

MYSTERY ONE – WHY EGYPT?

Eternal Death and Eternal Life

Why is Western society so obsessed with burial of the dead? For over five thousand years, from before the beginning of recorded history until the beginning of the Christian age, the Egyptians demonstrated an overwhelming obsession with burying the dead. At the end of the Egyptian age the Christian tradition took over, demanding the dead be given a respectful burial marked with the cross of their religion. Today tradition dictates that the dead be thoroughly preserved with formaldehyde, put in expensive caskets and buried in permanently marked plots. This is the civilized way, at least in the West.

In the East things are different. Buddhist sects prefer the body destroyed after death, one group going even so far as to grind the bones small enough to be put in soup where they are slowly consumed by monks until there is absolutely nothing whatsoever left of the original body in any of its original form.

Preservation or destruction of the body? What is the difference, really, to the dead? If the dead are truly gone the fate of the lifeless body should not matter. But the living carry out the wishes of the departed soul as if it were still around to care. And so the answer is that each is a different approach meant to assist the immortality of the soul. One way prefers to keep the body intact, seemingly in perpetuity, the other prefers to destroy it completely.

In our search for answers to the Egyptian riddle we do not have to discover what the absolute truth is of death and the afterlife. But there was a perceived truth that the Egyptians held sacred and which motivated their entire culture, and to hold the interest of an entire culture for thousands of years it must have been very convincing. To understand this truth we must first know for certain what we are really talking about when we talk about eternal life.

So we dare to ask the question, what is immortality? Is it the preservation of the physical body in the hopes that someday by scientific or supernatural means it will be resurrected with the original occupant intact? Or is it the freeing of the spirit to live forever in a spirit world alone or with others, on Earth or somewhere else? Physical and spiritual immortality seem to be the two goals our world has pursued, regardless of where they may lead.

We also must dare to ask the question, if there is a spirit then what does that mean? Is it some electrical field created by and belonging to the physical body? Is it a life unit created by a Supreme Being and sent to earth to test its quality before being granted eternal life? Or is it a personality that travels the world, forever lost and seeking shelter lifetime after lifetime until somehow it finds its way back to truth? For now we need not examine the existence of a God, nor the creation of the spirit, but only to admit the existence of an uncomplicated spirit, somehow arrived on Earth, living in a physical body and wishing to survive death, uncertain of its future.

Our civilization's quest for immortality was born in Egypt of the Egyptian mind and spirit, so this is where we begin our understanding of the Egyptian personality, of the Egyptian mind, of the Egyptian civilization and its understanding of the world and life.

The scope of Egyptian history

The history of Egypt is long and varied. It must be realized that the history of Pharaonic Egypt, that is when the ruling king dominated all of Egypt, lasted an unprecedented 3500 years from around 3150 BC until 400 AD. There is further evidence for civilization along the Nile for at least another 2000 years before that, going back to some time between 5000 and 6000 years BC. But, other than rock art and pottery, we have almost no historical information for that period. Before that there are no artifacts other than stone tools and a few burials.

Egyptian history has been sectioned off by modern civilization into several periods:

The periods of Egyptian History		
Prehistoric	Up to 4000 BC.	Ends with the very beginnings of Nile civilization evidenced by agriculture, pottery, art and organized burials.
Predynastic	4000 – 3200 BC	Many artifacts but no history for this period exists except for the names of several local kings, but nothing of their accomplishments.
Early Dynastic	3200 – 2700 BC	The first pharaohs of Egypt, the first writing and the first pyramid. Dynasties 1, 2, 3.
Old Kingdom	2700 – 2150 BC	Begins with Pharaoh Snefru and includes the age of Pyramid building. Egypt became a powerful state and growing civilization. Dynasties 4, 5, 6.
First Intermediate Period	2150 – 2050 BC	A period where no single pharaoh seemed to have ruled Egypt. Local rulers became powerful and fought for control. Referred to by an ancient text as “70 kings in 70 days”. “Dynasties” 7, 8, 9, 10.
Middle Kingdom	2050 – 1650 BC	The golden age of Egyptian civilization. Egypt was at its height of culture and power and most of the literature we have today was written during this period. Dynasties 11, 12.
Second Intermediate Period	1650 – 1550 BC	Another period of an unstable power base where no single king ruled the entire country. “Dynasties” 13, 14, 15, 16, 17.
New Kingdom	1550 – 1050 BC	Another very stable and prosperous period from where we get much literature and cultural remains. Dynasties 18, 19, 20
Third Intermediate Period	1050 – 664 BC	Egypt's final period of internal instability. Dynasties 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26.
Late Period	664 – 332 BC	The last native Pharaohs ruled during this time. Dynasties 27, 28, 29, 30, 31.
Ptolemaic Period	332 – 32 BC	Egypt was ruled by Greek Pharaohs.
Roman period	32BC to 395 AD	In the twilight days of Egypt, it was governed by Roman rulers.

All of this has been figured out in the last two hundred years. Before 1798 all that was known of Egyptian history came from classical Greek historians. The modern discovery of Egypt was really a byproduct of a French military defeat. In 1798 the post-revolutionary government of France sent an expedition to Egypt under the direction of General Napoleon Bonaparte to establish a new trade route to India by creating what is now the Suez Canal. A survey of Egypt was on the agenda so Napoleon took with him not only with 4,000 troops but a large cadre of French scientists, artists and scholars.

Unfortunately the French, always in conflict with the British, lost a battle that kept Napoleon from his mission and cut off his route back home for 3 years. Suddenly Egyptian survey was the only part of their mission they could accomplish. This resulted in an incredible encyclopedic work entitled “The Description of Egypt” (it sounds better in French). Another unintentional contribution was the discovery of the Rosetta stone, which amongst other artifacts, was dug up as part of the routine of fortifying defenses against a British attack, which never came.

The Rosetta stone held the key that allowed the French genius of Champollion to be the first to decipher hieroglyphic writing. Containing the same message in Greek and Egyptian, it ignited two hundred years of linguistic analysis, and in fact this work is still ongoing. Egyptian was a very sophisticated language, and we have not yet found any dictionary.

Unfortunately, for the first several decades of the exploration of Egypt the focus of public interest was in the unwrapping of mummies and the export of fascinating artifacts to museums and parlors of the wealthy. It was not until the late 1800s that Egyptology became a mature enough science for interest to turn into a more academic and professional field. A few of the Egyptologists of the time became interested in an area of southern Egypt that had been largely ignored because of its remoteness from civilization and pyramids. Yet this turns out to be the location where Egyptian civilization began in the cities of This, Abydos, Naqada and Hierakonpolis.

Up until this time it was considered that Egypt began with the Old Kingdom. Very little was known of Early Dynastic Egypt, then referred to as Archaic Egypt, and nothing at all was known of the Predynastic period, which did not yet even have a name.

It seems that the more time that goes by, the more research that is done, and the more artifacts which are found, only serves to push back the history of Egypt farther and farther. Up until a few years ago, the earliest evidence for Egyptian kingship was the Painted Tomb. This is the earliest tomb ever found with decoration, and a beautiful decoration it is, absent of writing yet with colorful scenes whose purpose and message is still unclear. This tomb dates to 3500 BC, the rich color of its walls surviving for an impossible 5500 years.

But recently a pot was discovered that pushed back the earliest image of a predynastic Egyptian king yet found. This pot dates roughly to 4000 BC and so it pushes back the date for Egyptian kingship by about 500 years. If there were Egyptian kings in 4000 BC, will we someday find them in 5000 BC, or 6000 BC? Only time will tell.

The Predynastic Era

The farther back we go into Egyptian prehistory the more difficult it is to link the artifacts found with a specific culture. The most plentiful source of artifacts, in fact the only plentiful source from this time period, comes in the form of cemeteries. Egyptians did things in a big way and this includes their cemeteries. There are so many of these that the places they come from led to categorization of the prehistoric/predynastic period, like the historical period, into specific time periods.

The Egyptian Prehistoric Periods		
Neolithic	12000 – 4000 BC	Neolithic means advanced use of stone tools
Badarian	4500 – 4000 BC	Named after the site el-Badari
Amratian/Naqada I	4000 – 3500 BC	Named after the sites el-Amra and Naqada
Gerzean/Naqada II	3500 – 3250 BC	Named after the sites el-Gerza and Naqada
Naqada III	3250 – 3150 BC	Named for Naqada

Burials found in the land that became ancient Egypt reach back to the very beginning of the Neolithic period, but what culture these people came from and any details whatsoever of where they came from, what they believed and anything beyond their occupation in life is simply not available. It is not until we reach the fifth millennium BC (5000 – 4000 BC) that we find any artifacts that allow us to tie the burials to a culture.

The scope of Egyptian philosophy

In the study of Egyptian history and philosophy it must be kept in mind that this spans a period of time unparalleled by any other culture in history. The division of the history of Egypt into different periods reflects more than just a difference in political organization. Ideas changed and beliefs changed and so did their philosophy change.

This aspect of their history is best reflected in the Egyptian language. Although it did change and evolve over the centuries, the Egyptians did appear to have a single language that remained consistent enough that if one learns to read the version written during the Middle Kingdom, it is not too difficult to learn to read the version written during the Old or New Kingdom.

The same goes for their philosophy. Throughout their history the Egyptians used a consistent set of symbols to define their beliefs. Scholars have dedicated entire lifetimes to deciphering the meanings of the stories that have survived so that we now have a wealth of information about this philosophy. But what may have been missed is that the changes in the Egyptian's perception of their own philosophy led to differences in the interpretation and practice of its original form.

The bottom line is that their beliefs changed, and even though they may on the surface appear to have been the same at the end as at the beginning, they may not have been the same at all. The Dead Sea Scrolls predate the Bible by 1500 years and show a different interpretation and practice of the Christian religion than we see in churches today. In the same way the evidence points toward a similar difference in Egyptian beliefs.

The question is, did their philosophy evolve from a primitive worship of the unknown elements of nature into a better thought out and dogmatic system? Or did the Egyptians begin with a more useful, sensible and pure philosophy, one that made sense on a spiritual and intellectual level, but which was so badly misunderstood by the end of the Egyptian civilization that it had devolved into meaningless ritual and recitation?

If the former were true then the wealth of later manuscripts we have from the Egyptians, the Greeks and even the Romans would be more than enough to explain their philosophy in detail. But this is not the case. Later texts are characterized by the multitudes of gods and rituals presented in confusing detail with very little explanation of the logic behind the story. On the other hand the farther we go back in history the less and less we have to refer to and the more difficult the earlier texts are to translate. But there is one thing which points very strongly in this direction, towards the idea that there was an earlier source of truth that became lost and occluded with time.

The further we go back in time the simpler everything becomes. Drawing from the major religions of the world including Christianity, Buddhism and more, it is certain that at the source of that belief system there is a philosophy postulated that is simple and direct. The more time goes by the more opportunity there is for others to add to and alter that belief system even to the point where it is unrecognizable, and there certainly was more than enough time for this to happen to the Egyptians.

Assuming this possibility then we need to know what happened to it that the Egyptian belief system became less well understood, more difficult to practice, and in the end, incomprehensible. This search may lead to the discovery of the piece of the puzzle that has kept the philosophy of the Egyptians from being understood in its completeness. If the original meaning is untangled from the complexity of later interpretations then this will enable us to understand their philosophy throughout all of its long history, in spite of its many forms and many changes.

Quickly, the journey awaits!

The Legend of Isis and Osiris

The tale that seems to form the core of the Egyptian belief system is the story of Isis and Osiris. The Greek historian Plutarch, who was contemporary with the living Egyptian civilization, wrote this down around 100 A.D and we have his exact words to hand.

We are fortunate on the one hand that this has survived, but unfortunate in that we are left on our own to interpret its meaning. Some see this as a story about real people who lived long before history was written. Others see it as a tale symbolic of social conflict, war and peace. Yet others see it as a story symbolic of the journey of the spirit.

Thus the question is posed, who was Osiris? Our journey begins with Plutarch's words:

Osiris, being now become king of Egypt, applied himself towards civilizing his countrymen by turning them from their former indigent and barbarous course of life. He moreover taught them how to cultivate and improve the fruits of the earth. He gave them a body of laws to regulate their conduct by and instructed them in that reverence and worship which they were to pay to the Gods. With the same good disposition he afterwards traveled over the rest of the world, inducing the people everywhere to submit to his discipline; not indeed compelling them by force of arms, but persuading them to yield to the strength of his reasons, which were conveyed to them in the most agreeable manner, in hymns and songs accompanied with instruments of music.

During Osiris's absence from his kingdom Seth had no opportunity of making any innovations in the state, Isis being extremely vigilant in the government and always upon her guard. After his return however, having first persuaded seventy-two other persons to join with him in the conspiracy (together with a certain queen of Ethiopia named Aso, who chanced to be in Egypt at that time) he contrived a proper stratagem to execute his base designs. For having privily taken the measure of Osiris's body, he caused a chest to be made exactly of the same size with it, as beautiful as might be, and set off with all the ornaments of art.

This chest he brought into his banqueting room where, after it had been much admired by all who were present, Seth, as it were in jest, promised to give it to any one of them whose body upon trial it might be found to fit. Upon this the whole company, one after another, go into it. But, as it did not fit any of them, last of all Osiris lays himself down in it, upon which the conspirators immediately ran together, clapped the cover upon it, and then fastened it down on the outside with nails, pouring likewise melted lead over it.

After this, they carried it away to the riverside, and conveyed it to the sea by the Tanaitic mouth of the Nile. These things, say they, were thus executed upon the 17th day of the month Athyr, when the Sun was in Scorpio, in the 28th year of Osiris's reign; though there are others who tell us that he was no more than 28 years old at this time.

As to Isis, as soon as the report reached her she immediately cut off one of the locks of her hair and put on mourning apparel upon the very spot where she then happened to be, which accordingly from this accident has ever since been called Koptos, or the city of mourning. After this she wandered everywhere about the country full of disquietude and perplexity in search of the chest, enquiring of every person she met with, even of some children whom she chanced to see, whether they knew what was become of it. Now it so happened that these children had seen what Seth's accomplices had done with the body, and accordingly acquainted her by what mouth of the Nile it had been conveyed into the sea.

Isis, during this interval, having been informed that Osiris, deceived by her sister Nephthys who was in love with him, had unwittingly enjoyed her instead of herself (as she concluded from the melilot garland which he had left with her) made it her business likewise to search out the child, the fruit of this unlawful commerce (for her sister, dreading the anger of her husband Seth, had exposed it as soon as it was born). And accordingly, after much pains and difficulty, by means of some dogs that conducted her to the place where it was, she found it and bred it up; so that in process of time it became her constant guard and attendant, and from hence obtained the name of Anubis, being thought to watch and guard the Gods, as dogs to mankind.

At length she receives more particular news of the chest, that it had been carried by the waves of the sea to the coast of Byblos, and there gently lodged in the branches of a bush of Tamarisk, which in a short time had shot up into a large and beautiful tree, growing round the chest and enclosing it on every side, so that it was not to be seen; and farther, that the king of the country, amazed at its unusual size, had cut the tree down, and made that part of the trunk, wherein the chest was concealed, a pillar to support the roof of his house.

She immediately went to Byblos where, setting herself down by the side of a fountain, she refused to speak to any body excepting only to the queen's women who chanced to be there. These indeed she saluted and caressed in the kindest manner possible, plaiting their hair for them and transmitting into them part of that wonderfully grateful odor which issued from her own body. This raised a great desire in the queen their mistress to see the stranger who had this admirable faculty of transfusing so fragrant a smell from herself into the hair and skin of other people. She therefore sent for her to court, and after a farther acquaintance with her, made her nurse to one of her sons.

Isis fed the child by giving it her finger to suck instead of the breast. She likewise put him every night into the fire in order to consume his mortal part, whilst transforming herself into a swallow she hovered round the pillar and bemoaned her sad fate. Thus continued she to do for some time until the queen, who stood watching her, observing the child to be all in a flame, cried out and thereby deprived him of that immortality which would otherwise have been conferred upon him.

The Goddess upon this, discovering herself, requested that the pillar which supported the roof might be given her; which she accordingly took down and then easily cutting it open, after she had taken out what she wanted, she wrapped up the remainder of the trunk in fine linen and pouring perfumed oil upon it, delivered it again into the hands of the king and queen, (which piece of wood is to this day preserved in the temple of Isis, and worshipped by the people of Byblos.) When this was done she threw herself upon the chest, making at the same time such a loud and terrible lamentation over it, as frightened the younger of the king's sons, who heard her, out of his life. But the elder of them she took with her, and set sail with the chest for Egypt; and it being now about morning, the river Phaedrus sending forth a rough and sharp air, she in her anger dried up its current.

No sooner was she arrived at a desert place, where she imaged herself to be alone, but she presently opened the chest and laying her face upon her dead husband's embraced his corpse and wept bitterly. But perceiving that the little boy had silently stolen behind her, and found out the occasion of her grief, she turned herself about on the sudden and in her anger gave him so fierce and stern a look that he immediately died of the affright. Others indeed say that his death did not happen in this manner but, as was hinted above, that he fell into the sea and afterwards received the greatest honors on account of the Goddess.

Isis intending a visit to her son Horus, who was brought up at Butus, deposited the chest in the meanwhile in a remote and unfrequented place. Seth however, as he was one night hunting by the light of the moon, accidentally met with it; and knowing the body which was enclosed in it, tore it into several pieces, 14 in all, dispersing them up and down in different parts of the country. Upon being made acquainted with this even, Isis once more sets out in search of the scattered fragments of her husband's body, making use of a boat made of the reed Papyrus in order the more easily to pass through the lower and marshy parts of the country.

To this occasion therefore is it to be imputed that there are so many different sepulchers of Osiris shown in Egypt, for we are told, that wherever Isis met with any of the scattered limbs of her husband she there buried it. We are told moreover that notwithstanding all her search Isis was never able to recover the privy-member of Osiris, which having been thrown into the Nile

immediately upon its separation from the rest of the body, had been devoured by the Lepidotus, the Phagrus and the Oxyrynchus.

Such then are the principle circumstances of this famous story.

To paraphrase the story shortens it a great deal.

Once Osiris became King of Egypt, he brought a higher level of civilization to his people. His brother Seth, who conspired to take his brother's throne, tricked Osiris into laying in a chest that fit him exactly, then bound it shut and cast it into the Nile.

In the meantime Isis appears to have raised Anubis, the illicit child of Nephthys, who tricked Osiris into thinking she was Isis so he would father her child.

Isis then discovers what has happened to Osiris. In searching for the chest she finds that it floated to Byblos where a Tamarisk tree grew around it, and that the trunk of that tree is now a pillar that supports the roof of the house of the king of Byblos. Isis goes undercover as nurse to a son of the queen of Byblos, a strange detour where she is interrupted in the midst of her ritual to confer immortality upon the boy.

Isis now revealed, she is given the pillar, removes the chest and takes it back to Egypt. She hides it while she goes on a visit her son Horus. It is not said when Horus was conceived, but pieces of this story found in other literature hint that Horus was conceived at the time Isis returned to Egypt. If true, this would mean that whereas Plutarch's version says she went to visit Horus, she actually went to bear and raise Horus. This would also mean that Horus was somehow conceived from the lifeless body of Osiris.

Finally, while Isis is away, Seth finds the chest and he takes this opportunity to tear the body of Osiris to pieces and scatter them far and wide. Isis travels the country to recover all of the pieces and succeeds in finding all but the phallus, which is assumed to have been eaten by a Nile fish.

Who was Osiris?

Was Osiris a real Egyptian king? Or a composite character who, like King Arthur of England, represented the founders of Egypt and their religious philosophy? Or was Osiris not a man at all but a symbol for something more? Perhaps for something that represents a force of nature and that the Egyptians used to explain the cycle of life itself?

It may seem hardly possible to make a direct link from this strange fairy tale to a philosophy that reveals a profound understanding of the spirit of man and his relationship to the universe. But in the chapters to follow an understanding of the original form of this story and the thought and symbolism behind it will emerge. In order to achieve this the thought process of the Egyptian mind must be made understandable, because only then can the meaning be not only fully understood but also fully appreciated.

And now let us continue our journey to discover who was Osiris!