

## *Resurrection in Ancient Egypt*

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“Resurrection” is a Christian term and a Christian idea. To ask for “resurrection” in ancient Egypt smacks of heresy: of the heresy of reducing the Christian kerygma to just a variant of the Near Eastern myth of dying and rising gods, for example, Tammuz, Attis, Adonis, Osiris, and Persephone, behind whose dying and rising we easily discern the rhythms of nature, such as the sprouting and fading of vegetation, the coming and disappearing of the inundation, the growing and decreasing of the moon, and so on. The death and resurrection of Christ happened once and for all; it belongs to the course of history and not of nature, to linear not to cyclical time. To be sure, the Egyptian concept of immortality cannot be separated from these natural associations. We are dealing with a religion of divine immanence where natural processes were regarded as divine manifestations. Yet I hope to be able to show that the Egyptian idea of immortality has quite another origin that has more to do with political than with natural theology. In the frame of this new interpretation, the question of possible connections between Egyptian and Christian ideas of resurrection appears in a different light.

### **The Binary Structure of the Egyptian Hereafter**

As far as human existence is concerned, virtually all the religions of the ancient world around the Mediterranean and in the Near East make the distinc-

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This chapter is based on my book *Tod und Jenseits im Alten Ägypten* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2001).

tion between the world of the living and the world of the dead, the upper world and the underworld. There is also the world of the gods, but this does not concern human existence. The underworld or world of the dead is the realm where human beings continue their existence after their life in the upper world. They do not “live on” in this realm, but are dead. Being dead, however, does not mean they disappear from this world altogether, but they pass from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. “Resurrection,” in this context, would mean to return to life in the upper world. This is what Orpheus aspired to achieve with Eurydice and what Jesus achieved with Lazarus, and this is what Ezekiel saw in a vision happening to thousands of dead whose bones left their tombs, were covered with flesh and skin, and returned to the world of the living (Ezekiel 37).

In the context of these religions, ancient Egypt seems to have been the sole exception. Only here, human existence encompassed three worlds, the world of the living, the world of the dead, and an Elysian world for which there are many names and descriptions in Egyptian texts such as “field of rushes,” “field of offerings,” “bark of millions,” and “house of Osiris.” Here “resurrection” does not mean to return to life on earth, but to be redeemed from the world of the dead and to be admitted into the Elysian world (I prefer the term “elysium” to the term “paradise,” because the latter term has connotations of origin, primordial time, and prelapsarian state that are not present in the Egyptian context). It is this ternary distinction between (a) the world of the living, (b) the world of the dead, and (c) the Elysian world, that in my opinion marks the exceptional structure of ancient Egyptian religion and its concept of immortality. Again, the distinction between the world of the dead and the Elysian world, in order to make this absolutely clear, consists in the fact that the world of the dead is a place where the dead are dead, whereas the Elysium is the place where those who were granted resurrection from death lead a new, eternal life.

In Greece, there are already adumbrations of such an Elysian world, especially in the context of Orphism and the Dionysian mysteries. The Greeks have always related these ideas to ancient Egypt. They believed that Orpheus, Homer, and others had brought these concepts from Egypt. In Egypt, however, the idea of an Elysium has its traditional place in the official cosmology and does not belong to some special cult, but to normal funerary religion. This exceptional structure of Egyptian religion has not been recognized so far. It was generally believed that the ancient Egyptians made the same binary distinction as their neighboring cultures and knew of only two worlds, a world of the living and a world of the dead, the only difference being that they pictured their world of the dead in much more friendly and beautiful



colors than did the Babylonians, the Israelites, and the Greeks. The Egyptian Duat was held to be a world of the dead just as Sheol, Hades, Orcus, and the Mesopotamian land of no return, with the only difference being that it showed Elysian traits. This, however, is not correct, as a closer look at the texts shows. Ancient Egypt confronts us with an enormously rich corpus of funerary literature that in its size and complexity is certainly unparalleled in any other ancient or modern civilization. These texts know very well of a world in which the dead are nothing but dead, and they depict this world in rather crass colors. It is a world of inversion where the dead walk upside down and are forced to live on their excrement, a world without light and water, full of demons and monsters. Every living being on earth is doomed to descend into this world, but everybody gets the chance of redemption and resurrection, not in the form of a return to the world of the living but of a passage to the Elysium.

### Royal Resurrection and the Myth of Osiris

If we ask for the origins of this division of the hereafter into a realm of the dead and an Elysium, we meet with concepts and structures that belong to political theology: the institution of pharaonic kingship. During the Old Kingdom, the Elysian world was reserved for the king; he alone was able, after death, to fly up to heaven and to join his father, the sun god, and the other gods, whereas ordinary mortals, as we read in the texts, had to "hide" in the earth. Resurrection was an exclusively royal privilege and the distantiation of the royal hereafter from the destiny of nonroyal beings forms the central theme of the Pyramid Texts. The Elysium, therefore, was originally a political concept: it surpassed the world of the dead in the same way as the figure of the pharaoh surpassed the world of the living.

In order to release the deceased king from death and earth, he had to be separated from his own death. The mythical model for this operation was the myth of Osiris. Osiris, a god and a king of Egypt, had been killed by his brother and rival Seth, who, moreover, tore his body apart and scattered his limbs all over Egypt. Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris, traverses Egypt in search of the *membra disiecta* of her brother, reassembling them into the shape of a body. Together with her sister Nephthys she bewails the body in long songs of lamentation using the power of speech as a means of reanimation. Isis and Nephthys were so successful in their reanimating recitations that Isis was able to receive a child from the reanimated body of Osiris. This is the first step toward resurrection.

The appearance of Horus, the son and heir of Osiris, marks the second scene of the myth and initiates the second phase of resurrection. In the same way as Isis and Nephthys are occupied with restoring the body, Horus is occupied with restoring the social personality of Osiris. We meet here a very pronounced gender differentiation. The restoration of the body is a female preoccupation. The means that are utilized in this respect are lamentation, mourning, affective language, and expressions of desire and longing. Everything in this female part of the ritual aims at recollecting the scattered limbs and restoring the dismembered body. Female mourning is concentrated on the bodily sphere of the dead. The restoration of the social sphere of the dead, on the other hand, his status, dignity, honor, and prestige, is constructed as a male preoccupation and the task of the son. Resurrection, thus, has two aspects: a bodily one and a social one. Bodily resurrection overcomes the dismemberment of the body, while social resurrection overcomes the isolation and dishonor of the victim and turns it into a situation of highest status, general recognition, honor, prestige, respect, and majesty.

Bodily resurrection, as effectuated by Isis and Nephthys, uses lamentations and similar spells, in which the enumeration of the various bodily parts from head to foot plays an important role. To quote just one typical example:

Your head, O my lord, is adorned  
with the tress of a woman of Asia;  
*your face* is brighter than the mansion of the moon.  
Your upper part is lapis lazuli,  
your hair is blacker than all the doors of the netherworld on the day of  
darkness.

(. . .) Your visage is covered with gold,  
and Horus has inlaid it with lapis lazuli.

(. . .) Your nose is in the odor of the place of embalming,  
and your nostrils are like the winds of the sky.

Your eyes behold the Eastern mountain;

your eyelashes are firm every day,  
being colored with real lapis lazuli.

Your eyelids are the bringers of peace,  
and their corners are full of black eye-paint.

Your lips give you truth and repeat truth to Re  
and make the gods content.

Your teeth are those of the coiled serpent  
with which the two Horuses play.

Your tongue is wise,



and sharper is your speech than the cry of the kites in the field.  
Your jaw is the jarry sky.<sup>1</sup>

That much for the head alone; the text continues in the same vein for pages and pages until it reaches the feet.

These texts are immediately reminiscent of love poems, to quote only a very ancient and prominent example:

Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair;  
thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks:  
thy hair is as a flock of goats,  
that appear from mount Gilead.  
Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn,  
which came up from the washing;  
whereof every one bear twins,  
and none is barren among them.  
Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet,  
and thy speech is comely:  
thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks.  
Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armory,  
whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men.  
Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins,  
which feed among the lilies.<sup>2</sup>

The form is also very popular in ancient Egyptian love poetry. With regard to these love poems, Emma Brunner-Traut has attributed to the ancient Egyptians a "dismembering glance." The ancient Egyptians, she holds, were unable to perceive the body and other complex phenomena as a coherent whole. Instead, they arrived at a notion of the whole only by addition, by enumerating the constituent parts. They perceived of the body not as a coherent organism where the various parts are moving in interdependent interaction, but as a mechanical *Gliederpuppe*, a puppet or robot whose members lead a life of their own without interaction, interdependence, and interconnection.<sup>3</sup> This statement, however, seems to me to contain only one half of the truth. It is true that the ancient Egyptians were fond of differentiation and enumeration,

1. Book of the Dead, ch. 172.

2. Song of Songs 4:1-5.

3. See Emma Brunner-Traut, "Der menschliche Körper — Eine Gliederpuppe," in *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 115 (1988): 8-14 and idem, *Frühformen des Erkennens: Am Beispiel Altägyptens* (Darmstadt, second ed. 1992; third ed., *Frühformen des Erkennens: Aspekte im Alten Ägypten* [Darmstadt, 1996]).

but their main concern was always the “connective” principles that integrate the various parts into a coherent whole. The point is not dismemberment but re-membering. Therefore, instead of calling the Egyptian attitude toward the world “dismembering” or “additive,” I would prefer to call it “embalming.” They were interested in the parts only in order to join them and to find out the connective principles that bring about their combination. The “embalming look” they were casting on the body led to a kind of “connective physiology.” They identified the heart and the blood as such a connective principle and arrived at a theory of circulation more than three thousand years before William Harvey. It is the heart, they said, “which speaks in the vessels,” meaning the beat of the pulse. The heart, by pumping the blood through the vessels, combines the limbs, ties them together, and integrates them into a coherent whole, the living body. This living connective device has to be replaced, under the conditions of death, with magic devices such as recitation that integrates the dismembered limbs by enumeration into the coherent structure of a text.

Horus, in his attempts at restoring the social self of his slain father, uses a very different kind of recitations; cf., e.g., spell 371 of the Pyramid Texts:<sup>4</sup>

O Osiris the king,

Horus has placed you in the hearts of the gods,

he has caused you to take possession of all that is yours (or: the white crown, the lady).

Horus has found you, and it goes well with him through you. . . .

Go up against your foe, for you are greater than he

in your name of Pr-wr-shrine.

Horus has caused him to lift you

in your name of “Great lifted one.”

He has saved you from your foe, he has protected you

as one who is protected in due season.

Horus and Osiris are united in the concept of *Ka*. PT 364, a particularly long and significant Horus Text, states: “Horus is not far from you, for you are his *Ka*.” PT 356, another typical Horus Text, closes with an invocation summarizing the roles of deceased father and surviving son in the concept of *Ka*:

O Osiris the king, Horus has protected you,

he has acted on behalf of his *Ka*, who is you,

so that you may be content in your name of “Contented *Ka*.”

4. For an English translation of the Egyptian Pyramid Texts (abbr. “PT”) see Raymond O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford, 1969).



The *Ka* is linked to the constellation of father and son; and it bridges the borderline between life and death. The *Ka* is written in hieroglyphs as a pair of arms that are raised as in adoration; in reality, however, they are meant as outstretched in a gesture of embracing. PT spell 1652, for example, states that the creator put his arms around his twin children Shu and Tefnut, in order that his *Ka* may be in them:

You set your arms about them  
as the arms of the *Ka*,  
that your *Ka* might be in them.

This constellation of father and son, one in the hereafter, one in the world of the living, is one of the most fundamental elements of ancient Egyptian culture. The funerary cult is based on the idea that only the son is capable of reaching into the world of the dead and of entering a constellation with his dead father that bridges the threshold of death and that is mutually supportive and life-giving. This is what is meant by the Egyptian word *akh*. A widespread sentence says: *Akh* is a father for his son, *akh* is a son for his father.

This originally mortuary constellation provides the model not only for the mortuary cult but for cult in general. Pharaoh, the only being living on earth capable of entering into communication with the divine world, approaches the gods as their son. In cult, he plays the role of the living son vis-à-vis his dead fathers and mothers. Filial piety is the basic religious attitude toward the gods.

Horus restores the social personality of his dead father Osiris by overcoming his isolation and his dishonor. He assembles the gods around Osiris and takes care that they are not allowed to escape and to leave him alone. He makes the gods recognize Osiris as their overlord and to give him honor. He restores honor and dignity to Osiris by humiliating his enemy, who is forced to carry Osiris. All these various ritual actions concern the social self as opposed to the bodily self.

The various actions of Horus for Osiris that in the Egyptian language are subsumed under the verb *nedj* (with a broad range of applications stretching from protection to revenge) culminate in a scene where Osiris is restored to life to such a degree as to be able to confront his murderer, Seth. Seth, in this confrontation, represents death, while Osiris represents the victim of death, the dead. This form of decomposing complex experiences seems to me one of the particular achievements of the mythical modeling of reality. By personifying death in the figure of Seth, death is made "treatable." It can be brought to court, accused, and sentenced. The justice that has been vio-

lated by the murder committed by Seth can be restored. In the view of this mythology, there is no natural death. Every death is a crime that must be vindicated, and the ritual treatment of death culminates in the enactment of this vindication. There is guilt behind every death, and this guilt has to be removed in order to restore the deceased to status and position in society. Every death is murder and injustice. Therefore, it can be "healed" in a way by punishing the murderer and restoring justice. Osiris has defeated Seth, which means that he has vanquished death.

Thus death becomes in a way objectified and treatable. Osiris is given full justice against Seth, that is, death. He cannot be restored to life upon earth, but he is given life in the other world as he is reintegrated into cosmic existence. The mythical Osiris was made ruler of the netherworld and king of the dead. The dead king follows his example. He is called Osiris and takes his place on his throne in order to rule the dead and the spirits, while his son Horus takes his place on his former throne among the living. This is the meaning of resurrection in the Old Kingdom. It is the exclusive privilege of the pharaoh. *Resurrection* is a proper term for this idea because the dead king is constantly summoned to "rise." "Raise yourself" (*wtz tw*) is the typical address to the deceased, and it means not only to get up but to ascend to heaven.

The myth of Osiris is, at least as far as its "core meaning" is concerned, not about the cycles of nature, the seed that is buried in order to sprout again, the waxing and the waning moon, the rising and the falling inundation, but about kingship. Osiris is first of all a king. The lawsuit with Seth is about the throne of Egypt. The myth of Osiris is first of all about kingship, in the second place about death and resurrection, and only in a rather peripheral and associative way about nature and cyclical time. It is the Egyptian myth of the state.

### **The Demotion and Moralization of Resurrection**

With the fall of the Old Kingdom, however, the royal hereafter and the mythical model of resurrection became extended to all human beings. Due to this process of demotion, the distinction between "realm of the dead" and "Elysium" lost its political meaning and became a matter of moralization. Not the divine quality of royal office, but the virtue and justice of a deceased person were now believed to be the conditions and prerequisites of resurrection and immortality. Therefore, the lawsuit and the idea of justification change their meaning in a very fundamental way. The dead no longer has to be justified "against" death as a murderer but "before" a divine tribunal, and the guilt that



is inherent in death is no longer externalized in the form of a scapegoat, Seth, but is interpreted as the deceased's own guilt, which he has accumulated during his life on earth. The texts deal with the concept of justification in the closest possible association with ideas related to embalment and mummification. Guilt, accusation, enmity, and the like are indeed treated as forms of impurity and pollution — as “immaterial pollutants,” as it were — that must be eliminated in order to bring the deceased into a state of purity that resists putrefaction and decomposition. Justification is moral mummification. When the embalmer's work on the body is finished, the priests take over and extend the work of purification and preservation onto the whole person. The Egyptian word for mummy also means “dignity” or “nobility.” At the last stage of mummification, the deceased passes through the postmortem judgment and is assigned the nobility of a follower of Osiris in the netherworld. He is justified against all accusations and purified from every guilt, every sin that might have obstructed his passage into the other world, even from the solecisms of early childhood. After the cleansing and immortalization of the body, the embalment and mummification ritual turns in its last stage to the social self. The judgment is nothing other than a purging of the soul from guilt. The idea of a general judgment postmortem develops during the Middle Kingdom, at the beginning of the second millennium B.C. It is clearly expressed in a wisdom text dating from that time:

The court that judge the wretch,  
 You know they are not lenient  
 On the day of judging the miserable,  
 In the hour of doing their task.  
 It is painful when the accuser has knowledge.

Do not trust in length of years.  
 They view a lifetime in an hour!  
 When a man remains over after death,  
 His deeds are set beside him as a sum.

Being yonder lasts forever.  
 A Fool is he who does what they reprove!  
 He who reaches them without having done wrong  
 Will exist there like a god,  
 free-striding like the lords of eternity!<sup>5</sup>

5. Instructions for Merikare P 53-57; cf. J. F. Quack, *Studien zur Lehre für Merikare*, Göttinger Orientforschungen 23 (Wiesbaden, 1992), 34-35.

This is what resurrection means in the context of ancient Egyptian funerary beliefs: "to exist in an Elysium hereafter like a god, free striding like the lords of eternity."

With the rise of the New Kingdom and the recension of the Book of the Dead,<sup>6</sup> the rules of admission into the other world became codified, and they form chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead. The mythical model of a lawsuit between Osiris and Seth had disappeared altogether. The whole procedure resembled now more an examination and an initiation.

The deceased had to present himself before Osiris, the president of the court, and before a jury of forty-two judges. He knew the accusations beforehand and had to declare his innocence. All of the possible crimes and violations that could constitute an obstacle for passing the exam had been spelled out and laid down in two lists, one of forty entries, the other of forty-two. The deceased had to recite these lists and explicitly to declare his/her innocence in each individual item. One list had to be recited before Osiris, the other one before the forty-two judges. During this recital, the heart of the candidate was weighed on a balance against a figure of Truth. Every lie would make the scale with the heart sink a little deeper. In the case of a heart found too heavy and irredeemably charged with guilt and lies, a monster that is always shown close to the balance and watching the weighing would swallow the heart of the culprit and annihilate his/her person.

By reciting these lists of negations — "I did not do this, I did not do that" — the deceased purged himself of all possible charges that could constitute "immaterial pollutants" causing his final destruction. He thus entered the other world in a state of imperishable purity. The spell in the Book of the Dead is entitled, "Purging N of all the evil which he has done, and beholding the faces of the gods." Again, there is no question of innocence. Nobody is innocent. What matters is whether a person is able or not to get purged of his/her sins. In the title of chapter 125, the ideas of moral purity and an immediate vision of the gods are brought into close relationship. According to Egyptian convictions, nobody (except perhaps the king) was able during his or her lifetime to see the gods, to have a vision and to enter the divine world. There are no traces of shamanism, prophetism, or mysticism in Egypt before the Greco-Roman period. All forms of immediate contact with the divine world are referred to the life after death and resurrection: all the gods that you have served on earth, you will confront face-to-face.<sup>7</sup>

6. For a recent English translation see R. O. Faulkner, *The Book of the Dead* (London, 1985).

7. Song III; cf. R. Hari, *La tombe thébaine du père divin Neferhotp*, *Teologisch tijdschrift*



From this text and countless others, we learn that the Egyptian Elysium was the same as the world of the gods. The dead who proved worthy of being justified before the divine tribunal were admitted into the divine world and were permitted to confront the gods face-to-face. The world of the gods did not form a fourth realm besides the other three, but was identical with the Elysium. Egyptian cosmology, therefore, showed the same tripartite structure as all the other cosmologies of the ancient world: heaven, earth, and underworld or world of the gods, world of the living and world of the dead, with the one exception that the dead were believed to be capable of managing the passage from the world of the dead to the world of the gods if they proved innocent or at least "justifiable" in the judgment of the dead.

This has consequences not only for anthropology but also for the Egyptian notion of divinity. If the dead are capable of passing from the world of the dead to the world of the gods, the gods are susceptible of dying and of passing through the world of the dead. The sun god Re does so every night, and the "decan stars" do so after almost two hundred days of nocturnal visibility, after which they disappear into the world of the dead for a period of seventy days. The Egyptian gods die, but there is always rebirth and new life, and this is what the Egyptian ways of treatment of the dead strive to imitate. Seventy days, which the decan stars were believed to spend in the world of the dead, was also the ideal period of performing the ritual of embalmment and mummification. It was the time span a deceased person was supposed to spend in the world of the dead before he rose like the decan stars from the dead and entered Elysium. The gods were as close to death as death was believed to be a passage to divinity. The ascension myth, which is so prominent in the Pyramid Texts, has its counterpart in the descensus myth, which is depicted on the walls of the royal tombs of the New Kingdom. There we see the sun god enter the earth in the western horizon and descend into the deepest depth of the underworld where he unites with Osiris at midnight, in order to be reborn in the East in the morning and to ascend to heaven.

In the light of these mythical images it becomes clear that funerary religion and religion in general belong together. If the Egyptian idea of resurrection is very exceptional in the context of ancient Mediterranean religions, the

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50 (Genf, 1958), p. 4; cf. my article "Fest des Augenblicks — Verheißung der Dauer: Die Kontroverse der ägyptischen Harfnerlieder," in *Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur*, Gedenkschrift für Eberhard Otto (Wiesbaden, 1977), 69; E. Hornung, "Altägyptische Wurzeln der Isismysterien," in *Études Isaiques (Hommages à Jean Leclant, vol. 3)*, ed. Cathérine Berger, Gisèle Clerc, and Nicolas Grimal, Bibliothèque d'étude 106/3 (Cairo: Institut Français D'Archéologie Orientale, 1994), 289.

same applies to the Egyptian concept of a god. Gods die and mortals rise from the dead — the two ideas presuppose each other.

## Conclusion

The Christian idea of resurrection presupposes the death of Christ. This, as stated in the beginning, was a fact of history, not of nature, belonging to linear time and to the category of once-for-allness. Still, through his death and resurrection, Christ has paved the way to paradise or Elysium in a way not altogether dissimilar to that of Osiris, who also, through his victory over Seth, opened a realm beyond the realm of death. The decisive common denominator of Christianity and ancient Egyptian religion is the idea of redemption from death, that beyond the realm of death there is an Elysian realm of eternal life in the presence of the divine. Christianity shares this concept not only with Egyptian religion but also with many or most of the Greek or hellenized mystery cults, with some trends in Early Judaism, and later also with Islam, but it seems that Egypt is the likely original source of these ideas.