

The Mysteries of Ancient Egypt

By

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THE earliest religious Mysteries of which we have any historical account were those of Osiris and Isis in Ancient Egypt, which were founded at a very early date and probably at the city of Memphis.

From Egypt, says Wilkinson, the Mysteries were transplanted into Greece many hundred years later and were renewed as the Mysteries of Eleusis near Athens, which are referred to by many of the old Greek and Latin authors. We now know that the civilisation, art and religion of Ancient Egypt, even 4,000 years ago were of a high order and no doubt exhibited ceremonies and secret associations or priests and literates fully competent to design symbolic representations of legendary and of historical events relating to gods, demi-gods and heroes. Isis and Osiris are deemed to be fabulous demi-gods, first King and Queen of Egypt in pre-historic times : they were called Brother and Sister, and also Husband and Wife, were deemed to have become Divine after death, and Osiris was called the Great Ruler of the Abodes of the Dead. He was also a god in Heaven of the living, the giver of all life and health, and of the fertility of the animal and vegetable kingdoms. Isis was not only Queen of Heaven and of the Lower Regions, but the Goddess of procreation. Osiris was symbolised as the Bull-Apis, and Isis as the Cow ; they were also deemed related respectively to the Sun and the Moon.

In opposition to the opinion that the Ancient Mysteries of Osiris and Isis were secret ceremonies, some modern

students assert that the cult of the Osirian and Isiac legends were forms only of public worship.

The only knowledge which we possessed upon these subjects, until the last century, was derived from Greek authors, and especially from Plutarch who wrote a treatise called "De Iside et Osiride," from Porphyry, Iamblichus, Herodotus, Apuleius (the author of "The Golden Ass"), and others who claimed special knowledge of the subject because they had been received as Initiates in the Sacred Mysteries. These authors were commented upon by numerous later writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Diodorus of Sicily, Origen and Tertullian; and more recently by Montfaucon, J. M. Ragon, P. Christian and writers each of whom were influenced by some personal reasons, theological or dogmatic.

Then again the scanty details of the Ancient Mysteries have been made the subject of elaboration more or less fanciful by authors who have sought to show resemblances to our modern Freemasonry or to Mediæval Rosicrucianism; a notable example of this class of treatise is found in the tract called "Crata Repoa" or Egyptian Initiation in Seven Grades, "first known in a manuscript by Karl Friedrich Köppen and W. B. von Hymmen, written in German about 1770; seven printed editions have since appeared; this tract was translated into French and printed by J. M. Ragon in 1821, and has since been published in English by our Frater F. F. Schnitger and named "Discovered Fragments of Initiation in the Egyptian Secrets." Schnitger recommends us to use caution in accepting the text as really representing Ancient Egyptian mysteries, and the warning is necessary as there is no ancient source for the definite description of grades of Mystery-working there given. Although the arrangement into grades, and many details of procedure described in this Crate or Krata Repoa (words of unknown origin) are no doubt due to the modern German author, yet the work contains much of great interest, and its many points of symbolism, etc., are due to allusions to be found in old Greek authors. This

Krata Repoa is quite too complex for actual working. We must remember that during the last 150 years a great number of Secret Society Rituals have been concocted, some of which have failed, while others are still in regular use. The Secretary of the first Rosicrucian Society in the United States of America wrote for its use an entirely new and fanciful ritual, which is now supplanted by our own.

Schnitger's edition of the Crata Repoa begins by a reference to a Mons. Terrasson, a French Abbé who was the author of "The Life of Sethos," which contains details of an Egyptian Initiation; it was published in French in 1731, and there is an English translation by M. Lediard, 1732. It declared that a Candidate for the Mysteries of Egypt required first a purification of the Body, and then one of the Soul, and that these ceremonials were conducted in temples adjacent to the Great Pyramid of Egypt and connected with it by subterranean passages. The Candidate was compelled first to pass through fire, then to swim across a water channel, and lastly to suffer suspension in darkness. If he survived these dangers he was received by the priests, and found himself to be in the Great Temple of Memphis. Life was for a time in pleasant places, but the Purification of his Soul was then taken in hand, abstinence from wine and from many usual foods was necessary, a long period of silence and seclusion was enforced, during which the Candidate had to write down his ideas and beliefs; these writings were examined and this course pursued until the priests were satisfied with his mental attitude.

After a long period spent as a prisoner he was taken to a representation of the Two Pillars of Hermes, and had to learn and appreciate a series of moral precepts which were inscribed on the walls of a long gallery; after this stage was passed he was led blindfolded to the "Door of Man"—the symbolic birth into the new life of the First Grade called Pastophoros: here he was received and addressed by the Hierophant upon the nature of God and human duty towards Him. A ladder of seven steps was shown and explained,

as also a chamber with eight doors ; he was taught the symbolic language and the Hieroglyphic mode of writing, and received a password and grip of the hand.

After some years of training, with frequent fasts, the Initiate was, after approval, admitted to the grade of Neocoros. The Third Grade was called Melanophorus, and the admission was through the " Gate of Death," the ritual and duties were concerned with death and burial ; the ceremony included the apparent murder of the candidate and a scene of Judgment upon him.

The Fourth Grade was Christophoros, the emblem of which was the Goddess Isis in the form of the Owl of Wisdom : in this ceremony the candidate had to smite off the head of a figure called Gorgon, representing the wife of Typhon Set the slayer of Osiris.

The Fifth Grade was Balahates : in this Grade the candidate slayed a figure of Typhon.

The Sixth Grade was named Knephnu ; it was reached through the " Gate of the Gods," and was concerned with Astronomy.

The Seventh and last Grade was called Prophetes or Zaphnath Paaneah ; its possession gave a right to vote in the election of a King of Egypt.

The Krata Repoa further describes the " Ammonian " letters, deriving them from the figures of a cross, a triangle and a square ; this is practically what is now called the Alphabet of the Mark Master Masons. Ragon's French edition only begins at Chapter 16 of Schnitger's version.

A recently published German Bibliography of Freemasonry gives seven editions of this tractate. The British Museum Library has a copy dated 1778.

All this, although of great interest to lovers of Ritual, has but little relation to the more generally accepted older statement that the Mysteries of Osiris were concerned only with the murder of Osiris the King, and the Mysteries of Isis

with the adventures of the Queen in her search for the dismembered parts of her kingly husband's body, of the recovery of the parts and the disposition of them. On the other hand some authors believe that the chief scene of the Mysteries was a Judgment drama of the dead, with a representation of a place of joy and an alternative state of torment as *post mortem* states of the human dead.

There seems no doubt that the Egyptian conceptions of the rank of Osiris as a King and as a god varied during the many centuries of the Pharaonic dynasties, and varied also with locality, for the Nomes or districts of Ancient Egypt and the cities also varied greatly in their views of the relative sacredness of the various gods, the world builders and the sun and moon gods, as much if not more than their esteem of the demi-gods—the mortals raised to divinity. Osiris and Isis were the types of these, for although so much worshipped they were never regarded as the Divine Creators of all things, nor as Jehovah was esteemed by the Jews, for they both lived and died in Egypt.

The story of Osiris, according to Plutarch, who lived about 100 A.D., was that the greatest god was Ra (Helios, the Sun), and that his wife was Nut (the Greek Rhea), who had a son Osiris by Seb (the Kronos of the Greeks) : Nut had also a son Typhon or Set the Evil One : two daughters were also born of Nut, these were Isis and Nephthys. These demi-gods lived in Egypt in human forms ; Osiris married Isis and Typhon married Nephthys. Osiris and Isis became king and queen of Egypt and were beneficent rulers. Typhon, prompted by jealousy, succeeded in murdering Osiris and placed his body in a *pastos* or coffin and threw it into the Nile. Isis, the widowed Queen, sought far and wide with great mourning for the coffin of her dead King, and at last found it at Byblos on the coast of Phoenicia, where it had been washed ashore and overgrown by a tree, which had been cut down and built into the palace of the ruler of the district.

In her search she had been guided by Anubis, her sister's son by Osiris. The coffin was recovered and taken back to

Bubastis, the city where Horus her son resided. The wicked Typhon, however, heard of the recovery of the coffin and seized it; he cut the body of the dead Osiris into fourteen pieces and scattered them far and wide. Isis again started on her travels, and recovered thirteen portions in different places; at each she built a tomb to the memory of Osiris; *e.g.*, the backbone at Busiris in the Delta, and the head at Abydos. Later on there was a great warfare between Horus and Typhon who was conquered by Horus, who delivered Typhon in chains to Isis, who foolishly set him free again. One legend adds that this action so annoyed Horus that he struck off her head, which Hermes replaced by that of a cow with long horns.

Horus became King of Egypt, and after his death was thought to become one with the great stars of Orion, while Isis became Sothis the Dog Star, and Osiris was spoken of as Bennu the Phoenix bird on earth, as well as God of the World of the Dead.

Flinders Petrie writes that we cannot doubt that the Osiris worship began in the pre-historic age of Egypt.

This myth would appear to be a religious allegory for which many suggested explanations have been given. It may be seen that the story lends itself to scenic and ritual representation and that the Mysteries of Osiris and Isis were quite probably so concerned. We know, at any rate, that these Mysteries were regarded with great awe and reverence, and that several of the old Greek authors tell us that the Initiates always refused to reveal the secrets they had received.

Alfred Wiedemann in his "Religion of the Ancient Egyptians," 1897, declares, however, that the recently discovered Hieroglyphic texts do not refer to any such division of the people or their worship as is understood by (1) Esoterics to whom were taught the mysteries of the religion, and (2) Exoterics or common people who were only allowed to be present at Temple worship. Yet even so it is

reasonable to suppose that admission to the priesthoods was through special tuition and periods of preparation with some ceremonial forms such as are still existent in the religions of other countries, viz., Theological Colleges and Ceremonies of Ordination.

There are, be it noted, some students of the religion of Ancient Egypt who find an explanation of the worship of Osiris and Isis, whether public or secret, in the view that at its origin the myth was one of mixed Nature and National worship,—Osiris being a symbol of Egypt which was divided into 14 Nomcs ; Wiedmann, however, specifies 20 Nomes or Provinces in Lower Egypt and 22 in Upper Egypt. Even if Osiris worship were of such a character at its origin, the Mysteries of Osiris and Isis, as they were subsequently introduced into Greece and its colonies, and later into Rome, must have been of a very different character, for the Greeks and Romans would feel no interest in a drama of Egyptian geography.

The most recent investigators of Egyptian ancient religions, are, however, again turning to our acceptance of the Esoteric Mysteries as an historical fact ; there is a notable work by Monsieur A. Moret, Conservator of the Musée Guimet at Paris, which treats of our subject, and he refers to the suggestions of M. T. Frazer and M. G. Maspero.

A. Moret writes “ in addition to the daily worship of the gods, the Temples of Egypt witnessed ceremonies of a special character whose meaning was reserved for the élite of the priests and certain others, and these were celebrated in separate buildings and at other hours than those of the regular religious rites.” He assigns to these ceremonies the Egyptian word *Iahou*, meaning “ sacred, glorious and profitable things.”

There was a more or less public Ceremonial Representation of the Death of Osiris once in each year ; this was a Feast of Fertility, at which a sheaf of corn was cut and a White Bull was slain. Then there followed a ceremony of the Burial of

Osiris, held at Abydos, and there was a Third Festival of the Triumph of Osiris at which there was a raising of the pillar Tat or Ded ; a Sed Festival is also recorded as at first held once every thirty years to mark the deification of Osiris the murdered King. M. Moret asserts that the death and burial of Osiris were openly represented, but that his Resurrection as a God was only celebrated in the Sanctuary ; hence the most ancient temples are found to have a secret chamber for this Mystery. The Chief Officer represented Anubis, and others represented the characters related to the Osiris legend, and there were also priests who recited the rituals, those who made libations and purifications, prophets and seers.

M. Junker, in his work on the texts at the Temple of Philae, describes ceremonials requiring certain guards for each of the twelve hours of the night and twelve hours of the day, on each occasion from 6 p.m.. Each hour there was a separate drama represented by scenes, and there were libations of water from the Nile and recitations of the " Lamentations of Isis." The reconstitution of the corpse of Osiris from its fourteen portions and its revivification were shown, and it seems as if the renewal of vegetable and animal life were also pictured.

These ceremonials seem to have been considered to have the privilege of conferring the right of resurrection or of re-incarnation upon the Initiates, as a magical effect of the Ritual. The preservation of the bodies of the dead as mummies seems to have been related to this expectation. Representations of the death and fate of Osiris seem to have been performed at times upon the individual dead of certain periods, for some bodies have been found severed into fourteen pieces, afterwards replaced ; and this was no doubt done in the belief that the reviving of the deceased would occur even as happened in the case of his great predecessor who had suffered this mutilation.

It appears to have been an incident at the funerals of the great, and of the priests and initiates, for some lady to

represent in the procession the widowed Isis mourning for her lost husband and king. The renewal of vegetable life also we find pictured on the tombs of the dead, and there appears to have been a special mystery regarding the sacrifice of an animal on the occasion of a notable death, when the skin—*nebrida*—was used as a winding-sheet for the body, and was used to typify the cradle of the re-born one, or perhaps it represented the womb enveloping the coming infant. In the Ritual, Osiris was re-born at the hour of noon when the sun at its culmination was most glorious, for Osiris was also the Sun.

The fundamental idea of the Mysteries of Osiris in Ancient Egypt, says Moret, was to represent death as the cradle of renewed life, and for the Initiate a symbolic death was suffered to secure a renewed life upon the higher plane of evolution.

Plutarch, in his "De Iside et Osiride," remarks that "Isis founded the Mysteries to serve as a lesson in piety, and for the solace of those men and women who should pass through experiences like those of Osiris; she did not desire that the sorrows she had suffered and the exertions she had made with wisdom and courage should be buried in silence and oblivion."

Herodotus (Euterpe, 171) tells us "At Sais is found a tomb of one whom I dare not name: at the lake and temple the Egyptians perform at night representations of his sufferings: these are called the Mysteries. Upon the subject of these Mysteries, all of which are without exception known to me, I preserve a religious silence."

There is another point which may have been a secret of the Mysteries,—the Creative Word, the Name of the True God, the secret Name of Ptah the Creator. We all know the Old Testament references to the great Names of God, and the Hebrew Rabbis have written innumerable works on the name IHVH we call Jehovah, and the great Name JAH; words never spoken but by the High Priest in the Sanctum Sanctorum.

The Kabalists said the utterance of the Great Name by a priest would make the heavens and the earth to tremble : they also had other names of power, such as the Forty-two lettered Name of God and the Shemhamphorash or Seventy-two lettered Name.

There are extant several Ancient Egyptian narratives of the power which the true or secret Name of a God, demi-god or man confers upon anyone who possesses it and uses it.

In a legend of the Twentieth Dynasty, we read of Ra being wounded by a serpent and suffering greatly, and he was only cured by telling Isis his secret Name, when by its power she healed him.

M. Lefebure writes that for an Egyptian to speak a name was to form an image of the person or thing, not a concept, but a living representation ; the name was one form of the soul and a distinctive sign of personality, of the Ego of a man. Under a kingly Priesthood regulating a national religion there must have arisen a select class of those most deeply instructed in the dogmas of the faith : as the people in general were taught the notion of the special virtues of the *ren* or name, it is most probable that these highest initiates held an even greater reverence for the names of their greatest Divinities, and so would believe in the possession of the power to affect the gods by the use of the Divine Names. So I suggest that such knowledge could hardly fail to be a sublime gift in Ancient Mystery Worship.

The vital importance of religion to the Ancient Egyptian and his firm belief in the future life are clearly described in the essay of our R.W. Frater C. E. Wright, the Chaplain-General ; it is printed in the Transactions of the Metropolitan College for 1911.

I am inclined to think that the solemn taking of an oath in a mystic sodality has a special power in promoting Fidelity. I do not, of course, say such oaths are not broken by wicked men, but I do believe a special curse follows such

infraction. It is a notable fact, guaranteed by one of our most famous mental specialists, who for a long period was the superintendent of a lunatic asylum, that he had never known a mad Freemason to disclose any secret words. I submit that this remark is one worthy of consideration, and I add that the impossibility of deciding to-day what were the secrets of Ancient Initiation is a clear proof that the obligations taken in the Mysteries of Egypt and Greece, not only secured the secrecy of the knowledge conferred, but implanted in the minds of the Initiate of old an esteem and reverence of the institution which has not been surpassed by any subsequent form of fraternal association or religious worship.

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