that the priest was responsible for all religious rites, this is not the case. The role of the priest in ancient Egypt varied considerably. Priestly duties were relegated by a chief priest according to their own clerical hierarchy. Some priests were limited to distinct roles such as purifiers or even astronomers. Their duty was to perform their task to the best of their ability as it related to the overall social structure. Still, these duties were carried out part-time only during the span of the Old and Middle Kingdoms; the commencement of the New Kingdom caused a drastic shift in the economic landscape of ancient Egypt that enabled priests to perform their duties full-time.<sup>2</sup> The rise of the New Kingdom is significant, in this instance, because it is during this time period that the *Book of the Dead* appeared.

Considering the variety of priestly duties, it can be suggested that being well versed in religious doctrine was not a prerequisite for all priests. Mastery of religious texts was reserved for *hery heb*, or lector priests, whose obligation was to recite the “words of the gods” and for *sem* priests whose responsibility included narrating the *Book of the Dead*. Since the *Book of the Dead* is the subject of exploration, it is the *sem* priest’s point of

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* (New York, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 228.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 228.

view that is of major importance. In order to gain a clear perspective of the *sem* priest's philosophy of the *Book of the Dead*, it is necessary focus the scope of investigation on various points of their educational training.

In this research, appraisal of the ancient Egyptian's educational system is conducted through works by Yosef Ben-Jochannan, Asa Hilliard, and George G.M. James. These scholars were chosen because their viewpoint concerning education in Egypt aligns with descriptions by historic figures Herodotus, Iamblichus, and Plutarch. In *The Maroon Within Us: Selected Essays on African American Socialization*, Asa G. Hilliard notes, "The ultimate aim of education in Egypt was for a person to become 'one with God' or to 'become like God.'"<sup>3</sup> In accordance with this statement, George James's *Stolen Legacy* offers a framework for this theory: "The ancient Egyptians had developed a very complex religious system, called the Mysteries, which was also the first system of salvation. As such, it regarded the human body as a prison house of the soul, which could be liberated from its bodily impediments, through the disciples of the Arts and Sciences, and advanced from the level of a mortal to that of a God."<sup>4</sup> James's quote yields a glimpse of the educational training in ancient Egypt, pointing to a candidate's (in this instance a *sem* priest's) ultimate goal—*deification*.

The uniqueness of ancient Egyptian culture is that it did not separate education from spirituality. Education was viewed as a practice whereby a human being developed and expressed the manifestation of the Creator within oneself. Ancient Egyptians called

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<sup>3</sup> Asa G. Hilliard, *The Maroon Within Us: Selected Essays on African American Community Socialization* (Baltimore, Maryland: Black Classic Press, 1995), 92.

<sup>4</sup> George G.M. James, *Stolen Legacy* (Drewryville, Virginia: Khalifah's Booksellers & Associates, 2005), 1.

this expression of deity lodged in oneself, *neter*. As Asa G. Hilliard implies, “The highest aim of Egyptian education was for one to become godlike through the revision of one’s own ‘Neter,’ of how God is revealed in the person.”<sup>5</sup> From an ontological point of view, this sentiment illustrates that ancient Egyptians believed humans were an extension of the Creator. They alleged that the soul was essentially divine and its presence in human form did not denote sin per se; rather, it represented a state of being whereby a fragmented soul could become enlightened through education, i.e., divine instruction.

Yet, education of this caliber was rare among the commoners of ancient Egypt; most of the people were illiterate. The masses mostly received vocational training, which was generally passed on from one generation to another. This type of educational training did not require literacy. On the other hand, priestly education, which was reserved for the elite members of Egyptian society or those who displayed a high level of intellectual capabilities, demanded literary proficiency. The academic elite were taught the ancient Egyptian writing system, *medu neter*, translated as “sacred writings” or “words of the gods.” And it was one’s ability to read and write *medu neter* that distinguished one as literate or not. A *sem* priest would have received this formal education.

The course of education for a *sem* priest began by one agreeing to submit oneself to a process of initiation, i.e., the mystery system. This study defines initiation as the *beginning*—the beginning of one’s divination. This procedure was the foundation, the training ground for the cultivation of divine intelligence and moral character. With this stated, the term mystery system can be misleading for some, warranting an ill-defined

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<sup>5</sup> Hilliard, *The Maroon Within Us: Selected Essays on African American Community Socialization*, 99.

outlook regarding ancient Egyptian tactics for obtaining deification; however, a more appropriate way to view this system was as a spiritual educational system. In this setting, the method for soul transformation is demystified and presented in a pedagogical manner. Asa Hilliard's work, *The Maroon Within Us: Selected Essays on African American Community*, characterizes the idea of pedagogy in Ancient Egypt:

Consequently, the reconstruction of what must have been a highly developed and vast system of education necessarily requires an approach that is highly inferential. Nonetheless, the inferences are not without empirical grounding. For example, the evidence that gives information about the educational system can be found in paintings, monument, architecture, technology and, above all, in the hieroglyphic and demotic writings, which include stories, rituals, songs, and so forth.<sup>6</sup>

Hilliard's remark endorses products of ancient Egypt's education, but this study aims to penetrate into the heart of its education process—initiation.

According to noted African scholar Yosef Ben-Jochannan, the ancient Egyptian educational system contained three distinct grades of initiation: “1) The Mortals, students on probation under instruction, who had not yet achieved experience into the ‘inner vision.’ 2) The Intelligences, students who had attained the ‘inner vision,’ and also received ‘mind’ or ‘Nous.’ 3) The Creators or Sons of Light, students who became a part of the ‘spiritual consciousness.’”<sup>7</sup> Within this sacred procedure, an initiate ascended through various stages culminating in the crowning goal—deification.

This process commenced with a probationary period in which a neophyte vowed to secrecy because it was imperative that the profane not be exposed to sacred teachings

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<sup>6</sup> Hilliard. *The Maroon Within Us: Selected Essays on African American Community Socialization*. Black Classic Press, 84.

<sup>7</sup> Yosef Ben-Jochannan, *Black Man of the Nile and His Family* (Baltimore, Maryland: Black Classic Press, 1989), 315.

without proper preparation. Students developed particular qualities of human consciousness, such as being able to distinguish between things eternal and temporal, commitment to do right because it is right, mastery of thought and action, and a desire for spiritual existence. These abilities embody only fragments of a span of aptitudes that were required of pupils. Reverend Charles H. Vail offers a detailed analysis of this cultural practice in chapter 4 of *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*.<sup>8</sup> Initiates only needed to display suitable proficiency of principle in preliminary stages; mastery was reserved for higher phases of initiation.

While exploring the moral, psychological, and spiritual components of oneself, a student was expected to study and refine, at minimum, one profession for the purpose of contributing to the overall structure of society. Professions included farming, politics, religious structuring, teaching, and other occupations. In addition, an initiate was educated in liberal arts and sciences, including agriculture, architecture, astronomy, grammar, literature, logic, mathematics, medicine, music, rhetoric, theology, and other disciplines. The type of priest a neophyte aspired to be determined the number of crafts one had to master. However, an apprentice was expected to master grammar (*medu neter*), rhetoric, and logic in order to pass to the third and final stage of initiation. As Ben-Jochannan states, “These three were disciplines of a ‘moral nature’ by which man’s (the student’s) irrational tendencies of behavior were cleansed or otherwise purged.”<sup>9</sup> Simply stated, a candidate utilized these specific disciplines to assist in the subduing and

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<sup>8</sup> Rev. Charles H. Vail, *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry* (New York, New York: Cosimo Classics Inc., 2005), 109.

<sup>9</sup> Ben-Jochannan, *Black Man of the Nile and His Family*, 315.



tilling of one's moral nature, which led to the awakening of the latent seed of spiritual potential within one's being.

*Grammar* is essential for the elucidation of this research because all methods of learning, concerning the disciplines, began with the scribe. The role of a scribe in ancient Egyptian culture was paramount because scribes were responsible for carrying out all duties, secular and sacred related to literature. More importantly, this position was where students learned the art of reading and writing the language of the gods. Surely this was the focal point for one training to become a *sem* priest because it was their responsibility to preserve and interpret the *Book of the Dead*. A neophyte's education was imparted in a unique manner in that one learned the external and internal functionality of a particular craft. The outer representation was for secular understanding while the inner, more sacred substructures of a craft were limited to the initiated. The holy substratum of education was never written down; it was passed on orally from mouth to ear. A more thorough examination of these esoteric methods of education will be revisited in a latter section of this chapter.

Physical examinations were eventually set in place to assess one's physical, psychological, and spiritual fortitude. These trials challenged a neophyte's comprehension and commitment to self-mastery. And it was these assessments that formed the core of instruction. One had to fully master this part of the process; no partial success would suffice. Here, aspirants had to be entirely free from fetters that bound the human ego to the mortal domain.<sup>10</sup> Once an apprentice accomplished this task and

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<sup>10</sup> Vail, *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*, 124.

developed enough discipline to remain consistently unrestricted by these fleshly limitations, he was propelled into the higher realms of consciousness, placing himself at the doorstep of full initiation.

In the third and consummating phase of spiritual attainment a student aimed to become a *hry sst3*<sup>11</sup>, *Kheri Sheta* or “Master of The Secrets.” A *Kheri Sheta* was one who had become unified with the Creator. In essence, the initiate would become a messiah, the embodiment of the Creator lodged within one’s being. The Egyptian word *Kheri Sheta* developed into the Greek term *χριστός* (*Christos*) which ultimately became the English *Christ*.<sup>12</sup> The term *Christos* is a Greek translation of the Hebrew *משיח* (*messiah*). The term *messiah* is a combination of Egyptian and Hebrew language; it can be separated into two distinct meanings. The prefix *mes* is an Egyptian word that means to be born or give birth; it also refers to one who has been sprinkled or anointed. The suffix *iah* is a Hebrew term for god. Together they produce the meaning “born god” or “anointed one.” Accordingly, the anointed one of ancient Egyptian culture was—Osiris. It was he who initiates and, in this instance, a *sem* priest, desired to become.

Generally, ancient cultures did not relegate the ownership or, in this context, title of the anointed one to one historical personage; rather, the notion of a savior was utilized as a spiritual expression that could be sought and attained by those who earnestly pursued it. This practice was found in ancient Egypt and an initiate could embark on this spiritual journey through the mystery system called the *Osirian Mysteries*. Again, “man’s

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<sup>11</sup> Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (London, 1950), 595.

<sup>12</sup> Yosef Ben-Jochannan, *Aspects of a Psycho-Esthetical: Analysis of African Spiritual Dynamics within a European Ultimate Mechanical Paradox* (New York, New York: Alkebu-lan Books Associates, 1988), 34.

irrational tendencies of behavior were cleansed or otherwise purged according to the teachings of the Osirica's Mysteries."<sup>13</sup> Here, in the process of becoming Osiris, an initiate experienced a rigorous journey culminating with a mystic death. This mystic death was death to the natural man, i.e., fleshly passions; it led to the resurrection and full manifestation of the hidden spiritual being within man. This was the state of being known as Osiris. As Vail writes, "The body was placed in a sarcophagus of stone, a vault or tomb beneath the floor of the Hall of Initiation; and carefully guarded. Meantime, the body was dead and buried, he himself was fully alive in the invisible world (Hades), and undergoing what was called the tests of earth, water, fire, and air. He then put on his perfected Bliss body, which was now fully organized as a vehicle of consciousness."<sup>14</sup> Vail says more: "When the neophyte reached a certain stage of perfection or enlightenment, he was said to 'rise from the dead.'"<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, this experience is what transfigured one into the likeness of Osiris because one would have been buried and resurrected with the great god.

One's matriculation through this ancient Egyptian spiritual process serves as the key component and foundation in this study. As noted, it is the *sem* priest's interpretation of the term death in the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* that is of supreme interest here. Traditionally, the *Book of the Dead* has been viewed as a religious text that accentuates the rites of one who is in the last phase of existence, i.e., death. However,

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<sup>13</sup> Ben-Jochannan, *Black Man of the Nile and His Family*, 315.

<sup>14</sup> Vail, *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*, 124.

<sup>15</sup> Vail, *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*, 125.

after traversing through a *sem* priest's spiritual education process an alternate viewpoint concerning the *Book of the Dead* is being explored.

As proposed in chapter one, this research will attempt to elucidate the term death in an esoteric manner. Death will not be perceived as termination from physical existence only; rather, this work will offer an interpretation of death as the experience of the human soul in the earthly realm. This adaptation closely aligns with the clerical customs of the ancient world. In his notable article *The Lost Meaning of Death*, Alvin Boyd Kuhn explicates this pivotal point of view: "For in olden times the proper signification of the terms 'death' and 'the dead' was the touchstone by which the meaning of all scriptural writing could be gauged. The terms carried in their ancient usage a hidden or esoteric connotation, which was at once a clue to the primary meaning of the entire structure of theology and a key to the rational envisagement of our mortal life."<sup>16</sup> If this is the case, and it is strongly suggested that it is, then the sole objective of the human soul is to awaken or come forth to the consciousness of its divine self during earthly manifestation. Within this reference, one of ancient Egypt's most coveted vestiges, the *Book of the Dead*, enters a new dimension of consideration; where rituals and spells of the *Book of the Dead* once were understood only as expectation of life beyond the physical grave, they now are viewed as a compilation of rites or experiences that articulate the believer's route to transformation, i.e., soul perfectibility during earthly existence. To the above may be added a comment by Ben-Jochannan in his notable work, *Black Man of the Nile and His Family*: "Teaching that the soul of man, if liberated from its bodily abode, could

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<sup>16</sup> Alvin Boyd Kuhn, *Alvin Boyd Kuhn's Collection* (ZuuBooks.com Publications, 2011), 21.

enable him to be in reality God-Like. As such, man would be among the gods in his lifetime on earth and attain vision in Holy Communion with the immortals.”<sup>17</sup> The previous comments verify two, already mentioned, components of ancient Egyptian culture: (1) there was a priestly perspective regarding their sacred text that contradicts present-day interpretation and (2) ancient Egyptians possessed a pedagogical method whereby one could be instructed into what ancient Egyptians considered human perfectibility.

Kuhn further declares that many spiritual institutions were masked beneath the name Books of the Dead, as in Egypt and Tibet.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the title of the ancient Egyptian spiritual writings during the New Kingdom was called the *Book of the Dead*. Upon further investigation, however, the indigenous name of the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* is *Per Em Heru* and is translated as *Coming Forth by Day*. This interpretation reveals a more illuminating meaning for this ancient text. To start, the term *coming forth* does not imply a completed action; rather, it signifies continuous action highlighting one’s constant evolution. In this instance, the word *day* is emblematic of light, not in the context of sunlight, but awareness. *Day* simply means enlightenment. To *Come Forth by Day* can be expressed as one’s unceasing process of instruction towards self-mastery, to *come forth* as an enlightened soul—to *come forth* as Osiris. Considering the interpretation above, the idea of soul transformation could have applied not only to those who had physically transitioned, but to the living as well.

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<sup>17</sup> Ben-Jochannan, *Black Man of the Nile and His Family*, 314.

<sup>18</sup> Kuhn, *Alvin Boyd Kuhn’s Collection*, 21.

Although Thomas George Allen’s version of the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* is the core of this literary investigation, there is a glaring distinction between his comprehension and the aforementioned standpoint of an ancient Egyptian *sem* priest. For example, in the introduction to *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day: Ideas of the Ancient Egyptians Concerning the Hereafter as Expressed in their Own Terms*, Allen notes that “the Egyptian designation found on the outside of some rolls [of *The Book of the Dead*] means *Going Forth by Day*. That ancient title emphasized the longing and the hope to return by day from wherever the hereafter might be centered—within the earth or traversing the sky—to visit again at will the familiar scenes of earth.”<sup>19</sup> Allen’s interpretation of the ancient title *Book of the Dead* is correct in that the purpose of this ancient Egyptian text was to express their notion of eternity; but, his analysis is limited and never mentions any priestly mode of reasoning concerning this ancient text. Therefore, the aim of this research is not to dismantle Thomas George Allen’s interpretation of the *Book of the Dead*, or any versions to be exact, but, restore the arcane method of interpretation to its proper place so that the golden rays of truth can burst forth from millennia of being obscured.

The reason kernels of truth remain masqueraded beneath centuries of interpretation of the *Book of the Dead* is, primarily, because many lack the master-key to unlock the wisdom of the ancients. This key is simply esotericism. Chapter one of this research briefly mentions the two contrasting methods used for comprehending an ancient

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas George Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day: Ideas of the Ancient Egyptians Concerning the Hereafter as Expressed in their Own Terms* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1.

religious text—exotericism and esotericism. Exotericism, as explained, is the manner of understanding suitable for the general public. The premise of exotericism is based on the exclusion of the masses, those not belonging to selected circles. On the other hand, esotericism is reserved for the elite or those who have been cultivated into a special knowledge. In this instance, the *crème de la crème* of ancient Egyptian culture was the priesthood. Its view of humanity's relationship with the Creator and cosmos was, usually, more intuitive than the average person's viewpoint and expressed through exquisite allegories.<sup>20</sup>

Many terms are synonymous under the umbrella of esotericism, including apologue, fable, parable, mythology, tale, narrative, and legend. All these words hint at one's possession of wisdom, or ability to see beyond the obvious. Utilizing esotericism as the medium of inspection allows one to pierce through surface level interpretation and grasp deeper explanations that are multi-layered within a religious text. This beautiful technique expands the range of thought for an individual and permits one to identify with physical, moral, psychological, social, and spiritual teachings. Contrarily, the multitude sees the opposite, they perceive only the mundane. Their sight is myopic because they have not been introduced to the sacred way of initiation.

Though a rift between the two perspectives was surely prevalent in the ancient world, it does not compare to the devastating phenomenon in the third century A.D. that cast the practice of esotericism into oblivion for centuries. To shed more light on this issue, it should be known that there always existed various groups of initiates who

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<sup>20</sup> Vail, *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*, 19-22.

developed and shared complex philosophical viewpoints concerning sacred writings.

These sects were known by many names, Mysteries, Kabbalists, Gnostics, Essenes, Platonists, Neo-Platonists, and Hermeticists. The outer label or title of the sets may have changed, according to culture, but the essence and ultimate aim of the groups remained constant.

However, with the vast expansion of Christianity in northeast Africa and rise of the western world in the form of the Roman Empire, the practice of the ancient Egyptian religion and all its formalities ceased with the closing of all ancient temples by Emperor Justinian I.<sup>21</sup> This single act delivered the fatal blow to esotericism causing it to become a lost art, which subsequently sparked the Dark Ages and plunged the psychological and religious institutions of humanity into a dismal obscurity of ignorance for ages.

The obscuring of the ancient Egyptian religion and other religious systems of antiquity enhanced the dreadful widespread use of literalism. Without esotericism, the imaginative knowledge of ancient Egyptian priests was forced to comprehend the notion of God through a diminutive scope, which resulted in a slanted, dogmatic history. This tragedy nurtured a reality where humans perceived the likeness of the Almighty God outside of themselves. Gone were the days where humans constructed themselves in the image of the Creator and manifested the power of God from within. Those times were banished, etched out of the memory of humankind and replaced with a tainted version of an old personage.

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<sup>21</sup> Alvin Boyd Kuhn, *Shadow of the Third Century: A Revaluation of Christianity* (Kessinger Publishing's), 170.



Likewise, the readings of holy scriptures, mainly Judeo-Christian texts, entered a period of scrutiny in which lofty philosophical points of views and other arcane appendages were eliminated from religious thought. Humanity suffered gravely from this disastrous epoch and the result was centuries of intellectual disillusionment. Traces of a symbolic interpretation of ancient scripture are visible at an early period. Take the Jewish culture, for example. In *Morals and Dogma*, Albert Pike states that the notable Jewish scholar Aristobulus “declared that all the facts and details of the Jewish Scriptures were so many allegories, concealing the most profound meanings, and that Plato had borrowed from them all his finest ideas.”<sup>22</sup> Further along in this same passage, Pike elaborates on another prominent Jewish scholar, Philo, “who lived a century after him, following the same theory, endeavored to show that the Hebrew writings, by their system of allegories, were the true source of all religious and philosophical doctrines. According to him, the literal meaning is for the vulgar alone.”<sup>23</sup> Albert Pike, a well-known student of comparative religions, used two eminent scholars of Jewish history to illustrate the figurative nature of scripture interpretation prevalent during this time. Again, the symbolic interpretation of holy scriptures existed in all ancient cultures, including ancient Egypt.

The third century A.D. and its feeble, specious creed seized control of religious thought for centuries, leaving only faint echoes of a once—golden theosophical age. Nevertheless, momentum shifted, once again, with one swing of a French soldier’s pick.

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<sup>22</sup> Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (Bensenville, Illinois: Lushena Books, 2005), 250.

<sup>23</sup> Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry*, 250.

In 1799, while digging the foundations of an addition to a fort near the town of el-Rashid, a French soldier came upon the Rosetta Stone. This finding proved to be one of the most extraordinary discoveries, to date, concerning the ancient Egyptian culture because it enabled French scholar Jean-Francois Champollion to decipher the ancient Egyptian language. Tremendous strides were made regarding the translation of ancient Egyptian language. This also meant translation of Ancient Egypt's most sought-after scriptures—the *Book of the Dead*.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the residue from the Dark Ages still proved to be haunting; for many researchers the more keen elucidations of the *Book of the Dead* remained clouded. The truths of this ancient heirloom remained sealed and impenetrable because there was no possession of the lost key—esotericism.

As previously explained, the writers of the *Book of the Dead* were the ancient Egyptian priests, and these composers of ancient scriptures were poets, allegorists, dramatists, mythicists. As Alvin Boyd Kuhn contends, “The ancients were also esotericists, writing only of the inner life and for initiated pupils. They wrote of inner things under an outer veil. They wrote of the Greater Mysteries which were never given out to the multitude, but taught in secret to disciplined students. Spiritual truth was not published in modern fashion.”<sup>25</sup> Ancient initiates never wrote literally. And once this concept is clear, it will not be hard to accept that the notion of death in the *Book of the Dead* is not to be taken literally.

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<sup>24</sup> Alvin Boyd Kuhn, *Who is this King of Glory? A Critical study of the Christos-Messiah Tradition* (Bensenville, Illinois: Lushena Books, 2006), ix.

<sup>25</sup> Kuhn. *Alvin Boyd Kuhn's Collection*, 67.

The proper lens of interpretation—esotericism—has been offered and the veil of confusion can be lifted. Philosophers of the ancient world, including ancient Egyptian priests, did not identify death as termination of physical life; rather, they perceived death as transitioning out of the experience of the soul manifested in a human body. Awkwardly as it sounds, herein lies the untold truth, the nugget of wisdom that so heavily contradicts the common understanding of death. Once more, theosophical scholar George James reiterates this unique concept in his work *Stolen Legacy*, “The ancient Egyptians had developed a very complex religious system, called the Mysteries, which was also the first system of salvation. As such, it regarded the human body as a prison house of the soul, which could be liberated from its bodily impediments through the disciplines of the Arts and Sciences, and advanced from the level of a mortal to that of a God.”<sup>26</sup> Metaphorically, the human body was conceived, by priests, to be the prison house or tomb of the soul. When the physical body expires, it is placed in a tomb; likewise, ancient philosophers considered the soul dead when it was clothed in the garb of flesh. The ancient sages did not believe in death. For them, the term death was a comparative one, for there strictly is no death, in the form of total extinction of being. Death is a transition from state to state, a change of form, of that which is and cannot cease to be.

From the dark corners of history, the sagacious words of Plato echo louder: “For I have heard from one of the wise that we are now dead; and that the body is our sepulcher.”<sup>27</sup> And what better persona from ancient Egyptian culture to represent this arcane truth but—Osiris! Osiris, the embodiment of death in ancient Egyptian

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<sup>26</sup> James, *Stolen Legacy*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Kuhn, *Alvin Boyd Kuhn's Collection*, 20.

philosophy, now reveals a more luminous nature that shines forth light on the dark subject of death. According to ancient Egyptian lore, Osiris was slain by his evil brother, Set, and thrown into a sepulcher or tomb. Under the eye of esotericism, the tomb of Osiris comes to light and the once-blurred vision is clearer. The tomb is not a literal grave; no, instead, it is a symbolic representation of the human body. The very last line in Chapter 30A of the *Book of the Dead* depicts this mystical concept, “Lo, he is interred ‘among the great’, continuing on earth, not dying in the west (but) becoming a blessed one therein.”<sup>28</sup> Another version of the same text is given by Egyptologist Raymond Faulkner: “May you say what is good to Re, may you make me to flourish, may powers be bestowed when I go forth, having been interred among the great ones who long endure upon earth. Not dying in the West, but becoming a spirit in it.”<sup>29</sup> Such a scripture is a testament that assigns the sacred meaning of the term dead to the living people on earth, not the deceased.

With this point of view, it is difficult to pinpoint such a subtle outlook without the appropriate tools. This apparatus, more than likely, would have come by way of the ancient Egyptian priesthood. More specifically, one would need to have received priestly instruction of sacred grammar to comprehend hidden meanings within the holy script. To be initiated was to be in the know, to be brought into the way of Osiris. This was the sacred path of the soul.

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<sup>28</sup> Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day: Ideas of the Ancient Egyptians Concerning the Hereafter as Expressed in their Own Terms*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Raymond Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London: British Museum Publications, 1989), 55.

Because of the fluidity of his personae, Osiris was ascribed many epithets. However, two of those titles accentuate the groundwork of this investigation. Those titles were Lord of the Dead and Lord of the Underworld. With a metaphorical approach, many of Osiris's appellations can be seen in their purest form. Again, the term death has been restored to its ancient connotation; it only meant the incarnate soul. Similarly, in this framework of ancient customs, the label Lord of the Dead meant Lord of the Living, the inhabitants of ancient Egypt who were followers of the ancient god. This sublime representation is validated through the work of the great scholar Alvin Boyd Kuhn: "Osiris, the 'Speaker,' the 'Manes,' the incarnating deity, is indeed the king in the realm of the dead<sup>30</sup>. For we are those dead and the god within us came to rule this kingdom, according to the obscure meaning of every religion."<sup>31</sup> The previous scripture only reinforces the hidden meaning of death that has escaped the mental grasp of philosophical and religious scholars alike. Once more, there is no death according to ancient Egyptian religious thought. In *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World*, Gerald Massey supports this claim by noting that, "There is no death in the Osirian religion, only decay and change, and periodic renewal; only evolution and transformation in the domain of matter and the transubstantiation into spirit."<sup>32</sup>

As for the name Lord of the Underworld, the land of the dead is no more than the human body, the earth. Masked under religious zealotry, the underworld has been

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<sup>30</sup> *Nsw Imyw* is an ancient Egyptian term that refers to the realm of the dead or the *King of Those who are There*.

<sup>31</sup> Alvin Boyd Kuhn, *The Lost Light: An Interpretation of Ancient Scriptures* (Zuubooks.com Publications, 2011), 137.

<sup>32</sup> Gerald Massey, *Ancient Egypt The Light of the World* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 150.

misrepresented as a literal place of the dead. Likewise, scholars have misconstrued ancient texts and identified the abode of Osiris as a geographical region rather than a spiritual designation. Two of these regions were Abydos and Amenta.<sup>33</sup> There was no actual entrance to an underworld at Abydos, but to complete the spiritual typology of Osiris, a temple, tomb, and deep well were constructed in the great city. The priesthood simply transferred their spiritual uranographic designation to a geographical location to symbolize the spiritual idea. For example, Egyptologist Wallis Budge tries to pinpoint the location of Osiris's tomb. He quotes the following: "I directed the ways of the god to his tomb in Peqer...I caused gladness to be in the dwellers in Amentet, when they saw the Beauty as it landed at Abydos, bringing Osiris Khenti-Amenti, the Lord of Abydos, to his palace."<sup>34</sup> In this passage, the speaker (I) is a representative of Horus, the Elder, who leads the soul (Osiris) to his tomb in Peqer. Peqer, in this instance, is another common-place synonymous with Abydos. They are both metaphors for the body, or the earth. Later in the same work Budge declares, "But about Osiris' burial-place there is no doubt, for all tradition, both Egyptian and Greek, states that his grave was at Abydos in Upper Egypt."<sup>35</sup> Budge seems to be misled; he is not aware that he is writing only of the historical variation of a spiritual legend.

The land of Amentet or Amenta is a combination of two ancient Egyptian terms: *Amen* and *ta*. Amen was identified as the creator in ancient Egyptian mythology, he was also king of the gods. His name meant the hidden one, referring to the undisclosed spirit

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<sup>33</sup> *Hnty Imntiw*, a title attributed to Osiris, meaning *Foremost of the Westerners*.

<sup>34</sup> Wallis Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection* (New York: University Books, Inc., 1961), 8-11.

<sup>35</sup> Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*, 67.

prevalent throughout creation. Amen was associated with the human soul as well. As Siegfried Morenz states, “For almost all the gods’ names can be translated and as a rule denote a characteristic feature of their nature or function: for example, Amon, “the Hidden One”, i.e. the invisible air-god...”<sup>36</sup> The only contradiction between the previous statement and this research is the interpretation of Amen’s functionality within ancient Egyptian culture. This study perceives Amen in its religious context as the ancient Egyptians notion of the Creator’s spirit. In the ancient Egyptian language ta is defined as earth (land).<sup>37</sup> Together these words yield hidden earth. In its esoteric typology, it refers to the hidden land or place where the hidden spirit (the Osiris) dwells. This blessed land was nowhere other than the human body. Ancient Egypt’s cryptic dramas depicted the spiritual evolution of humanity and the history of the human soul in its earthly tabernacle of flesh. Surprisingly enough, ancient Egyptian scholar Gerald Massey presents Amenta in a different light in his work *The Egyptian Book of the Dead & the Ancient Mysteries of Amenta*. According to Massey, “Amenta is a huge fossil formation crowded with the dead forms of a past life in which the horny conspectivities of learned ignorance will only see dead shells for a modern museum.”<sup>38</sup> Though Massey is heralded as one of the most brilliant academics concerning ancient Egyptian culture, his description of Amenta represents the brute historical reality of the profane who lack the proper tools to unveil this ancient mythology. This is baffling considering Massey’s position regarding death; he states, “There is no death in the Osirian religion, only decay and change, and periodic

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<sup>36</sup> Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1973), 21.

<sup>37</sup> Gardiner, Sir Alan. *Egyptian Grammar* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1957), 37.

<sup>38</sup> Gerald Massey, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead & the Ancient Mysteries of Amenta* (Brooklyn, New York: A&B Publishers), 2.

renewal; only evolution and transformation in the domain of matter and the transubstantiation into spirit.”<sup>39</sup> Obviously, there is an imbalance in Massey’s assessment; it could be there is a deficiency in his comprehension of death in the ancient Egyptian religion.

To the priesthood the soul only appeared to be dead; it was imagined to be asleep. The ancient Egyptian ritual (*Book of the Dead*) clearly depicts this theme in line 2 of chapter 99, “Behold, [I] am come. “Who art thou that comest?” I am [the beloved] of his father, the greatly beloved of his mother. I am one who [can] wake [his] sleeping father.”<sup>40</sup> In this framework, the speaker is Horus, the divine son of Osiris and Isis, who desires to awaken his sleeping father, Osiris. Again, Osiris is emblematic of the soul that appears to be dead (asleep) in Amenta, i.e., the human body.

What did it mean for one to come forth as Osiris? With all of the data assembled regarding this subject, there is a strong possibility that one coming forth as Osiris could have been read as one complex glyph representing soul perfectibility, embarking on a process that led to one’s own deification. Within this reference, the idea of Osiris takes on an existential functionality.

As this work peers more closely into the ancient Egyptian religion, the once hazy idea of soul perfectibility becomes more feasible. To begin, the ancient Egyptian religion rested on the belief that humans, like Osiris, were created in the divine image of God.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Massey, *Ancient Egypt The Light of the World*, 150.

<sup>40</sup> Allen. *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day: Ideas of the Ancient Egyptians Concerning the Hereafter as Expressed in their Own Terms*, 78.

<sup>41</sup> Maulana Karenga, *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt* (Los Angeles, California: University of Sankore Press, 2006), 216-218.



Soul perfectibility was the focal point of their religion. This is not perfection in the sense of a finished creation, but in the context of constant development, one constantly being molded in the likeness of God. An ideology of such implication was possible because there was no notion of sin present. Since the essence of humans was created in the likeness of God, the core of human existence was innately good. This is a glaring distinction from modern western religions, which assert that humans are naturally born into sin. Though the idea of *isft* or evil doings was present in the ancient Egyptian belief system, these actions were not considered an inherent part of the human make-up. Rather, when the human soul displayed deceitful traits, it could be perfected through divine instruction. An ancient Egyptian scholar calls this cultural trait the “teachability of humans.”<sup>42</sup>

Here then was the sole purpose for the ancient Egyptian mystery system—to righteously instruct the fragmented soul into the idea of perfection, i.e., Osiris. As before mentioned, many of these divine teachings were passed on orally, but those that were written down were called—Sebait. The Sebait, or “Books of Instruction,” were devoted to the proposition that humans are pliable, teachable, and capable of moral cultivation, which makes them capable of moral, psychological, and spiritual transformation.<sup>43</sup> A prime example of Sebait in ancient Egyptian culture is the teachings of Ptahhotep. These principles are said to have been a moral roadmap that guided the ancient Egyptian social landscape for ages.

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<sup>42</sup> Karenga, *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt*, 236-239.

<sup>43</sup> Karenga, *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt*, 236.

The most prominent moral code in ancient Egyptian culture was, most likely, the *Book of the Dead*. In chapter 125 of this ancient text is a set of spiritual laws called the negative confessions. Examples of these declarations were: “O flame-embracer who came forth from Kheraha, I have not robbed. O Beaked One who came forth from Hermopolis, I have not been greedy. O swallower of shadows who came forth from the cavern, I have not stolen. O fierce [of face] who came forth from Rosetau, I have not killed people.”<sup>44</sup> These holy decrees provided a strict guideline for constructing one’s life, and the submission of one’s life was to travel the eternal path—the way of Osiris. With consistent application of divine tutelage an aspirant gradually transformed from an imperfect being into a god in flesh. This is the cryptic meaning of the death, burial, and resurrection of Osiris; it was one’s struggle to earn one’s deification.

Why was it necessary for one to aspire to deification? All research points to this: like other cultures, the ancient Egyptians used their understanding of spirituality as a mechanism to cope with and address the essential questions of life. However, unlike many cultures, the ancient Egyptians perceived the human soul to be the very essence of the Creator making all human beings divine. Therefore, to become Osiris was to express those core values of human existence ubiquitous to all cultures; this included feeding the hungry, clothing those in need, prayer, living in harmony with fellow human beings, honoring the dead, and more. This lifestyle was a direct attempt to answer the age-old riddle: What is the purpose of life? Ultimately, the ancient Egyptians conceded, to be human was to be God masqueraded in flesh. Their primary aim was to focus on the soul,

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<sup>44</sup> Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day: Ideas of the Ancient Egyptians Concerning the Hereafter as Expressed in their Own Terms*, 98.

which was considered to be the extension of God, the temple not made with hands eternal in the heavens. As chapter 154 of their compelling scripture states: “Hail to thee, my father Osiris. Thy members shall continue to exist. Thou hast not decayed, thou hast not rotted, thou hast not turned to dust, thou hast not smelled, thou hast not decomposed. Thou shall not become rotten.”<sup>45</sup> In the closing word of the Christian minister: *Amen!*

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<sup>45</sup> Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day: Ideas of the Ancient Egyptians Concerning the Hereafter as Expressed in their Own Terms*, 154.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this research was to investigate Osiris's place within the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* in order to rediscover dimensions for the esoteric meaning of *death*. Initially, this study proposed that the *Book of the Dead* concealed an arcane interpretation of death. Death, in this exploration, did not signify a mere absence of physical life; rather, it aligned with the ancient mystical interpretation, which was the soul's involution into earthly manifestation. Western scholarship has had difficulty locating this golden grain of truth because of its literal, dogmatic approach as far as exegesis is concerned. The ancient Egyptian priesthood believed human limitations could be overcome by expanding one's consciousness to the point where there was a direct link between the human soul and God. This was accomplished through their process of initiation. Here, a candidate learned to master oneself and earn his own deification. In this light, immortality was possible to obtain in the earthly life—not in the *great by and by!* Furthermore, this research deduced that this priestly interpretation of death—of Osiris—remained cloaked in one of ancient Egypt's most coveted religious scriptures—the *Book of the Dead*, and it was this researcher's aim to uncover this elusive expression.

This exposition entered a recurring debate surrounding the interpretation of the term *death* in ancient Egyptian religious customs, particularly the *Book of the Dead*. On one side was the lofty philosophy of the ancient world, which pronounced the *death* of man as the matriculation of the soul through *the valley of the shadow of death*, i.e., the body. With this, the ultimate aim of man was to free himself from his natural limitations and reconnect with his divine source. Certainly, the sagacity of ancient Egyptians inculcated this theme within their ancient scripture. The forceful event that challenged this established idea was the spread of Christianity in northeast Africa, which imposed literalism as the focusing lens for the interpretation of ancient scripture, sending the consciousness of humanity into a state of obscurity. However, since the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, the key to unlocking centuries of disillusionment concerning this ancient text has been scholars' ability to transliterate and translate the ancient Egyptian language. Yet, the road to recovery has been limited and many western exegeses still suffer from the remnants of this horrific episode enforced by the Church and are unable to discern the sacred doctrine of esotericism. Herein lies a focal point of this assessment because the crux of its interpretation was second hand, relying heavily upon the interpretation of scholars, mostly trained Egyptologists.

Considering the importance of translation as it relates to the ancient Egyptian language, it is the translation of the term *Book of the Dead* that gave further reasoning for this inquiry. The correct translation of the *Book of the Dead* is the *Book of Coming Forth by Day*. The title alone speaks volumes! *To Come Forth by Day* insinuates one's ability to progress into a certain state of consciousness by enlightenment—not physical light. In

order to accomplish such a feat, surely one had to be alive. Nevertheless, the title of this sacred text left the exegete in a state of bafflement. How could an ancient religious text indigenously called the *Book of Coming Forth by Day* be renamed the *Book of the Dead*? Immediately, there was a premonition to explore the meaning of the word death in ancient cultures. The results pointed to this: there has been and remains a discrepancy between the term death in this sacred manuscript and the exegeses of western scholarship. On one side there is the traditional approach, which comprehends death as the extermination from physical existence; in contrast to this point of view stands the non-traditional perspective, which advocates a metaphorical understanding of the same. This study proved the latter. The ancient Egyptian priesthood used metaphysical, multi-layered concepts to teach its initiates. Eventually, these thoughts seeped into popular traditions; however, unlike the initiates, the masses were unable to comprehend the sacred doctrine. Though an esoteric elucidation of religious texts has been frowned upon by some academics, this research garnered enough details to validate its claim.

A plethora of literature highlights Osiris's role within ancient Egyptian religious culture. Many of these works identified the mystical and mythical nature of Osiris's character. For instance, James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* does a phenomenal job of expanding the reader's knowledge of Osiris's personae as it relates to natural phenomena, such as horticulture and astronomy. Frazer also cleverly explained Osiris's role concerning primitive rituals. From Frazer's explanation, one is able to grasp and have a solid foundation of Osiris' functionality within ancient Egyptian traditions. In addition to Frazer's work, Harold Cooke's *Osiris: A Study in Myths, Mysteries and Religion* marked

hidden points pertaining to the mythical death of the great Egyptian god. Cooke even delves into various nuances of Osiris's personality, connecting him to the ancient Egyptian Mystery System. It is Cooke's work, in particular, that further develops this research and sets up the necessity for the classic manuscript *Stolen Legacy* by George James. James's *Stolen Legacy* provides the framework for this examination because it thoroughly explains Osiris's position in ancient Egypt's ideology of salvation, and it demystifies the process whereby one can attain deification. Simply stated, James's work offers a pedagogical framework for ancient Egyptian religious thought. James affirms this to be apotheosis—the ancient way to true divinity. Moreover, it is this conceptualization that cements the need for this inquiry. The aim is to adumbrate James's grasp of Osiris within the *Book of the Dead*.

All of the investigation concerning Osiris's position within the *Book of the Dead* and his association with a cryptic denotation of death affirmed the initial inquiry of this study. There are several instances where the *Book of the Dead* clearly demonstrates a symbolic expression of death and figurative representation associated with the god Osiris. This supports the initial claim of a metaphorical definition of the term *dead* within the *Book of the Dead*. Though there is a process of initiation that appears in the Stela of Ikhernofret, this study was not able to identify an actual process for deification in the *Book of the Dead*. Instead, the development of divinity, i.e., initiation, is emphasized through various modern scholars and a few ancient sources such as Greek historians Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch. Still, it is credible information that serves as an important backdrop and strengthens the core argument of this exploration because it is in the

ancient rite of initiation that the sacred meaning of death is communicated. Without the layout of the ancient procedure, the holy significance of death would have been impossible to elucidate.

Again, the effort of this exposition was to excavate Osiris's place within the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* in order to discern another aspect of the meaning of death. Throughout the ages, many cultures have attempted to answer the cyclical question: Is there life beyond the grave? No other civilization seems to have more of an impact on this question than the ancient Egyptians. The centerpiece of their influential religious philosophy was Osiris. Fixated as the cornerstone of their spiritual foundation, this transcendent character was the very fabric of human nature—his image molded the conscience of ancient Egyptian culture. As the Lord of Resurrection, Osiris became the blueprint for salvation—the key to eternal life. The investigation of Osiris's character in the *Book of the Dead*, if deduced from the ancient lens, does reveal the mindfulness of human divinity within earthly confinement.

The mundane translations of religious texts by modern academics and clergy have left the minds of the masses crippled for millennia. This discussion offers enough material whereby modern exegetes can identify and rediscover the sacred methodology of scripture interpretation. Likewise, the modern populates have been steered towards worshipping God outside of themselves. Contrarily, ancient Egyptian culture taught that the essence of divinity dwelt within the human soul and that there was a pedagogical approach to obtaining unification with the Creator. This was the way of initiation—the way of Osiris. The search for the proper understanding of death as it related to Osiris's



character in the *Book of the Dead* was an attempt to remedy the confusion about whether or not humans are innately divine. To reiterate, this study was successful because it did find traces of a priestly interpretation of death. Nevertheless, future studies are needed in areas concentrated on initiation rites not only in the ancient world, but in the modern world, especially Africa, because they could better accentuate Osiris's role in the *Book of the Dead* and his association with human illumination.

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