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Adayshia Johnson

Georgia State University

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The Transnational Reach of the Osiris Myth in the Mediterranean (ca. 359 BC – 60 BC): An Early Model of Religious Syncretism

Adayshia Johnson

Georgia State University

Abstract

The Osiris myth was foundational to ancient Egypt for thousands of years; however, the establishment of Alexandria and its continued growth through the Ptolemaic dynasty made the Osiris myth transnational. Consisting of Egyptian natives, Greeks, and Hebrews, the city was home to several differing religious beliefs, customs, and political views. Often, those factors correlated with one another, and where there could have been subjugation, we find that there was instead acculturation. Osiris, Isis, and their son Horus connect heavily with Greek culture, demonstrated mainly by their fusion with Greek gods/goddesses. Though the amalgamations occurring were not solely based on religion, religious syncretism during this time in Alexandria is distinct because it was the first city of its kind and managed to facilitate such fusion on a scale large enough to be revered today.

Keywords: Alexander the Great, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, Isis, Horus, Mediterranean, Osiris, Ptolemaic Dynasty, Religion

1. Introduction

The Osiris myth is a religious and spiritual depiction of three of Egypt's most important gods: Osiris, Isis, and Horus, whose worship worked throughout the Mediterranean following the founding of Alexandria, Egypt, in 332 BC. Alexandria was a unique place both in the ancient world and in Egypt. As a major port city on the Mediterranean, Alexandria attracted individuals from all over and created a melting pot of differing skin complexions, religious beliefs, political views, and cultural norms. However, the most prominent cultures found in the city, aside from the native Egyptians, consisted of the Greeks, Romans, and a large Jewish community. This was due, in part, to the extensive time that Greece and Rome ruled Egypt.

The Jewish presence in Alexandria is vital to note as the community was much Hellenized both culturally and lawfully during the Hellenistic period of Egypt. For instance, the version of Judaism practiced in Ptolemaic Egypt, and thus discussed in this research, consists of the Second Temple period, during which came the emergence of Hellenistic Judaism.¹ Hellenistic Judaism preceded and influenced early Christianity, which syncretized heavily with the Osiris myth. However, due to Christianity's arrival dating to the Roman empire and outside of our chronological scope, Judaism's role in this research emphasizes its Hellenization from Ptolemaic Egypt politically and culturally rather than religiously.

Additionally, because of its strategic position at the Nile Delta on the Mediterranean Sea, Alexandria's transnational reach provided the ideal conditions to spread the worship of the Osiris myth to Greece and Rome while also adopting many of the beliefs, traits, and customs of Greek and Roman society. A shift from the old and traditional into a new modern society took place that was noticeably ahead of its time. Such a shift resulted in the amalgamation of the relative cultures and their religious beliefs, which developed one of the world's first models of religious syncretism.²

The interconnection of church and state is, and has been, ever-present throughout human history, where one regularly includes or influences the other; Egypt and its Pharaohs are the perfect example as they represented Horus in life and Osiris in death. Religion and spirituality have historically been central to many battles, wars, and disputes. Take, for example, the Assyrians, the world's second-known empire following the Akkadians in ancient Mesopotamia.³ Though outside of our chronological scope, the Assyrians offer a significant example of what religious disunity and contention can generate in humanity. Known for their brutality and ruthlessness, the Assyrian war tactics when conquering a new land and its people were no exception. Such tactics often included the act of "godnapping," a term used to describe the practice of stealing religious statues and symbols from temples.⁴ The Assyrian use of this tactic shows the intention to demoralize the conquered peoples' deities and the belief that the

¹ Second Temple Period Judaism- (ca. 516 BC – 70 CE) Begins after the rebuilding of the temple in 516 B.C. until its destruction in 70 C.E. This period of Judaism is at times referred to as "intertestamental" as it spans the period after most of the Old Testament was written and before most of the New Testament was written.

Hellenistic Judaism- Designation for Judaism in the Hellenistic world who spoke Greek and adopted (to some extent) a Greek way of life.

² Religious Syncretism- The blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system or incorporating beliefs from unrelated traditions into a religious practice.

³ Assyrian Empire- A group of united city-states under Assyrian rule (900 BC – 600 BC).

⁴ Sherry, Bennett. "Rise of Empires – Akkadians and Assyrians." *Khan Academy* (accessed: Oct. 4, 2022).

act would hinder their ability to be heard by the gods. However, not all empires and their rulers exhibited the same brutality.

Cyrus the Great, king of Persia and founder of the Achaemenian empire, is remembered as a tolerant ruler to his people and those he conquered.⁵ In the Bible, Cyrus is credited as the liberator of the Jews who were being held captive in Babylonia by the ruler Nabonidus,⁶ and aided them in rebuilding their temples. Although Cyrus' act of conquest was placed in the name of "freeing" a suppressed and dissatisfied people, such a circumstance only acted as justification for his invasion efforts. Still, Cyrus the Great's tolerance for his conquered peoples' religions undoubtedly tops the Assyrians in unity. However, it is Alexandria that eclipses them both. Religious rivalries have caused disunity and disconnection amongst humanity throughout observed history, but what is evident in Alexandria during the Ptolemaic period is that a form of unity and connection amongst religions and their subsequent believers is possible. Delving into the factors of diversity and acculturation present in Alexandria demonstrates the distinct trait of integration, both religiously and societally, revealing that humanity is much more connected than it appears and has the potential to unify in a way best exemplified in Alexandria at that time.

Alexandria is the primary focus of this research due to its geographic importance during the last three centuries before the common era. Located in what used to be a Lower Egyptian village, once known as Rhakotis, Alexandria was conveniently positioned on the western edge of the Nile River delta at the Mediterranean Sea, contributing to its reputation as a city of diversity. After Alexander the Great's founding, Alexandria went through further developments under the Ptolemaic Dynasty. The changes that occurred throughout Ptolemaic Egypt, brought about by its Greek rulers, resulted in a melting pot of not only politics and cultures but of religion as well.

An assessment of the relevant cultures is necessary to best evaluate the factors contributing to Alexandria's notable interconnection, individually and collectively. In addition, it is imperative to include an understanding of Alexandria as a unique society, a brief history of each ruling period relevant to the chronological timeline, the interconnection and assimilation occurring between the appropriate groups, as well as a list of distinct gods and goddesses of the Mediterranean with relevance to the Egyptian Osiris myth and within the chronological scope of this paper. The evidence compiled for this research consists of historical and textual information and architectural and artistic artifacts.⁷

For this research, all relevant spiritual beliefs will be called myths, as they depict figures representing humanity. Whether factual or fictional, myths are stories based on tradition and serve a purpose in ancient and modern cultures. In his book *The Greek and Roman Myths: A Guide to the Classical Stories*, Philip Matyszak described a myth as "the ancient's view of the world," which would inevitably exhibit human qualities such as emotion, kinship, politics, war/battle, and lessons.⁸ Magic, as well, is relevant to each myth that is discussed as magic is defined here as a term "to refer to a person or group's efforts to change their life through

⁵ Xenophon. "Cyropaedia."

⁶ Frye, R. N. "Cyrus the Great." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 10, 2020.

⁷ See Appendix.

⁸ Matyszak, Philip. "The Greek and Roman Myths: A Guide to the Classical Stories."

supernatural means,” which can include acts of witchcraft, ceremonial rituals, and prayer.⁹ these constitute aspects of Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Christian mythologies, traditions, and practices.

2. Historical Context

A brief history of the Macedonian Empire is essential here, as it was a Macedonian who founded Alexandria and initiated three successional periods of non-Egyptian rule.¹⁰ Ancient Macedonia was a small kingdom located in northern Greece. However, through the rule of King Phillip II (reigned 359 BC – 336 BC) and his son Alexander III of Macedon, popularly known as Alexander the Great, the small kingdom became the Macedonian Empire. King Phillip II united the city-states of both northern and southern Greece, bringing them under Macedonian rule. His ambitions continued as he improved his army and planned to conquer neighboring lands in the Mediterranean region. King Phillip II of Macedon died before he could act on such plans. Still, his son, Alexander, would later bring his father’s projects to fruition as he expanded the Macedonian Empire.

Alexander the Great became king of the Macedonian Empire in 336 BC. He was an accomplished general who never lost a battle. Alexander invaded Egypt in 332 BC, where he founded the city of Alexandria. During that time, Egypt was under Persian rule of the brutal Achaemenid empire, and the Egyptians were ready to be freed. As a result, Alexander conquered Egypt without battle and was seen as a liberator of the country. Alexander left Egypt in 331 BC and divided his military command. In 323 BC, Alexander the Great died from malaria or typhoid fever, which ran rampant at the time.¹¹ Upon Alexander’s death came the beginning of the Hellenistic Period.¹²

Following Alexander’s death, his son was due to be his successor. However, due to his son's infancy, Alexander’s generals became his successors, known as the Diadochi. The Diadochi warred for Alexander’s empire before dividing it amongst themselves, wherein the position of ruler of Egypt was claimed by the satrap Ptolemy.¹³ Ptolemy I Soter was a Macedonian general of Alexander the Great who assumed control of Egypt following Alexander’s death. His title remained satrap of Egypt until 305 BC when Ptolemy claimed kingship, thus beginning the Ptolemaic dynasty.¹⁴ The Ptolemaic Kingdom was an ancient Hellenistic state based in Egypt that ruled for more than 300 years and totaled fifteen Ptolemaic leaders. The initial century and a half of the Ptolemies was the most prosperous era the dynasty had experienced, which laid

⁹ Keating-Zunner, Amanda. “Chapter 1: Introduction to the Anthropology of Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion.” *Medium*, (Dec. 01, 2020).

¹⁰ Macedonian Empire – ca. 359 – 323 B.C. Ancient Greek kingdom that established an ephemeral empire and introduced what is known as the Hellenistic Age.

¹¹ Burke, Cunha. “The Death of Alexander the Great” (2004).

¹² Hellenistic Period- Greek rule in eastern Mediterranean and Middle East (323 BC – 30 BC).

¹³ The Diadochi- Greek for “successors.” Rival Macedonian generals, families, and friends of Alexander the Great who fought over his empire following his death in 323 BC.

Satrap- A provincial governor in the ancient Persian empire, and in several of their successors.

¹⁴ Ptolemaic Dynasty- Kingdom in ancient Egypt ruled by Macedonian Greek royalty during the Hellenistic period, sometimes referred to as the Lagid Dynasty.

the foundation for the dynasty to be known as the most powerful politically and culturally.¹⁵ Ptolemy I Soter, the first of the Ptolemaic kings, descendants continued to rule Egypt until the death of Cleopatra VII in 30 BC and Egypt's fall to the Roman Empire.¹⁶

3. Alexandria, Egypt

Though the Achaemenian empire was founded by the tolerant Cyrus the Great, the line of successors that came after him only sometimes followed his example. Egypt was invaded and fell under Persian rule in 525 BC by Cambyses II, beginning the twenty-seventh dynasty of Egypt.¹⁷ It is believed that Cambyses founded a cult of Cyrus. This ruler cult deified the Achaemenian founding king, Cyrus the Great. A British classical scholar and writer, W. W. Tarn, states in the article, *The Hellenistic Ruler-Cult and the Daemon*, that there was a cult of Cyrus that existed during Alexander's life, which was said to have been founded by Cambyses following Cyrus' death.¹⁸ This act of deifying the ruler later appears in Ptolemaic Egypt, with the cult of Alexander and the Ptolemies. However, the arrival of Persian king Artaxerxes III in 358/359 BC brought much brutality to the Egyptians.

Artaxerxes is remembered as a cruel ruler who killed many of his relatives to secure the throne. The same brutality was shown to the native religions of his conquered lands, including the raiding of temples and Artaxerxes' supposed killing of the sacred Egyptian Apis bull with his own hands. It was not until the arrival of the Macedonian empire that the Egyptians were freed from their rule. The subjugation that the Egyptians endured at the hands of the Persians resulted in a warm welcome of the new ruler, Alexander the Great. Such circumstances provided the means to develop a city founded on cooperation. Alexandria was a city of the conquered and conquerors, but it quickly became a new city built on a syncretized version of the two distinct entities. This was due to Alexander's and the Ptolemies' understanding that the path of least resistance was through mutual assimilation.

Following Alexander's death, the Ptolemies' focus was to curate the city of Alexandria further as the esteemed ruler had planned. Such an endeavor included the efforts made to retrieve Alexander's corpse and bring it back to Alexandria, the development of the Ptolemaic ruler cult and the cult of Serapis, the reintroduction of sibling marriage, the translation of Egyptian Coptic writing and development of the Greek-Egyptian Demotic writing, as well as the

¹⁵ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Macedonian and Ptolemaic Egypt." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 3, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Egypt/Macedonian-and-Ptolemaic-Egypt-332-30-bce>.

¹⁶ Cleopatra's death and defeat in the battle of Actium resulted in the acquisition of Egypt by the Roman triumvirate, Octavian, who was soon to become the first Emperor of Rome. Octavian's victory at Actium in 31 BC resulted in his crowning as Rome's first Emperor, Augustus (27 BC – 14 CE), thus beginning the Roman Empire (27 BC – 476 CE). Due to its acquisition of Egypt being outside of the chronological scope of the topic, the Roman Empire will not be included in the research.

Battle of Actium- Naval battle fought on the western coast of Greece between Roman Emperor Augustus and Roman general Mark Antony in 31 BC.

Octavian- Also known as: Augustus, August Caesar. Original name: Gaius Octavius. Adopted name: Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus.

¹⁷ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Cambyses II." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 3, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cambyses-II>.

¹⁸ Tarn, W. W. "The Hellenistic Ruler-Cult and the Daemon." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 48 (1928): 210. <https://doi.org/10.2307/624962>.

construction of the temples at Philae, Edfu, and Dendera, the famed lighthouse known as the Pharos of Alexandria, and the library at Alexandria. Emphasis was made on the Ptolemies' part to not only respect the Egyptian gods but to join the natives in revering them, the Pharaohs in becoming them, and develop a cooperation that the world had not yet seen. Approaching Egyptian mythology not only from a place of tolerance but with respect and integration following the brutality of the Persians resulted in many successes for the Ptolemies, the most important of which was their extensive reign.

Following Alexander's death in 305 BC, Ptolemy I Soter followed Cambyses' example in creating a ruler cult of Alexander, honoring him as a divine figure. The first step in doing so required that Ptolemy return Alexander's body to a tomb in Alexandria, which he did in late 322/321 BC. Once Alexander's body was returned to Alexandria, Ptolemy I could use it well by further obscuring the line between Greeks and Egyptians. A ceremonial ritual that occurred in the ruler cult of Alexander was interpreted by Classical scholar and ancient historian Dr. L. R. Taylor to be a form of communion service," wherein which the Macedonian generals passed around a single cup of wine, each sipping from it and ingesting what Tarn confesses to believe is the symbolic "blood of Alexander."¹⁹ Tarn, however, thinks this act of "communion" to be a result of Alexander's toasts with his generals, which had become a Macedonian custom. Whether implicit or explicit, this communion-toast resulted in Alexander's subsequent deification and such a custom was brought from Greece to Egypt. The cult of Alexander bound the two together, thus cementing their unification. The portrayal of future Pharaohs as gods continued with Ptolemy II Philadelphus's introduction of an official ruler cult in 282 BC, before which any Pharaoh of Egypt did not become a god or object of idolization.²⁰

When it came to the act of becoming Pharaoh, Ptolemy II Philadelphus dedicated himself to the role so heartily that he adopted the royal Egyptian tradition of sibling marriage to his sister/wife, Arsinoe II.²¹ Together, the ruling pair ushered themselves, Alexandria, and thus the Hellenistic world, into a new modern age of mutual assimilation. Both Ptolemy II and his wife Arsinoe II were depicted in varying styles, consisting of prominent Egyptian influences and subtle Greek styles. Egyptian features of Ptolemy II Philadelphus are best seen in figure 1. ²² Figure 2 is helpful to convey the prominence of this depiction (though it is of an unknown Ptolemaic King) as it shows yet again the Egyptian style eyes and eyebrows, this time with the addition of a headdress. The Egyptian style coalesces with the Greeks by depicting a round face.²³ Arsinoe II's features also mimic this, as seen in figure 3, with heavy Egyptian influences.

¹⁹ Tarn, W. W. "The Hellenistic Ruler-Cult and the Daemon."

²⁰ Rowell, Sheila. "The Alexander Cult and Ptolemaic Ruler Worship." *Ancient History Resources for Teachers*; North Ryde Vol. 19, Issue 2, (Jan 1, 1989): 82.

Pfeifer, Stefan. "The God Serapis, His Cult and the Beginnings of the Ruler Cult in Ptolemaic Egypt." Accessed: (Oct. 14, 2022): 388.

²¹ Heinen, H. "Ptolemy II Philadelphus." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 5, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ptolemy-II-Philadelphus>.

²² Ptolemy II- See Appendix: Figure 1.

Fig. 1, *Face Attributed to Ptolemy II Philadelphos or a Contemporary*, Greywacke, 285 – 246 B.C., The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/548230>.

²³ Ptolemaic King (Unknown)- See Appendix: Figure 2.

Fig. 2, *King's Head with Egyptian Headdress but Greek Hair and Features*, Gabbro, 2nd century B.C. or early 1st century B.C., The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/577944>.

Arsinoe II is styled with a headdress (adorned with two snakes), slender eyes, and a sharp chin.²⁴ Contrarily, Greek adaptations of the Ptolemaic queens resemble figure 4, *Marble Head of a Ptolemaic Queen*, a sculpture of an unknown Ptolemaic queen in a Greek style. She styles short, curly hair and Greek facial features.²⁵ Although figure 3 of Arsinoe II does not show Greek influence, her willingness to welcome Egyptian culture inspired future queens further to curate a mixture of Greek and Egyptian features. This act resulted in artifacts that continue to represent the unique quality of syncretism that the Ptolemaic Dynasty exhibited.

Revering the gods was especially easy for the Hellenistic rulers as many Egyptian gods correlated well with the Greeks. Throughout the Ptolemaic dynasty, several temples were erected in honor of Egyptian, Greek, and syncretized versions of the gods. Such temples include the temple of Isis at Philae, the temple of Horus at Edfu, and the temple of Serapis at the Serapeum. Constructing the temples was a challenging feat and took many years before completion. Still, the effort, time, and money spent doing so were encouraged by the sanguine reaction of those dwelling within the Hellenistic empire. Additionally, the construction of the Pharos of Alexandria, the theatre, and the library demonstrates the significance that the Ptolemies aimed for Alexandria to achieve. A distinct mark of the prominent port city, the Pharos of Alexandria, would be a tool to transfer Isis' name throughout the Mediterranean.

Isis was a vital goddess in ancient Egyptian religion whose name, narrative, and worship spread throughout the Greco-Roman world. As the sister/wife of the significant God-king, Osiris, and mother of the revered son, Horus, Isis's role in Egyptian mythology was substantial. As such, it was clear to the Ptolemies that respecting and embracing her was necessary. Ptolemy II emphasized her importance to the Ptolemies by the decision to construct the Temple of Isis at Philae. Due to the locality of Alexandria and its subsequent prominence as a port city, ships (some of which bore Isis' name) departed from the shores, spreading her name throughout the empire. The Temple of Isis at Philae is strategically located on the Island of Philae in the Nile River. The completed construction of Pharos of Alexandria in 247 BC added to the vibrant number of visitors. Assuredly, the heavily trafficked waters of the Mediterranean intensified the transmission of Isis' name, and ones relevant to it such as Osiris and Horus, by the substantial number of sailors ebbing and flowing amongst the shores. As a result of this diffusion, depictions of Isis can be seen coalescing with Greek style.

A statue in Egypt is best determined to be Isis by the Egyptian-styled hair (long and straight), the position of her body, either sitting or standing upright and stiff, her sharp/pointed chin, petite clothing, with her son Horus in her arms and a sun disk above her head.²⁶ Depictions of Isis changed, however, as her name and worship spread throughout the Mediterranean and adopted Graeco-Roman traits. She began to emerge with Greek-styled hair (short and curly), positioned in a relaxed stance/position of sitting/laying or standing, with a

²⁴ Arsinoe II- See Appendix: Figure 3.

²⁵ Ptolemaic Queen (Unknown)- See Appendix: Figure 4.

Fig. 4, *Marble Head of a Ptolemaic Queen*, Marble, ca. 270 – 250 B.C., The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/257603>.

²⁶ Isis- See Appendix: Figure 5 (Right).

Fig. 5, *Triad of Osiris, Isis, and Horus*, Cupreous metal, 664 – 30 B.C.

round face, Greek-style clothing, and often a torch in hand (a symbol of the Greek goddess Demeter).²⁷

Although Greek and Egyptian mythology were the predominant religions in Alexandria during the time being discussed, the Jewish community was well-respected and tolerated. They held a good portion of Egyptian territory, occupying two of the five parts of Alexandria, and achieved significant status as political leaders and generals.²⁸ According to the German theologian Emil Shürer, Ptolemy I distributed 30,000 Jewish soldiers throughout Egypt in garrisons, several of which have been found on the eastern side of the Delta.²⁹ Although the Jews retained the religious and lawful beliefs of their forebears, the unique environment of Alexandria and its significant Greek presence managed to influence the Jewish community both societally and culturally.³⁰ Shürer states that Ptolemy II had the Torah translated into Greek, with the city celebrating two annual feasts to commemorate the event. As a result, the Torah was read in Greek in the many synagogues throughout Alexandria.³¹ This led to the creation of Hellenistic Judaism. Though, during the period discussed, the Alexandrian Jewish community does not show ample religious syncretism with the relative cultures, many societal correlations can be found, as well as several religious continuities such as the Osiris myth and the story of Cain and Abel.

4. The Osiris Myth

The Osiris myth, consisting of Osiris, Isis, and Horus, was a foundational religious depiction for ancient Egyptians. Isis and her husband Osiris are two of the nine primeval gods of the Egyptian Ennead, the first-born children to the Egyptian Geb, god of the earth, and Nut, goddess of the sky.³² The joint narrative of Osiris, Isis, and their son Horus is essential to discuss as it illustrates many connections and correlations between Egyptian, Greek, Roman mythology, Judaism, and early Christianity. However, it is important to iterate that the connections between the relative religions vary depending on the versions of the myth discussed.

In the most popular version of the myth, Osiris, one of the most important gods of ancient Egypt, was believed to have been murdered by his brother, Set, another member of the nine primeval gods of the Egyptian Ennead. Set murdered his brother Osiris by first trapping him in a coffin and sinking it to the bottom of the Nile River, then dismembering his body into fourteen pieces and spreading them across the world. Isis searched and collected thirteen of

²⁷ See Appendix: Figure 6; Figure 7.

Fig. 6, *Plaster Cast of a Metal Emblema of Isis-Tyche*, Plaster, 2nd half of the 3rd century – 2nd century B.C.

Fig. 7, *Pendant: Bust of Isis*, Gold, 30 B.C. - A.D. 330.

"Which Greek Goddess is Isis Like?" *Rhakotis Magazine*, Apr. 30, 2019. <https://rhakotis.com/2019/04/30/which-greek-goddess-is-isis-like/>.

²⁸ "Alexandria, Jews In." *McClintock and Strong Biblical Cyclopedia*, Accessed: Oct. 15, 2022.

<https://www.biblicalcyclopedia.com/A/alexandria-jews-in.html>.

²⁹ Shürer, Emil. "Alexandria, Egypt – Ancient." *Jewish Encyclopedia* accessed: Oct. 15, 2022.

<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1171-alexandria-egypt-ancient#anchor10>.

³⁰ Shürer, Emil. "Alexandria, Egypt – Ancient." *Jewish Encyclopedia* accessed: Oct. 15, 2022.

<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1171-alexandria-egypt-ancient#anchor10>.

³¹ Shürer, Emil. "Alexandria, Egypt – Ancient." *Jewish Encyclopedia* accessed: Oct. 15, 2022.

<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1171-alexandria-egypt-ancient#anchor10>.

³² Egyptian Ennead- Group of nine deities in Egyptian mythology worshipped at Heliopolis.

Osiris' body parts, only missing the penis. After the rites of embalment were performed on Osiris' body by the Egyptian god Anubis, Isis' beating wings forced air into Osiris' nose, resurrecting the god-king in an act of magic, thus creating the famed ritual of ancient Egyptian mummification. Following his resurrection, Osiris became the embodiment of divine kingship. Though Osiris' phallus was not found, Isis conceived their child Horus through magical means. Horus, son of Osiris, later avenged his father's murder by killing his uncle, Set, and taking his place on the throne as the living king.³³ Essentially, Horus (and any Pharaoh of Egypt after him) became the physical embodiment (or avatar) of the living Osiris, while Osiris was the deceased king ruling the underworld.

5. Osiris

As the first-born son of Geb and Nut, Osiris was murdered by his brother. Osiris' death by the hand of his brother, Seth, exhibits a critical link between Egyptian mythology and Judaism as it depicts a similar story to that of the Torahic Cain and Abel. Myths of Cain and Abel and Seth and Osiris include two brothers, one of whom kills the other. For Cain, the factors leading to this are considered jealousy. The Torah tells the story of Cain and Abel, sons of Adam and Eve, making offerings to God. Cain, a farmer, offered God subpar produce, while Abel, a shepherd, offered and sacrificed his finest sheep.³⁴ With Abel's acceptance by God and Cain's denial came the world's first murder.³⁵ However, theories have arisen that the factors contributing to this famed killing are more complex. Cain and Abel are believed in the Torah to have been born with twin sisters. Cain, the first-born son, was born with one twin sister, while Abel is believed to have been born with two. God, to populate the Earth, permitted the marriage of each brother to his sister. It is speculated that jealousy arose between the brothers as Cain wanted to marry the wife that was meant for Abel.³⁶ This hypothesis also relates closely with the Osiris myth, as they both include jealousy and lust as the result of murder.

Set's murder of his brother, Osiris, is believed to be a result of jealousy. However, in Egyptian mythology, this is attributable to his brother, Osiris, who claimed kingship, and in some versions of the story, Set's wife, Nephthys, was impregnated by Osiris. Both the Torahic and Egyptian tales tell of a "chosen" brother and son of God whom his sibling murdered out of spite and jealousy. So, the myths are similar in the actions undertaken and correlate to one another in their ethos. However, differences between the two illustrations are plentiful and bound to occur due to the differing cultures, needs, and agendas.

To name a point of contrast, Cain's murder of his brother Abel resulted first in the punishment of exile. Later, after repenting to God due to his fear of being killed, he was given the "mark of Cain", which is believed to be a physical mark upon his body that deters anyone

³³ Mark, Joshua J. "Osiris." *World History Encyclopedia*. Mar. 16, 2016. <https://www.worldhistory.org/osiris/>.

³⁴ Kesselman, Shlomo Chaim. "Cain and Abel: The Story of the First Sibling Rivalry." *Chabad* (accessed: Oct. 6, 2022).

³⁵ Torah: Book of Genesis Chapter 4; Mark, Joshua J. "Osiris." *World History Encyclopedia*. Mar. 16, 2016. <https://www.worldhistory.org/osiris/>.

³⁶ Kesselman, Shlomo. "Cain and Abel." *Chabad*, (accessed: Oct. 6, 2022). Bereishit Rabbah 22:7.

from killing him.³⁷ God promised Cain that if he were killed, the killer would then be cursed.³⁸ Seven generations later, Cain was killed in a hunting accident by the hand of his descendant, Lamech. Contrarily, Set's punishment did not include any such mark or curse. Instead, he was met with death by the hand of his nephew, Horus, which elicits a final connection between the two myths as both Seth and Cain's murder of their brothers were avenged by their descendants.³⁹ However, how each myth depicts the act of killing differs. Seth chose trapping, drowning, and dismemberment. For Cain, his choice is debated but is most popularly believed to have been in a sacrificial form of slitting Abel's neck. The last notable instance of discontinuity between the two myths occurs with the resurrection of Osiris and not of Abel. However, with resurrection comes new links to early Christianity. Instantly, one thinks of Jesus Christ.

Although there are many correlations between the figures Osiris and Jesus Christ, due to the advent of Christianity and historical information about Jesus being outside of the chronological scope of this paper, it is only mentioned here briefly as a point of disparity. Following the interpretation of Christ through Judaism, Jesus was human and not a deity of divine nature or resurrected. The idea of God as a duality or trinity is considered heretical within Judaism and, by some Judeo-Christians, polytheistic. The shift of Christ's divine illustration was not seen until early Christianity and the Roman Empire arrived. However, the preemptive to early Christianity is, in part, Hellenistic Judaism – and thus deserves acknowledgement.

There are many similarities between Egyptian and Greek mythologies, most of which are expressed through their syncretic figures. A prime example is Serapis. Serapis is a composite god comprised of several Egyptian and Hellenistic deities – most notably the gods Osiris, Apis, and Zeus – that was prominent during the reign of Ptolemy I to encourage unity and establish the dominance of the Ptolemaic Dynasty. Serapis, however, is an addition to the earlier assimilation between the Egyptian gods Osiris and Apis, known to those living near Saqqara as Osirapis or Osorapis.⁴⁰

Much of the worship of Serapis was done in Alexandria at the great Serapeum, a temple built for the worship of Serapis by Ptolemy I. Serapis' iconography was most influenced by Hellenistic elements, often depicting a Greek style man (robe, hairstyle, and beard) along with a three-headed dog, Cerberus, at his feet.⁴¹ Although some resemblance to Osiris was also prevalent by including a basket above his head, representing Osiris' attributes to fertility and grain. Figure 11 shows Serapis with a woman, thought to be his consort, who is an assimilation of the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Greek goddess Persephone.

³⁷ Rashi, Genesis 4:15.

³⁸ Kesselman, Shlomo. "Cain and Abel." *Chabad*, (accessed: Oct. 6, 2022).

Curse/Mark of Cain - (some interpretations considered this to be a physical curse/mark on his body).

³⁹ Book of Genesis, Chapter 4.

⁴⁰ Mark, Joshua J. "Serapis." *World History Encyclopedia*. Oct. 19, 2021.

<https://www.worldhistory.org/Serapis/>.

⁴¹ See Appendix: Figure 8.

Fig. 8, Komon, *Plaque with Greek Dedication to Isis, Serapis, and Apollo by Komon for the Benefit of Ptolemy IV and V*, Marble, 210 – 204 B.C.

6. Isis

As mutual assimilation was the tactic of choice for Ptolemy I, Isis' role in the Osiris myth of wife/motherhood, strength, protection, and kingship was quickly transcribed to fit several Greek pantheon goddesses. One such connection is with the Greek goddess Demeter. According to Herodotus, "Isis... is Demeter in the Greek language", while "Osiris when translated is Dionysus, and Isis is more similar to Demeter than any other goddess."⁴² Herodotus' claim is not made recklessly. He knows Isis and Demeter have several correlating factors to their myths, including their comparable searches across the Earth for a relative.

As we know, Isis searched for her husband's corpse. Her search led her to Byblos in Syria, where Osiris's body washed ashore. A sacred tree is said to have grown around Osiris's body, a tree which the king of Byblos, Malcander, cuts down and erects as a holy pillar in his house. Isis disguised herself and, after catching the queen's attention, was asked to nurse the royal baby, Dictys. For several nights, Isis placed the baby boy in fire but once discovered by the queen, decided to reveal herself, informing the queen that if the ritual had continued, the boy would have been immortal.⁴³ In Greek mythology, we see that Demeter, too, had to journey the earth.

Demeter's journey was prompted by the kidnapping of her daughter, Persephone, by the God of the underworld, Hades. Demeter disguised herself as an older woman and when at Eleusis, was invited into the king's house by his wife, Metaneira, and asked to nurse their son, Demophon. For several nights, Demeter placed Demophon into fire in a magical rite, intending to make him a god. When interrupted by Demophon's mother, Demeter reveals that Demophon would have been immortal had the ritual continued.⁴⁴ Although differences are present between the two myths, it is also apparent that they correlate in three impactful ways: the first being the kidnapping of a relative, and the kidnapping of said relative leads to correlation number two as it prompts both Demeter and Isis to embark on a journey across the earth in search for said relative. Finally, our last but far from least connection regards the act of a magical ritual by both goddesses to elicit immortality. Assuredly, such connections would have stood out to Ptolemy I as a potential link between the Greeks and Egyptians. Additionally, Isis's relation to Ptolemy's favored figure, Serapis aided in the efforts to amalgamate the two goddesses as it would have been necessary to deliver a consort for Serapis.

The Isis-Demeter figure was the most suitable depiction of Serapis' consort as they both displayed a fierce wife and mother. As stated best in El-Sayed El-Aswad's article, *Archaic Egyptian Cosmology*, "Isis took the roles of her husband as defender and protector of her family. She was known as a powerful and dominant person in supporting her husband who, in turn, was presented as powerless."⁴⁵ However, Demeter too, exhibits traits similar to Isis as

⁴² Herodotus Histories 2.5.9 and I 13.5.

⁴³ Mark, Joshua J. "Isis." *World History Encyclopedia*. Feb. 19, 2016. <https://www.worldhistory.org/isis/>. Plutarch. "Plutarch's Lives: (Isis and Osiris)." Translated from the Original Greek, with Notes, Critical and Historical, and a Life of Plutarch. New York: Derby & Jackson, 1859.

⁴⁴ Cartwright, Mark. "Demeter." *World History Encyclopedia*. Nov. 12, 2019. <https://www.worldhistory.org/demeter/>.

"To Demeter." Homer. Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homeric, translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, William Heinemann, 1920, pp. 289–325.

⁴⁵ el-Sayed el-Aswad. "Archaic Egyptian Cosmology." *Anthropos* 92, no. 1/3 (1997): 69–81.

described by El-Aswad in her journey and determination to find her daughter, Persephone. Together, the two highlight Egypt's unique trait of emphasizing powerful women, creating the perfect tool for the Ptolemies to display their respect for Egyptian culture and religion. Moreover, Isis' conception and birth of her son Horus increased her significance in the Greco-Roman world, later developing more syncretism with Christianity.

8. Horus

Horus, son of Osiris and Isis, was significant to the Osiris myth as he is known to have united the two lands of Lower and Upper Egypt.⁴⁶ Isis, after locating Osiris's body, bandaged it (only missing the phallus), and revived him to rule the underworld. Following his resurrection, Osiris' body remained lifeless. Nonetheless, Isis magically conceived of their son Horus. His birth completed the Osirian Triad, otherwise called the Egyptian Holy Trinity (a concept not present in the other relevant myths at the time).

In his childhood and adolescent years, Horus (referred to as "Har-pi-kruti," or "Horus the child") was depicted throughout the Ptolemaic era as a child upon his mother, Isis's lap.⁴⁷ In many depictions, Horus is breastfed by his mother, representing his infancy and dependence on Isis, yet another reason the goddess held so much prominence in the Hellenistic world. When an adult, Horus (referred to as "Haroreris" or "Horus the Elder," avenged the murder of his father and rightfully succeeded the throne.⁴⁸ Upon Horus' death, the succeeding Pharaohs took on his role as the living king and identified themselves with the god. After death, however, the Pharaoh equates to Osiris. Glen Holland states it best in her article, *Osiris, Seth, Horus, and the Divine Origins of Egyptian Kingship*, that "as soon as an individual pharaoh dies, he is no longer the divine pharaoh but is now identified with Osiris instead of Horus, and the new pharaoh assumes the role of Horus as the divine pharaoh."⁴⁹ The Pharaohs' embodiment of Osiris and his son Horus, especially during the Ptolemaic dynasty, reveals another instance of these figures' importance to the ruling authority. El-Sayed El-Aswad stated in *Archaic Egyptian Cosmology* that within this synthesis, "Osiris and Horus became two aspects or faces of the same identity."⁵⁰ The Greek rulers' adoption of this divine embodiment not only aided in stabilizing their political position as foreign rulers but also assisted in the transference of Horus' name throughout the Mediterranean.

Horus' name is referred to differently depending upon the stage of his life, i.e., Horus the Younger and Horus the Elder. However, Horus's role in the Osiris myth was quite easily mixed with the Greeks, becoming known as Harpocrates and later giving rise to the cult of Isis in Rome during the Roman Empire. Harpocrates is a valuable example of religious syncretism in Ptolemaic Egypt as it is a Hellenized version of the Egyptian god Horus, adapted by the Greeks.

⁴⁶ Mark, Joshua J. "Horus." *World History Encyclopedia*. Mar. 16, 2016. <https://www.worldhistory.org/Horus/>.

⁴⁷ See Appendix: Figure 9.

Fig. 9, *Isis Nursing Horus*, Bronze or copper alloy, ca. 1070 – 343 B.C., The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/553034>.

Mark, Joshua J. "Horus." *World History Encyclopedia*. Mar. 16, 2016. <https://www.worldhistory.org/Horus/>.

⁴⁸ Holland, Glen. S. "Osiris, Set, Horus, and the Divine Origins of Kingship." *Wondrium Daily*, Dec. 1, 2017. <https://www.wondriumdaily.com/osiris-set-horus-and-the-divine-origins-of-kingship/>.

⁴⁹ Holland, Glen. S. "Osiris, Set, Horus, and the Divine Origins of Kingship." *Wondrium Daily*, Dec. 1, 2017.

⁵⁰ El-Aswad, El-Sayed. "Archaic Egyptian Cosmology." *Anthropos* 92, no. 1/3 (1997): 69–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40465357>.

Harpocrates was a Hellenized version of the Egyptian, meaning “Horus the Child.”⁵¹ Often depicted as a naked child in connection to Horus, and with his hand to his mouth (a gesture that the Egyptians believed symbolized childhood). Harpocrates was often depicted in a Greek style with features such as short, curly hair and a full or round face.⁵² Yet, the syncretic chief god Horus-Apollo is another example. The city of Apollonopolis Magna, formerly known as Edfu, was a Greco-Roman city named after the syncretic chief god Horus-Apollo. In its territory lies the Temple of Edfu, built by the Ptolemies between 237 and 57 BC as a show of worship to the falcon god Horus. The Ptolemies' decision to rename the city of Edfu and erect a temple to Horus aided in their successful illustration of reverence and concurrence.

9. Conclusion

The Osiris myth was foundational to ancient Egypt for thousands of years; however, the establishment of Alexandria and its continued growth through the Ptolemaic dynasty made the Osiris myth transnational. Alexandria's prominence as a port city and focus on politics, the arts, and science rivaled that of Rome and Greece. Still, the city's distinct quality of syncretism, both societally and religiously, was an isolated occurrence. The Ptolemaic rulers occupied Egypt for 275 years and output many religions and cults, including the Osiris myth and its figures.

Being placed on the Mediterranean Sea resulted in Alexandria setting a new standard for unity as multiculturalism had been seen before, but syncretism was solely Alexandrian. Consisting of Egyptian natives, Greeks, and Jews, the city was home to several differing religious beliefs, customs, and political views. Those factors often correlated with one another, and where there could have been subjugation, we find that there was mutual assimilation instead. Alexander the Great and the Ptolemies that succeeded him accepted that power need not come from brutality, as seen by the Assyrians, but from unity and mutual respect. Though discontentment is bound to occur in any city over a period – and in Alexandria, it did – what matters most is what that city culminated to be.

Osiris connects heavily with Greek culture, demonstrated mainly by his fusion with Greek gods in the advent of Serapis. However, his connection to Judaism (and later Christianity) is too distinct to ignore, as the illustration of Osiris' death parallels that of Abel. Isis correlates heavily with the Greek goddess Demeter and developed a prominence and power throughout the Mediterranean world that, as a woman, was unrivaled at the time. Her son, Horus, is reminiscent of Isis and Osiris and gained prominence in the Hellenistic world. He was fused with the Greek god Apollo and the Pharaohs, given the Greek name of Harpocrates, and commonly depicted in Greek styles. Though the amalgamations occurring were not solely based on religion, religious syncretism during this time in Alexandria is distinct because it was the first city of its kind and managed to facilitate such fusion on a scale large enough to be revered today. The level of multiculturalism, unity, and acculturation present in Alexandria can act as the foundation for understanding the potential unity of the modern world both religiously and societally.

⁵¹ “Harpocrates.” *Calouste Gulbenkian Museum*. Jun. 19, 2020. <https://gulbenkian.pt/museu/en/collection-of-stories/harpocrates/>.

⁵² See Appendix: Figure 10.

Fig. 10, *Statuette Representing Harpokrates*, Copper alloy, 332 B.C. - 200 A.D., The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/546198>.

Appendix



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

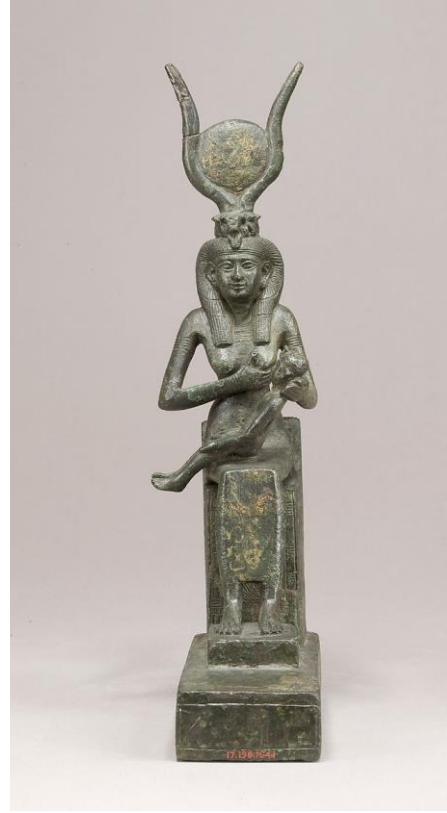


Figure 9



Figure 10

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<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40465357>.
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<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/548230>.
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<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/577944>.
- Fig. 3, *Head Attributed to Arsinoe II*, Limestone (Indurated), 278 – 270 B.C., The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/547699>.
- Fig. 4, *Marble Head of a Ptolemaic Queen*, Marble, ca. 270 – 250 B.C., The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/257603>.

Fig. 5, *Triad of Osiris, Isis, and Horus*, Cupreous metal, 664 – 30 B.C., The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/546178>.

Fig. 6, *Plaster Cast of a Metal Emblema of Isis-Tyche*, Plaster, 2nd half of the 3rd century – 2nd century B.C., The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/259138>.

Fig. 7, *Pendant: Bust of Isis*, Gold, 30 B.C. - A.D. 330, The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/547918>.

Fig. 8, Komon, *Plaque with Greek Dedication to Isis, Serapis, and Apollo by Komon for the Benefit of Ptolemy IV and V*, Marble, 210 – 204 B.C, The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/551367>.

Fig. 9, *Isis Nursing Horus*, Bronze or copper alloy, ca. 1070 – 343 B.C., The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/553034>.

Fig. 10, *Statuette Representing Harpokrates*, Copper alloy, 332 B.C. - 200 A.D., The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/546198>.

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