

The Egyptian Myth of Isis and Osiris

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Summary

The ancient Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris appears to be a dramatic tale of betrayal and revenge: Isis is the wife of Osiris, king of Egypt; Osiris is killed by his brother Seth; Horus, who is the son of Isis and Osiris, later fights with and defeats Seth. This myth, however, has a hidden, or esoteric, meaning. We will show that its hidden meaning is a detailed description of the spiritual journey and that this description is consistent with the modern treatment of that journey given by Alice A. Bailey.

Ancient Egyptian Myths

Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891), co-founder of the Theosophical Society, believed that ancient myths contained concealed truths. She wrote: “Myths... are now proved to be fables, just in proportion as we *misunderstand* them; truths, in proportion as they were once *understood*.”¹ Regarding ancient Egyptian myths, Blavatsky stated: “The Egyptian priests *have forgotten much, they altered nothing*. The loss of a good deal of the primitive teaching was due to the sudden deaths of the great Hierophants, who passed away before they had time to reveal *all* to their successors; mostly, to the absence of worthy heirs to the knowledge. Yet they have preserved in their rituals and dogmas the principal teachings of the secret doctrine.”²

We will investigate the truths concealed within the ancient myth of Isis and Osiris, which is perhaps the best known story in Egyptian mythology. There are several versions of the myth.³ The version that we will consider has four main characters: Osiris, who is king of Egypt; Isis, who is the wife of Osiris; Seth, who is the brother of Osiris; and Horus, who is the son of Isis and Osiris. Each of these characters is regarded as a god or goddess.

This version has three main segments: first, after Seth seals Osiris in a chest and throws it in a river, Isis searches for and eventually recovers the chest; second, after Seth cuts up Osiris’s body into multiple parts, Isis searches for those parts and eventually finds them; and third, Horus struggles with Seth for the right to rule the kingdom and eventually defeats him. As shown by the myth, Egyptian gods and goddesses are similar to human beings, because they lived, died, gave birth, went into battle, and had human emotions.

Spiritual Journey

We will compare the ancient myth of Isis and Osiris with the modern description of the spiritual journey given by Alice A. Bailey. According to Bailey, the spiritual journey contains a series of milestones, called “initiations,” that define discrete segments of that journey. In this context, the word “initiation” denotes an entrance into the spiritual life, or into a new stage in that life. The first segment is called the “path of probation,” and it extends from the beginning of the spiritual journey to the first initiation. Bailey writes, “The Probationary Path... marks that period in the life of a man when he definitely sets himself on the side of the forces of evolution, and works at the building of his own character. He takes himself in hand, cultivates the qualities that are lacking in his disposition, and seeks with diligence to bring his personality under control.”⁴

About the Author

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The second segment of the spiritual journey extends from the first initiation to the second initiation. Bailey says, "After this [first] initiation the initiate is taught principally the facts of the astral plane; he has to stabilise his emotional vehicle and learn to work on the astral plane with the same facility and ease as he does on the physical plane."⁵ Here, "astral" is a synonym for emotional. The third segment extends from the second initiation to the third initiation. Bailey says, "After the second initiation the teaching shifts up a plane. The initiate learns to control his mental vehicle; he develops the capacity to manipulate thought matter, and learns the laws of creative thought building."⁶

To analyze the myth of Isis and Osiris, our basic approach takes every symbol as representing some aspect of the consciousness of an aspirant on the spiritual journey, and takes every event as representing a stage on that journey. We will show that each of the three segments of the myth symbolically describes the corresponding segment in Bailey's treatment of the spiritual journey.

First Initiation

The complete myth of Isis and Osiris cannot be found in any one ancient Egyptian source, perhaps because the slaying of Osiris was too awesome to be committed to writing or because the Egyptians knew the myth so well that a complete narrative was not thought to be necessary. Nevertheless, numerous allusions to the myth can be found in extant texts. Plutarch (46–120 A.D.), a Greek historian, biographer, and essayist, used oral and written sources to compose his essay *On Isis and Osiris*, which connected the various episodes of the myth into a single narrative. Plutarch's essay was responsible for making this Egyptian myth well known to the Greeks and Romans.

In the first segment of the myth, Seth seals Osiris in a chest and throws it in a river. We take this segment from Plutarch's classical account, as translated by Frederick Cole Babbitt.⁷ Only selections of Plutarch's account are included, but those selections appear in the order given by him.

Typhon, having secretly measured Osiris's body and having made ready a beautiful chest of corresponding size artistically ornamented, caused it to be brought into the room where the festivity was in progress. . . . Osiris got into it and lay down, and those who were in the plot ran to it and slammed down the lid, which they fastened by nails from the outside and also by using molten lead. Then they carried the chest to the river and sent it on its way to the sea.

Seth, whom the Greeks called Typhon, is the nefarious demon of evil in Egyptian mythology. In the above passage, Seth and his co-workers use nails and molten lead to seal Osiris in a chest that is carried out to sea. Throughout the myth, Seth symbolizes the adversary that we must overcome on the spiritual journey. Bailey says our goal is "liberation from maya or illusion."⁸ Buddhism and Hinduism also consider such liberation to be their goal and use the Sanskrit word *maya* to denote illusion. Thus, Seth symbolizes our illusions, or false beliefs. Bailey speaks of "prison houses of ideas," and says, "water is the symbol of the emotional nature."⁹ Accordingly, the nails and molten lead symbolize our imprisoning ideas, and the sea symbolizes our emotions. The sealed chest floating in the sea symbolizes our physical body after it has been affected by our ideas and emotions, which in turn have been corrupted by our illusions.

Bailey refers to the soul, or inner divinity, as the "king upon the throne of the heart."¹⁰ Osiris might symbolize the soul, because he is the king of Egypt in the myth. Blavatsky confirms this association by stating that Osiris is synonymous with the Sanskrit word *purusha*,¹¹ which denotes the soul in Hinduism. Plato says, "For some say that the body is the grave of the soul which may be thought to be buried in our present life."¹² Thus, Osiris buried within the sealed floating chest symbolizes the soul when it is buried by the activities, emotions, ideas, and illusions in our present life.

Isis, when the tidings reached her, at once cut off one of her tresses and put on a garment of mourning in a place where the city still bears the name of Kopto.

Bailey writes, “*Eve, Isis, and Mary...* are of peculiar and significant importance where our civilisation is concerned for they embody in themselves the symbology of the entire form nature, which, when integrated and functioning as a whole person, we call the personality.”¹³ Thus, Isis symbolizes the personality, consisting of the mental, emotional, and physical bodies. Because the aspirant is focused within the personality on the path of probation, Isis also represents the aspirant during this segment of the journey.

At the beginning of her journey, Isis puts on a garment of mourning in the city that bears the name Kopto, which is the Greek verb that means to lament or mourn. Likewise, at the beginning of the spiritual journey, the aspirant feels a loss of contentment and satisfaction. Bailey describes this beginning: “Yet there slowly arises in him a divine discontent; the savor of his life experience and enterprises begins to prove unsatisfactory. Another shift in consciousness takes place, and he reaches out—at first unconsciously and later consciously—to the life and significance of a dimly sensed reality.”¹⁴

Isis wandered everywhere at her wits’ end; no one whom she approached did she fail to address, and even when she met some little children she asked them about the chest. As it happened, they had seen it, and they told her the mouth of the river through which the friends of Typhon had launched the coffin into the sea.

During her quest for Osiris’s chest, Isis addresses one person after another before finding

someone who can provide useful information. Likewise, the aspirant runs from one teacher to another before finding someone who can provide genuine help, as explained by Bailey: “The first stage, therefore, in the training of such an aspirant is to relate him to a more advanced disciple who will lead him gradually onward and give him the help he needs... The aspirant at this stage runs from one teacher to another, according to inclination, opportunity and necessity. He is an example of instability

but is carefully watched by the disciple who has transcended this particular stage of volatility; his task is to see that the aspirant escapes from this ‘network of futility,’ as it is sometimes called, and that he gradually settles down to the later stage of interior investigation.”¹⁵

Wherefore the Egyptians think that little children possess the power of prophecy, and they try to divine the future from the portents which they find in children’s words, especially when children are playing about in holy places and crying out whatever chances to come into their minds.

The foregoing two passages mention the “little children,” but this symbol appears elsewhere. In the New Testament, *Luke* 18:17 states: “Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.”¹⁶ The Gnostic *Gospel of Truth*, composed during the second century A.D., speaks of “the little children, those who possess the knowledge of the Father.”¹⁷ *A Course in Miracles (ACIM)* explains what this symbol means: “The Bible tells you to become as little

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children. Little children recognize that they do not understand what they perceive, and so they ask what it means.”¹⁸ Thus, the “little children” symbolizes people—not necessarily young—who have made spiritual progress, because they have learned to follow the guidance of the soul as though they were following their parents. In other words, the “little children” actually symbolize teachers who provide helpful guidance on the path of probation.

Thereafter Isis, as they relate, learned that the chest had been cast up by the sea near the land of Byblos and that the waves had gently set it down in the midst of a clump of heather. The heather in a short time ran up into a very beautiful and massive stock, and enfolded and embraced the chest with its growth and concealed it within its trunk. The king of the country admired the great size of the plant, and cut off the portion that enfolded the chest, which was now hidden from sight, and used it as a pillar to support the roof of his house.

Byblos, which is near the place where the chest had been cast, is the Greek name of the city in present-day Lebanon with the current Arabic name of Jbeil. It is believed that this city was founded around 5000 B.C., that it is the oldest continuously-inhabited city in the world, and that its port is the oldest in the world. According to Egyptian mythology, the Egyptian god Thoth invented writing in Byblos. The Greeks called this city *Byblos*, because it was through this city that *bublos*, which is the Greek name for Egyptian papyrus, was imported into Greece.

In yoga philosophy, the Sanskrit word *nadis* denotes subtle lines of force that underlie the physical body. Bailey says, “The *nadis* (lines or threads of force) underlie every nerve in the human body and the centres which they form at certain points of intersection or juncture are the background or motivating agency of every ganglion or plexus found in the human body.”¹⁹ Yoga philosophy speaks of seven centers, sometimes called “chakras,” that are formed by the nadis. According to Bailey, “Of the seven centres, two are in the head and five in the spinal column.”²⁰

The above passage states that Osiris’s chest is concealed within a clump of heather that is part of the column supporting the roof of the king’s house. The king’s house symbolizes the physical body, the pillar that supports the roof symbolizes the spinal column, the heather symbolizes the system of nadis, and the clump of heather that enfolds the chest symbolizes one of the chakras formed by the nadis. Because this clump is located in the pillar, we have the following clue: Osiris’s chest can be found in one of the five chakras located in the spinal column.

The English names for the five chakras located in the spinal column are throat, heart, solar plexus, sacral, and basic. In which one is Osiris’s chest concealed? Bailey speaks of “the throat centre as the creative formulator of thought.”²¹ Because Byblos is associated with writing, and because writing involves the creative formulation of thought, this city symbolizes the throat chakra. Thus, Osiris’s chest might be found in the throat chakra. The passage, however, states that the chest is “near the land of Byblos.” Thus, the chest might instead be located in the heart chakra, because the latter is the only spinal chakra that is “near,” or next to, the throat chakra.

These facts, they say, Isis ascertained by the divine inspiration of Rumor, and came to Byblos and sat down by a spring.

This passage symbolically describes the key requirements that the aspirant must achieve prior to the first initiation. Isis learned these facts through “divine inspiration,” indicating that the aspirant must also become receptive to divine inspiration. Bailey says that the effort here is “consciously developing the higher sensitivity.”²²

The sea represents our emotional nature, just as Byblos represents our mental nature. Isis’s journey by sea to Byblos symbolizes the movement that the aspirant must make from an emotional orientation to a mental orientation. Bailey says, “The aspirant makes a transition in consciousness from the astral plane to the mental and... becomes aware of glamour as something from which he must eventually free himself.”²³ In this quotation, “astral” is a

synonym for emotional, and “glamour” refers to emotional reactions that entrap us.

Bailey distinguishes between emotions associated with the solar-plexus chakra, such as “fear, hate, disgust, love, desire and many other purely astral reactions,” and emotions associated with the heart chakra, such as “high and consecrated feeling, devotion, aspiration and love.”²⁴ Two kinds of water appear in this myth: “the sea,” which has a relatively low altitude; and “a spring,” which has a higher altitude. The lower waters represent the lower, or solar plexus, emotions, as in *Psalms* 69:2: “I sink in deep mire, where *there is* no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.” The higher waters represent the higher, or heart, emotions, as in *Psalms* 36:8-9: “thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures. For with thee *is* the fountain of life.”

Isis’s sitting by “a spring” symbolizes another key requirement that the aspirant must achieve: cultivating the higher emotions, such as devotion, aspiration, and love. Bailey says that the goal of the aspirant’s activities is to stimulate the “will-to-love,” which involves “the intense aspiration really to love.”²⁵

Then the goddess disclosed herself and asked for the pillar which served to support the roof. She removed it with the greatest ease and cut away the wood of the heather which surrounded the chest... She opened the chest and laid her face upon the face within and caressed it and wept.

The first segment of the myth ends when Isis finds Osiris’s chest within the heather. The phrase “caressed it and wept” suggests love and devotion, which are higher emotions associated with the heart chakra. Bailey speaks of “the first initiation, the birth of the Christ in the cave of the heart,”²⁶ and uses Christ as a synonym for soul.²⁷ Because Osiris symbolizes the soul, the first segment of the myth culminates in a symbolic depiction of the first initiation, in which the aspirant finds the soul within the heart chakra.

Second Initiation

In the second segment of the myth, Seth cuts up Osiris’s body into multiple parts, and then Isis searches for those parts. We take the second segment from Plutarch’s account, as translated by Babbitt. Only selections from Plutarch’s account are included, but they appear in the order given by him. At the end of this segment, however, we augment Plutarch’s account with a passage given by Robert Armour, who was a Fulbright Professor at al-Azhar and ’Aim Shams universities in Egypt.

Typhon, who was hunting by night in the light of the moon, happened upon it [Osiris’s chest]. Recognizing the body he divided it into fourteen parts and scattered them, each in a different place.

This passage refers to “the light of the moon.” Bailey uses “lunar orb,” or moon, as a symbol for the solar-plexus chakra.²⁸ Accordingly, “the light of the moon” symbolizes the lower emotions, such as fear, hate, disgust, and desire, that are associated with the solar-plexus chakra.

The above passage states that Seth (or Typhon), who was hunting by the light of the moon, divided Osiris’s body into fragments. As before, Seth symbolizes illusion, and Osiris symbolizes the soul. Thus, the passage has this meaning: illusion controls our lower emotions, which in turn cause us to perceive the one soul as divided and separated into many forms. Bailey explains, “Yet all forms are differentiations of the soul, but that soul is one Soul, when viewed and considered spiritually. When studied from the form side, naught but differentiation and separation can be seen.”²⁹

Isis learned of this and sought for them [the parts of Osiris’s body] again, sailing through the swamps in a boat of papyrus.

After becoming aware that Osiris’s body was divided and scattered, Isis tries to undo that division by searching for the scattered parts. As before, Isis symbolizes the personality and represents the aspirant on the spiritual journey. Similarly, after becoming aware of his or her

emotional reactions, the aspirant tries to overcome those reactions by searching for the presence of the soul within various people. Bailey describes this effort by saying, "He will, for instance, in his daily life, work toward at-onement with all beings, seeking to penetrate to the heart of his brother; endeavoring to be at one with the life in all forms; rejecting every tendency to separative reactions."³⁰

Bailey calls the emotional plane "the battleground between the pairs of opposites."³¹ There are many pairs of opposites, such as good and evil, rich and poor, healthy and sick, young and old. Whenever we are identified with one opposite in a pair, we contend with, or feel separated from, people associated with the other opposite. Osiris's body was divided into fourteen fragments, which consists of seven pairs. The number seven has a symbolic meaning. *Genesis* 2:2-3 states: "And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made." The *New Bible Dictionary* concludes, "Seven . . . is associated with completion, fulfillment and perfection."³² According to this numerical symbol, the aspirant needs to search for the presence of the soul within people associated with both opposites in *all* pairs by which he or she is emotionally affected.

Because papyrus was the paper used in ancient Egypt for writing, it symbolizes the mind. Swamps, being composed of water, symbolize the emotional nature. Isis is sailing in a boat of papyrus through the swamps, indicating that the aspirant has shifted his or her consciousness from the emotional body to the mental body. Bailey describes this process: "The aspirant upon the higher levels of the astral plane is swept by the 'fire of dedication.' This immediately focusses his will as it demonstrates on the mental plane, and this focussing in due time starts the serious undertaking of the shifting of his consciousness on to mental levels."³³

This is the reason why people sailing in such boats are not harmed by the crocodiles, since these creatures in their own way show either their fear or their reverence for the goddess.

Because crocodiles live in swamps, they symbolize emotional reactions. The above passage indicates that polarization within the mental body prevents emotional reactions from causing harm, which means that they cannot affect outer behavior. Bailey makes a similar point: "the emotional body should be controlled from the mental plane, and when the polarisation has been transferred into the mental body through forms of meditation and intensity of purpose and of will, then the emotional becomes quiescent and receptive."³⁴

The traditional result of Osiris's dismemberment is that there are many so-called tombs of Osiris in Egypt; for Isis held a funeral for each part when she found it.

Revelation 2:11 refers to the "second death." According to Bailey, the "first death" is "the death of the physical body," and the "second death" is "associated with the death of all astral control over the human being."³⁵ In the above passage, the "funeral" held by Isis symbolizes the second death—the death of the aspirant's own emotional reactions. For the aspirant to sense the soul lying behind someone's outer human appearance, his or her own emotional reactions to that appearance must die, thereby achieving what Bailey calls "divine indifference."³⁶ The many tombs of Osiris in Egypt indicate that the aspirant needs to bring about the death of his or her emotional reactions to many kinds of people.

Of the parts of Osiris's body the only one which Isis did not find was the male member, for the reason that this had been at once tossed into the river, and the lepidotus, the sea-bream, and the pike had fed upon it; and it is from these very fishes the Egyptians are most scrupulous in abstaining.

The above passage states that Isis could not find Osiris's "male member," which is the phallus, because it was eaten by various sea animals. The phallus is the organ of creation in a male body, and so it symbolizes the creative aspect of the soul, which is sometimes called the "light of the soul." Because the sea symbolizes the emotional body, the sea animals symbolize the emotional forms within us

that block the light of the soul from reaching us. In particular, using Bailey's language, the sea animals represent "the forms which desire, emotion, sensitivity to environment, developing aspiration and old ideals have taken and which prevent the light of the soul from illuminating the waking consciousness."³⁷

Bailey writes, "The only light which can dissipate the fogs of glamour and rid the life of its ill effects is that of the soul, which—like a pure dispelling beam—

possesses the curious and unique quality of revelation, of immediate dissipation, and of illumination."³⁸ Here is our problem: we need the light of the soul to dissipate our emotional reactions, or glammers, but those reactions prevent the light of the soul from illuminating us. What can we do?

But Isis made a replica of the member to take its place, and consecrated the phallus, in honor of which the Egyptians even at the present day celebrate a festival.

This passage describes a meditation exercise. The phrase "Isis made a replica of the member to take its place" symbolizes the aspirant's use of the imagination to visualize the light of the soul. The phrase "consecrated the phallus" indicates that the aspirant acts *as if* the visualized image were, in fact, the light of the soul.

The goal of this exercise is to invoke the actual light of the soul. Bailey discusses the role of visualization in achieving this goal: "In the early stages of his invocative work, the instrument used is the creative imagination. This enables him at the very beginning to act *as if*

he were capable of thus creating; then, when the *as if* imaginative consciousness is no longer useful, he becomes consciously aware of that which he has—with hope and spiritual expectancy—sought to create; he discovers this as an existent fact and knows past all controversy."³⁹

There are many ways to proceed with this visualization, for which Bailey gives the following instruction: "Some people picture the

three bodies (the three aspects of the form nature) as being linked with a radiant body of light, or they visualize three centres of vibrating energy receiving stimulation from a higher and more powerful centre; others imagine the soul as a triangle of force to which is linked the triangle of the lower nature... Still others prefer to preserve the thought of a unified personality, linked to and hiding within itself the indwelling Divinity, Christ in us, the hope of glory... Thus, through the use of the imagination and visualization, the desire body, the emotional nature, is brought into line with the soul."⁴⁰

Horus declares that he has defeated Seth in several areas. Likewise, causal consciousness realizes that it has dealt with certain areas of life more effectively than personality consciousness would have... [C]ausal consciousness enables the personality to have a channel of communication with the soul... "Guidance can come, as you well know, from a man's own soul when through meditation, discipline and service, he has established contact, and there is consequently a direct channel of communication from soul to mind, via the brain..."

The above passage completes Plutarch's account of the second segment of the myth, and so his next paragraph in his essay starts his third segment. Armour's version of the myth, however, adds more information to the second segment, as shown next.

Once it [Osiris's body] was all together, except of course the part eaten by the fish, the body was wrapped in white linen and placed in state at the Temple of Abydos.⁴¹

Much evidence supports Armour's version that Osiris's reassembled body was placed at Abydos. For example, Plutarch, in a postscript to his account of the myth, reports that "the prosperous and influential men among the Egyptians are mostly buried in Abydos, since it is the object of their ambition to be buried in the same ground with the body of Osiris."⁴² The opening hymn in an ancient papyrus affirms: "Glory be to Osiris Un-Nefer, the great god who dwelleth in Abydos."⁴³ George Hart, who was a curator at the British Museum, writes: "Other cult centres claimed to be the resting place of Osiris's body—or parts of it... but it is at Abydos that we find the fullest documentation of the next episode in the myth."⁴⁴

Abydos is one of the most ancient cities of Upper Egypt, dating back to the late prehistoric era. The name Abydos comes from the Greeks. The city originally had the Egyptian name Abdju, which meant "the hill of the symbol or reliquary." A reliquary is a container for holy relics. The sacred city of Abydos was the location of many ancient temples and is considered to be one of the most important archaeological sites of ancient Egypt.

A. E. Powell, a theosophical writer, says, "The causal body... is the receptacle of all that is enduring—i.e., *only* that which is noble and harmonious, and in accordance with the law of the spirit; for every great and noble thought, every pure and lofty emotion, is carried up, and its essence worked into the substance of the causal body."⁴⁵ Because the Egyptian name for Abydos signifies a container for holy relics, and because the causal body is the receptacle for the wisdom gained from experience, Abydos symbolizes the causal body.

Because Osiris symbolizes the soul, the reassembled body of Osiris represents the realization of omnipresence, which is the realization of the one soul that lies behind all differentiations of form. Bailey says, "The first great realization which the aspirant has to achieve is that of *omnipresence*; he has to realize his unity with all, and the oneness of his soul with all other souls. He has to find God in his own heart and in every form of life."⁴⁶

Placing Osiris's reassembled body at Abydos indicates that the realization of omnipresence occurs by entering causal consciousness. Bailey explains: "The student having withdrawn his consciousness on to the mental plane at some point within the brain... let him then raise his vibration as high as may be, and aim next at lifting it clear of the mental body into the causal."⁴⁷ Bailey refers to polarization within the causal body as "causal consciousness" or as "the full consciousness of the higher Self."⁴⁸

Isaiah 26:3 says, "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee." When aspirants have the realization of omnipresence, they see the soul everywhere, allowing their minds to stay on the soul wherever they happen to look, which enables the soul to keep them in perfect peace. For them to have this realization, they must shift their consciousness from the emotional body to the mental body and then to the causal body. Bailey says that "the second initiation... marks the completion of the process whereby the emotional nature (with its outstanding quality of desire) is brought under soul control."⁴⁹ Thus, having the realization of omnipresence marks the attainment of the second initiation.

Third Initiation

In the third segment of the myth, Horus, who is the son of Isis and Osiris, struggles with Seth for the right to rule the kingdom. A papyrus manuscript, written about 1160 B.C., describes "The 80 Years of Contention between Horus and Seth." We take the third segment from this ancient Egyptian source, using the translation given on the Theology Website.⁵⁰ Only selections from that translation are included, but they appear in the order given.

Horus, the Avenger of Osiris, came before the Great Ennead. With His Mother beside Him, He spoke of the cruel murder of His Father at the hands of Seth. He spoke of the usurpation of the Throne of Egypt. The Gods were impressed by the eloquence of the Falcon-Headed One, and They pitied Him.

After achieving the second initiation, the aspirant can reside in causal consciousness, which means that he or she can be polarized within the causal body. Powell states: “Causal consciousness thus deals with the *essence* of a thing, whilst the lower mind studies its details. With the mind, we talk round a subject, or endeavour to explain it: with the causal consciousness, we take up the essence of the idea of the subject, and move it as a whole, as one moves a piece when playing chess.”⁵¹ Falcons symbolize causal consciousness, because they can fly at high speeds, indicating that causal consciousness can quickly move ideas along, and because their wings are shaped like a scythe, indicating that causal consciousness can cut through to the essence of things. Because the above passage refers to Horus as the “Falcon-Headed One,” Horus symbolizes causal consciousness.

The aspirant can also reside in personality consciousness, which means that he or she can be polarized within the mental, emotional, or physical body. Bailey associates personality consciousness with illusion, because she says, “you will learn that things which are potent and apparent in your personality consciousness are *in fact* non-existent.”⁵² As before, Seth symbolizes illusion, but Seth also symbolizes personality consciousness in this segment of the myth.

Horus and Seth are contending with each other about who should occupy the throne of Egypt. What do these symbols mean? Causal consciousness and personality consciousness are contending with each other about which one should rule over the personality. In the above passage, Horus speaks of the cruel murder of Osiris at the hands of Seth and how Seth usurps the throne of Egypt. Again, Osiris symbolizes the soul. These symbols indicate that causal consciousness has the following realization: personality consciousness causes the aspirant to forget about the soul and governs the personality in place of the soul.

The word Ennead is derived from the Greek word that means “nine.” In Egyptian mythology, the Great Ennead refers to a panel of nine deities. In the above passage, this panel of gods begins to conduct a trial during which

they will judge the claims of each party and render a verdict. In our own struggle, however, we are our own judge. *Joshua* 24:15 tells us to “choose you this day whom ye will serve.” Thus, in this segment of the myth, the panel of gods represents the aspirant, referring to the center of consciousness that has the responsibility of choosing between the two alternative states of consciousness.

Shu, Son of the Creator, was the first to speak: “Right should rule might. Mighty Seth hath force on His side, but Young Horus hath Justice. We shalt do Justice unto Horus by proclaiming, “Yes! Ye shalt have the throne of Thy Father!”

Soon after the beginning of the trial, Shu believes that choosing between Horus and Seth is equivalent to choosing between justice and force. Because Shu is a member of the panel of gods, he represents the aspirant. Soon after taking the second initiation, the aspirant has a similar belief. Because causal consciousness thinks in wide and inclusive terms, it is associated with justice. With regard to personality consciousness, *ACIM* says, “Yet its one claim to your allegiance is that it can give power to you. Without this belief you would not listen to it at all.”⁵³ Believing that “right should rule might,” the aspirant chooses to reside in causal consciousness instead of personality consciousness.

Isis gave a great cry of Joy. She begged the North Wind to change direction Westward to whisper the news unto Osiris.

As before, Isis symbolizes the personality. The above passage indicates that causal consciousness enables the personality to be joyful and have a channel of communication with the soul. Bailey supports this analysis by saying, “Joy is the quality of soul life and that quality can be imposed upon the personality,”⁵⁴ and she also speaks of the causal body as “the spiritual body of the soul,”⁵⁵ implying that the causal body is the intermediary between soul and personality. In fact, Bailey sometimes refers to causal consciousness as “living as a soul”: “He [the aspirant] functions as the soul and has achieved a definite measure of success in living as a soul, consciously upon the physi-

cal plane. This particular technique of meditation... demands the ability to focus the consciousness in the soul form, the spiritual body.”⁵⁶

And, to this, Seth proclaimed, “It is I who slay the Enemy of Re daily. It is I Who stand in the prow of the Bark of Millions of Years, and no other God can do it. It is I who should receive the office of Osiris!”

Why would the aspirant even be attracted to personality consciousness? In the above passage, Seth is proclaiming how special he is, showing that personality consciousness offers feelings of pride and vanity. The point is that one does get pleasure from judging and looking down on other people; one does gain a sense of satisfaction by feeling more important or more advanced than others. *Ecclesiastes* 1:2 states, “All is vanity,” which implies that the aspirant has spent most of his or her life cultivating ways to feel more special than other people. Personality consciousness allows those feelings to continue.

The Gods knew the Terrors of the Serpents of Chaos. They muttered that Seth was right.

The gods remember certain terrors and then decide that Seth is right. Likewise, the aspirant, who is symbolized by the gods, is aware of his or her fears, and reenters personality consciousness to defend against them. *ACIM* asks: “Who would defend himself unless he thought he were attacked, that the attack were real, and that his own defense could save himself? Herein lies the folly of defense; it gives illusions full reality, and then attempts to handle them as real. It adds illusions to illusions, thus making correction doubly difficult. And it is this you do when you attempt to plan the future, activate the past, or organize the present as you wish.”⁵⁷

Isis became furious at the Ennead for not speaking in favor of Her Son. She complained to Them until, for the sake of peace, They promised that Justice should be given unto Horus.

While in personality consciousness, the aspirant identifies with some aspect of the person-

ality, perhaps with activities, feelings, or thoughts. Bailey says, “Wrong identification is the cause of pain and leads to suffering, distress and various effects.”⁵⁸ The above passage indicates that the personality has become discontented with its suffering, wanting joy and peace instead of pain and distress. Eventually the aspirant responds by deciding to re-enter causal consciousness.

Mighty Seth was angered. “How dare Ye cowards break Thine Oath! I shalt fetch My Great Septre and strike one of You down with it each day! I swear that I will not argue My case in any Court where Isis is present!”

The phrase “Mighty Seth was angered” indicates that personality consciousness tries to preserve itself when it feels threatened. *ACIM* uses the term “ego” to denote personality consciousness and states: “The ingeniousness of the ego to preserve itself is enormous.”⁵⁹ Seth’s threat to strike down members of the panel of gods indicates that personality consciousness, if it is abandoned, threatens to take away the aspirant’s power. Bailey speaks of “the age-long habits of suppression.”⁶⁰ Seth’s refusal to allow Isis to be present indicates that personality consciousness tries to suppress those parts of the personality that threaten it.

The foregoing passages depict a seemingly endless alternation between causal consciousness and personality consciousness, going back and forth. How can the cycle of alternating states be resolved?

Re proclaimed, “We shall cross the river to the Island in the Midst, and try the case thereon. I shalt further order the ferryman not to ferry Isis across.”

In this passage, Re is a member of the panel of gods and so represents the aspirant. Re plans to move the trial to a place where Isis cannot reach. Likewise, the next step for the aspirant is to examine the attractiveness of personality consciousness while being detached from the personality. Bailey makes a similar point when she says, “you would find it of value to discover where your ‘extensions’ are,”⁶¹ referring to the preoccupations that militate against causal consciousness.

Isis... now appearing as a beautiful young woman... approached the Lord of Storm. "Who art Thou, my pretty?" asked Seth, "And why hast Thou come here?" Isis hid her face and wept, "O Great Lord, I am looking for a champion. I was the wife of a herdsman, and I bore for him a son. Then, my dear husband died, and the boy began to tend his father's cattle. But, lo! a stranger came and ceased our byre, and told my son that he would take our cattle and turn us out. My son wished to protest, but the stranger threatened to beat him. Great Lord, help me! Be my son's champion!" Seth heard Her words and dried Her tears. "Do not cry, my pretty. I shall be your champion and destroy this villain! How dare a stranger take the father's property whilst the son is still alive!" Great Isis shrieked with laughter... "Cry thyself, Mighty Seth! Ye hath condemned thyself! Thou hast judged Thine own case!"

Isis shows that Seth's condemnation of others leads to his own self-condemnation. This story illustrates a key principle: when we condemn others, we are actually condemning ourselves. *ACIM* explains: "If you can condemn, you can be injured. For you have believed that you can injure, and the right you have established for yourself can be now used against you, till you lay it down as valueless, unwanted and unreal."⁶² More generally, according to Bailey, "we see in others what is in us, even when it is not there at all or to the same extent."⁶³

Seth was angered unto tears of rage. The Gods demanded to know what had transpired. He told Them of how He had been tricked by the cunning Lady Isis. Re said unto the Dark God, "It is true, Seth. Thou hast judged Thyself."

Personality consciousness is attractive partly because it allows us to have feelings of pride and vanity, which are based on judgments of other people. As indicated by the above passage, the aspirant, who is represented by Re, has the insight that judging other people leads to self-judgment. Due to this insight, the aspirant is able to renounce feelings of pride and vanity.

Horus made His complaint against Seth: "It is now eighty years We are in the Court, but They do not know how to judge among Us. I have contended with Him in the Hall of the Way of Truth. I was found right against Him. I have contended with Him in the Hall of the Horned Horus. I was found right against Him. I have contended with Him in the Hall of the Field of Rushes. I was found right against Him. I have contended with Him in the Hall of the Field Pool. I was found right against Him."

Horus declares that he has defeated Seth in several areas. Likewise, causal consciousness realizes that it has dealt with certain areas of life more effectively than personality consciousness would have. As mentioned earlier, causal consciousness enables the personality to have a channel of communication with the soul. Bailey says that this channel carries divine guidance: "Guidance can come, as you well know, from a man's own soul when through meditation, discipline and service, he has established contact, and there is consequently a direct channel of communication from soul to brain, via the mind. This, when clear and direct, is true divine guidance, coming from the inner divinity."⁶⁴

In the Trial, Re-Atum asked this important question: "What shall We do about these two Gods, Who for eighty years now have been before the tribunal?" Geb, Lord of the Gods, commanded the Nine Gods gather to Him. He judged between Horus and Seth; He ended Their great quarrel. He made Seth as king of Southern Egypt... And Geb made Horus king of Egypt in the land of Northern Egypt... Thus Horus stood over one region, and Seth stood over one region.

The gods decide to compromise: Seth would rule Southern Egypt, and Horus would rule Northern Egypt. Likewise, the aspirant decides to compromise: rely on causal consciousness for some areas, including those for which it has been proven effective; but rely on personality consciousness for other areas, such as defending against his or her own fears.

ACIM states: "You must choose between total freedom and total bondage, for there are no

alternatives but these. You have tried many compromises in the attempt to avoid recognizing the one decision you must make. And yet it is the recognition of the decision, *just as it is*, that makes the decision so easy.”⁶⁵ Because the aspirant is still trying to compromise, he or she has not yet recognized the one decision that must be made.

Then Horus spake and said, “It is not good to defraud Me before the Ennead and to take the office of my Father Osiris from Me!”

Next, causal consciousness has the realization that relying on personality consciousness for some areas is not a good outcome, because it limits the guidance of the soul. *ACIM* uses the term “Holy Spirit” as a synonym for the soul and makes the same point: “It is only because you think that you can run some little part, or deal with certain aspects of your life alone, that the guidance of the Holy Spirit is limited.”⁶⁶

Shu and Thoth persuaded the Court to send a letter to Osiris. After a time, the messenger returned... Osiris demanded to know why His son had been robbed of the throne. He demanded to know if the Gods had forgotten that it was He, Osiris, Who had given the world the precious gifts of barley and wheat.

The panel of gods decides to resolve the conflict between Horus and Seth by asking for advice from Osiris. The corresponding step for the aspirant is to resolve the conflict between causal and personality consciousness by seeking guidance from the soul. *ACIM* says, “Only the Holy Spirit can resolve conflict, because only the Holy Spirit is conflict-free.”⁶⁷ The soul (or Holy Spirit) responds by telling the aspirant to examine why he or she still wants to stay in personality consciousness and reminding the aspirant that it has already proven itself by giving many gifts.

Geb’s words to the Nine Gods: “I have appointed Horus, the Firstborn, Him alone, Horus, the inheritance.”

In this final passage, the gods appoint Horus to be ruler of all Egypt. The corresponding step for the aspirant is to rely on casual consciousness for all areas of his or her life. Bailey says

that the aspirant attains the third initiation when he or she has achieved “freedom from the ancient authority of the threefold personality,” which means that he or she “must be freed from any magnetic or attractive ‘pull’ emanating from the personality.”⁶⁸ Thus, relying on causal consciousness for all areas marks the attainment of the third initiation.

Interpretations of the Myth

Because of the popularity of the myth of Isis and Osiris, there have been many previous attempts to explain its significance. According to Amour, “Most interpretations can probably be reduced to three simple themes: the transferal of the power of kingship, celebration of the cycle of nature and its annual rejuvenation, and rituals for achieving immortality.”⁶⁹

This article showed that the myth of Isis and Osiris could be interpreted as a symbolic depiction of the spiritual journey. We are not aware of any prior attempt to interpret this myth in such a way. In two quotations given earlier, Blavatsky expressed the belief that important truths are concealed within ancient myths. Our interpretation of the myth of Isis and Osiris supports her belief.

¹ H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (1877; reprint; Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1976), vol. II, p. 431.

² H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I (1888; reprint; Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1977), p. 312.

³ E. A. Wallis Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection* (1911; reprint; New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1961).

⁴ A. A. Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar* (1922; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1974), p. 63.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁷ F. C. Babbitt, *Plutarch’s Moralia: Volume V* (1936; reprint; Whitefish, MT: Kissinger Publishing, 2005).

⁸ A. A. Bailey, *The Light of the Soul* (1927; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1978), p. 398.

- ⁹ A. A. Bailey, *A Treatise on White Magic* (1934; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 250, 523.
- ¹⁰ Bailey, *The Light of the Soul*, p. 47.
- ¹¹ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. II, p. 704.
- ¹² Plato, *Cratylus*, p. 400c, in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds.), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).
- ¹³ A. A. Bailey, *Esoteric Astrology* (1951; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1979), p. 253.
- ¹⁴ A. A. Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology*, vol. II (1942; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1981), p. 337.
- ¹⁵ A. A. Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol. I (1944; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 715-716.
- ¹⁶ All verses from the Bible are taken from the King James Version.
- ¹⁷ R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 148.
- ¹⁸ *A Course in Miracles (ACIM)* (second edition; Glen Ellen, CA: Foundation for Inner Peace, 1992), vol. I, p. 211.
- ¹⁹ Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology*, vol. II, p. 434.
- ²⁰ A. A. Bailey, *The Soul and Its Mechanism* (1930; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1976), p. 115.
- ²¹ A. A. Bailey, *Telepathy and the Etheric Vehicle* (1950; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1975), p. 19.
- ²² Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol. I, p. 726.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 722.
- ²⁴ Bailey, *Telepathy*, pp. 9, 20.
- ²⁵ Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol. I, pp. 729, 735.
- ²⁶ A. A. Bailey, *The Externalisation of the Hierarchy* (1957; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1976), p. 422.
- ²⁷ A. A. Bailey, *From Bethlehem to Calvary* (1937; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1989), p. 42.
- ²⁸ Bailey, *A Treatise on White Magic*, p. 98.
- ²⁹ Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology*, vol. I (1936; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1979), p. 56.
- ³⁰ Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology*, vol. II, p. 235.
- ³¹ A. A. Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations* (1960; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1976), p. 674.
- ³² *New Bible Dictionary* (third edition; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996), p. 834.
- ³³ Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, p. 682.
- ³⁴ A. A. Bailey, *Letters on Occult Meditation* (1922; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1974), p. 98.
- ³⁵ Bailey, *Esoteric Healing* (1953; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 406, 409.
- ³⁶ Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol. I, p. 661.
- ³⁷ A. A. Bailey, *Glamour: A World Problem* (1950; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1973), p. 220.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- ³⁹ Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, pp. 443-444.
- ⁴⁰ A. A. Bailey, *From Intellect to Intuition* (1932; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1972), p. 225.
- ⁴¹ R. A. Armour, *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt* (1986; revised; New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2001), p. 64.
- ⁴² Babbitt, *Plutarch's Moralia: Volume V*, p. 51.
- ⁴³ E. A. Wallis Budge, *Literature of the Ancient Egyptians and Egyptian Tales and Romances* (1914; reprint; Whitefish, MT: Kissinger Publishing, 2005), p. 44.
- ⁴⁴ G. Hart, *Egyptian Myths* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 32.
- ⁴⁵ A. E. Powell, *The Causal Body and the Ego* (1928; reprint; Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), p. 90.
- ⁴⁶ Bailey, *The Light of the Soul*, p. 358.
- ⁴⁷ Bailey, *Letters on Occult Meditation*, p. 96.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 292, 340.
- ⁴⁹ Bailey, *Esoteric Healing*, p. 156.
- ⁵⁰ Theology Website, <http://www.theologywebsite.com/etext/egypt/ho rus.shtml>.
- ⁵¹ Powell, *The Causal Body and the Ego*, p. 105.
- ⁵² Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol. I, p. 182.
- ⁵³ *ACIM*, vol. I, p. 204.
- ⁵⁴ Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol. I, p. 557.
- ⁵⁵ Bailey, *A Treatise on White Magic*, p. 247.
- ⁵⁶ Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology*, vol. II, p. 393.
- ⁵⁷ *ACIM*, vol. II, p. 252.
- ⁵⁸ Bailey, *Esoteric Healing*, p. 347.
- ⁵⁹ *ACIM*, vol. I, p. 123.
- ⁶⁰ Bailey, *Esoteric Healing*, p. 78.
- ⁶¹ Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol. I, p. 735.
- ⁶² *ACIM*, vol. II, p. 379.
- ⁶³ Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol. I, p. 729.

⁶⁴ Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology*, vol. II, pp. 491-492.

⁶⁵ *ACIM*, vol. I, p. 326.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁶⁸ Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, pp. 686, 688.

⁶⁹ Armour, *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt*, p. 67.