



Comments on Plutarch's essay On Isis and Osiris

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Comments on Plutarch's essay *On Isis and Osiris*

Gregory Nagy

This compressed and selective commentary, with special reference to wording about the *sōma* 'body' of Osiris, features summaries, paraphrases, and quotations of Plutarch's key formulations. I enclose within brackets ({}) my own interpretations wherever they concern matters that are not explicitly addressed in Plutarch's essay. A most useful commentary is that of Griffiths 1970.

§1 (351C) The essay is addressed to Clea, priestess at Delphi. It is relevant to this essay that she is connected with the priesthoods at Delphi, specifically with a priesthood involved in the cult of Dionysus. (Plutarch himself was a priest of Apollo at Delphi.) In terms of Hellenic traditions, Dionysus is the equivalent of Osiris: see §§41, 44, 55, 57, 58. Plutarch makes it explicit at §55 (364E) that the cult of Dionysus is relevant to Clea: as we read there, Clea is not only *arkhēis* 'priestess' of a group of female devotees called the *Thuiades* in Delphi: she has also been 'consecrated' [*kathōsiōmenē*] in the 'sacred rites of Osiris' [*Osiriaka hiera*] through the priestly connections of both her father and mother [*apo patros kai mētros*]. {Throughout his essay, Plutarch speaks to Clea in a dual role: she is an insider to the mysteries of both Dionysus and Osiris. This dual role qualifies her as someone who will understand both Hellenic and Egyptian traditions.}

§2 (352B) On Isis as daughter of Hermes, who is the Hellenic equivalent of Egyptian Thoth (hereafter I will just say Thoth) ... This identity is linked here with her status as the foremost of the 'Muses' in Hermopolis; Isis is also linked with Thoth as the inventor of *grammatikē* and

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mousikē, 352A. {Compare Aesop's Isis in the *Life of Aesop* traditions.} Her devotees carry the *hieros logos* 'sacred wording' in their *psukhai* as if in a *kistē* 'chest'.

§3 (352F) On Typhon, who is the Hellenic equivalent of Egyptian Seth (hereafter I will just say Seth) ... Seth is described as 'dismembering' and 'making disappear' [*diaspōn kai aphanizōn*] the *hieros logos* 'sacred wording' [*ton hieron logon*]. But the goddess Isis 'assembles' and 'puts together' this sacred wording [*hon hē theos sunagei kai suntithēsi*] and 'gives it as a tradition to those who are being initiated' [*kai paradidōsi tois teloumenois*]; the emphasis here is on both Isis and on her antithesis, Seth, who is also the antithesis of Osiris, Horus, etc. So Seth disintegrates the *hieros logos* 'sacred wording', while Isis reintegrates it and makes it the traditional formula for initiates to learn in the process of their initiation.

§4 (354A) Plutarch mentions here in passing a detail that he will narrate more fully at a later point: at the time of a full moon, Seth finds the *sōma* 'body' of Osiris lying in his 'wooden coffin' [*xulinos soros*]. Seth 'dismembered' [*dierripsen*] it. See later on at §18 (357F–358A), where Plutarch narrates how Seth finds the *sōma* in the moonlight and 'takes it apart' [*dieleîn*], and there are 14 'parts' [*merē*]. See also §70.

§5 (354C–D) On Ammon as a vocative ... {Cf. the Greek name Poseidon and the Roman name Iuppiter as old vocatives. The vocative aspects of the name Ammon are I think relevant to the narrative about Alexander at the precinct of Ammon, where the salutation of the oracle is meant to determine the identity of Alexander.}

§6 (354E) On Solon ... Pythagoras ... Lycurgus in Egypt, *inter alios* ... They all get informed by the 'priests'. {Note the emphasis on Panhellenic prestige. The prestige of such information as exchanged by Plutarch and Clea is evidently meant to be parallel to the Egyptian lore connected with such prestigious Panhellenic figures as Solon, Pythagoras, Lycurgus.}

§7 (355A) Plutarch says to Clea: When you hear what the Egyptians ‘tell-as-myths’ [*muthologōusin*] about ‘wanderings’ [*planai*] (obviously of Isis) and ‘dismemberments’ [*diamelismoī*] (obviously of Osiris) and many such ‘sacred experiences’ [*pathēmata*], you must not accept that any of these things happened that way. He connects this statement with how the Egyptians are ‘making enigmas (*ainigmata*)’ [*ainittomenoi*] (355C). {Plutarch’s essay is meant to run these myths through a special filter, as it were. The filtering has to do partly with the subtraction of details. See §8 (355D), coming up. It also has to do with the encoding of an ‘enigma’ (*ainigma*), as Plutarch will explain later. See especially §63 (366D).}

§8 (355D) ‘This myth will be told’ [*lexetai d’ ho muthos houtos*] in the shortest possible form, with the ‘useless’ [*akhrēsta*] and the ‘superfluous’ [*peritta*] being ‘subtracted’ [*aphairethenta*].

§9 (355E) An oracular voice from the precinct of ‘Zeus’ tells Pamyles to proclaim the birth of Osiris thus: ‘that a great king, benefactor [*euergetēs*] Osiris, is born’ [*hoti megas basileus euergetēs Osiris gegone*]. {I see here an overt link with the Ptolemaic epithet Euergetes.}

§10 (356A–B) On Osiris as a culture hero, a giver of laws, who teaches by way of (1) ‘song’ [*ōidē*] and (2) the ‘craft of the Muses’ [*mousikē*]. Note that the inventors of these media are understood to be Iris and Thoth: see §2.

§11 (356B) Seth assembles 72 conspirators to execute his plot against Osiris. {The number may be relevant to the traditions concerning the Sarapeion / Serapeum at Alexandria as the place for storing the Septuagint, which was put together by 72 ‘translators’—according to some versions (by 70 in other versions).}

§12 (356C) The detail about the 72 conspirators against Osiris is mentioned in the context of the story of a coffer [*larnax*] that is made by Seth to fit exactly the dimensions of the body of Osiris. {I note that the setting for the story of the *larnax* is a *sumposion* ‘symposium’.} When Osiris enters the *larnax*, Seth and the conspirators shut it tight, so that Osiris becomes

hermetically sealed inside, and then they set it adrift on the river Nile. All this happened on the 17th of the month Athyr.

§13 (356F) Anubis is born, exposed, and found by Isis. He thereby gets his role as divine watchdog. Right after this event, Isis finds out about the fate of the floating *larnax* of Osiris.

§14 (357A) The *larnax* had floated all the way to Byblos in Phoenicia. Earlier, Plutarch gives a detail about which mouth of the Nile was the place of the exit of the *larnax* into the sea (356C μεθεῖναι διὰ τοῦ Τανιτικοῦ στόματος εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν).

§15 (357C–D) To this day, the narrative claims, the people of Byblos venerate the wood of Isis, within which the *larnax* of Osiris had been lodged and from which Isis had hewn out that *larnax* in order to take it back home to Egypt, body and all. {This detail is important for Ptolemaic and post-Ptolemaic phases of the sacred narratives about the ‘wandering’ of Isis to Byblos in Phoenicia.}

§16 (357D) The *eidōlon* ‘image’ of any dead person, when it is ritually carried around in a ‘box’ [*kibōtion*], is not just some ‘reminder’ [*hupomnēma*], Plutarch says, of the ‘sacred experience’ [*pathos*] concerning Osiris. The ritual act of carrying around such an *eidōlon* is in the specific context of a *sumposion* ‘symposium’. {Thus, from Plutarch’s point of view, we have here a Dionysiac context.}

§17 (357E) The mythical honorand of the ritual symposium, Maneros, is envisioned as the inventor of ‘the craft of the Muses’ [*mousikē*].

§18 (357F–358A) Seth finds the *sōma* in the moonlight and ‘takes it apart’ [*dieleîn*]. There are 14 ‘parts’ [*merē*], says Plutarch, but Diodorus (1.21) says 16. {The variation between 14 and 16 may be a matter of different “snapshots” in the diachrony of this overall myth-ritual complex.} See also §4.

§19 (358A) Then Isis looks for the *sōma* in a papyrus boat. How papyrus boats are immune from attacks by crocodiles.

§20 (358A) There is a different *taphos* ‘tomb’ of Osiris for each different ‘part’ [*meros*] of Osiris in different places throughout Egypt because Isis performed a separate *taphē* ‘funeral’ for each. Another version is that she made *eidōla* ‘images’ for each polis in which Osiris is entombed. {Consider the earlier comment on *eidōla* – that are being ritually carried around at symposia.} This way, Seth will look for multiple images and not find the real thing. {Multiplicity is the disguise. By extension, variation is viewed as masking the absolute aspects of the myth and the ritual.}

§21 (358B) Only the *phallos* of Osiris is missing, which is referred to euphemistically as *aidoion* ‘[male] member’ until Plutarch’s narrative reaches the sacred context of initiation into the mysteries, and only then is it referred to as *phallos*. {I note that the mention of a *mimēma* ‘re-enactment’ of the *phallos*, as created by Isis, is precisely the context in which the *aidoion* is called the *phallos*. The implicit analogy seems to be this: natural is to artificial as non-sacred is to sacred.}

§22 (358C–D) Plutarch’s *en passant* mention here of a local myth as correlated with a local ritual is particularly striking: a snake is cut up in myth, a rope is cut up in ritual. {We see here a splendid illustration of the ethnographic value of Plutarch’s essay, beyond his own priestly (and philosophical) hermeneutics concerning the religious tensions between localized customs on one hand and universalized values on the other.}

§23 (358E) Plutarch now reaches the *kephalaia* ‘main points’ of the overall myth of Isis and Osiris; those aspects that are ‘the most inauspiciously spoken ones’ [*dusphēmīōtata*] have been ‘subtracted’ [*exhairethenta*]. The narrative elements that have thus been ‘subtracted’ are, among others: the ‘dismemberment’ [*diamelismos*] concerning Horus {I note that, as before

with the ‘sacred experiences’ or *pathēmata* concerning (*peri*) Osiris, there is avoidance of saying directly ‘of Horus’} and the beheading of Isis. {So Plutarch seems reserved (or maybe we should say minimalist) about the themes of ‘dismemberment’ [*diamelismos*].} Now Plutarch goes on to tell Clea that he knows how she has little patience with such thinking concerning gods. The ‘poets’ [*poiētai*] and ‘writers of prose’ [*logographoi*] are presented as a negative model here: they ‘weave’ [*huphainousi*] and ‘spin’ [*apoteinousi*] {cf. the usage of Latin *dēdūcere*}, like spiders! So you must understand, Clea, that *tauta* ‘these things’ about Isis and Osiris are not like that! But they do feature some ‘narratives’ [*diēgēseis*] about ‘sacred dilemmas’ [*aporiai*] and ‘sacred experiences’ [*pathē*], that ‘you of all people’, Clea, ‘will indeed understand’ [*sunēseis autē*]. So says Plutarch. He goes on to compare the *muthos* of Isis and Osiris to the rainbow [*iris*], which is the *emphasis* ‘reflection’ of the sun and which is ‘varied’ [*poikillomenē*] precisely because it is clouded, obscure, opaque. So also [*houtōs*] the *muthos* works to redirect our ‘train of thought’ [*dianoia*]. That is what their ‘sacred rites’ [*thusiai*] do ‘show indirectly’ [*hupodēloûsi*], having [*ekhousai*], as they do, a ‘mournful and melancholy’ element [*to penthimon ... kai skuthrōpon*], which is reflected, *emphainomenon*, in them (cf. his use of *emphasis* ‘reflection’, a moment ago). {Plutarch’s use of *thusiai* ‘sacred rites’ here is parallel to Plato’s usage in e.g. the *Timaeus* 26e, on which see Nagy 2002:53.} The same can be said, Plutarch adds, about the architecture of their temples ...

§24 (359A–B) {There now follows a remarkable Hellenocentric vision of Egyptian symbolism. It has to do with the symbolism of space in the architecture of Egyptian temples. Plutarch’s main point is that there are open spaces and secret spaces within them. The same point, I think, can be made about their myths as well.} The Egyptian temples have secret *stolistēria* (that is, places where one is invested for ritual), and these Plutarch compares to their Greek equivalents, to which he refers elliptically as *oikidia* and *sēkoi*. Then he talks about the

doxa or ‘belief’ as grounded variously in the various different sacred precincts of Osiris – the *doxa* of ‘the *sōma* that is said to be located in many places’ [*pollakhou keisthai legomenou tou sōmatos*]. He reports that one ‘little polis’ [*polikhnē*] is given the name of *Diokhitēs* {I take it that this name is interpreted to mean ‘exceptional’: *diekhein* can mean ‘differ’ and even ‘excel’} in that *Diokhitēs* claims to be the only city that possesses the *alēthinon* ‘genuine’ body. {Compare the traditions of Megara, a Greek *polis* that claims to be the only locale that possesses the corpse of Ino the White Goddess (Pausanias 2.42.7).} Plutarch adds immediately that Memphis has the *eidōlon* ‘image’ of the *psukhē* of Osiris, ‘which is where the *sōma* is also located’ [*hopou kai to sōma keisthai*]. {Notice that this statement is a ‘they say that’ construction, and the reader is not guaranteed that the Memphis version is compatible with the *Diokhitēs* version. The claim of Memphis, in any case, is that this city possesses the genuine *sōma* of Osiris and the genuine *eikōn* ‘image’ of his *psukhē*. So *eikōn* as a thing of culture (vs. nature), as a thing artificial (vs. natural), has a special kind of ‘genuine’ status in Memphis. See further at §47 (362D). See also my remark on *eikōn empsukhos* ‘animated image’ at §69 (368C).}

§25 (359B–C) One interpretation of the name Memphis, Plutarch reports, is ‘tomb of Osiris’. {Cf. the narrative traditions concerning Memphis as the original place where the *sōma* of Alexander the Great was housed.}

§26 (359C) How Eudoxos, conceding that there are many *taphoi* or tombs of Osiris, thinks that the *sōma* is located in Bousiris. That is where it is common knowledge that he was born, in any case. Plutarch expands on how Taphosiris means, obviously, ‘tomb of Osiris’.

§27 (359C) Plutarch says: ‘I bypass’ (the verb for ‘bypass’ here is *eân*: ἐᾶν) the mention of such ritual practices as the cutting of wood, the rending of linen, and the pouring of libations. He justifies his silence on the grounds that many aspects of the Egyptians’ ‘mystery-initiation rituals’ [*mustika*] are involved in these themes. The priests say, with regard to not only these

gods but also other gods, that their *sōmata*, once they have ‘run out of energy’ [*kamonta*], are placed ‘in their own locale’ [*par’ autois*], ‘to be taken care of’ [*therapeuesthai*] by them (that is, by the priests), but that the *psukhai* of these gods are in the skies. What follows is a set of prime examples.

§28 (359D) The *psukhē* of Isis is the Dog Star of the Greeks, the *psukhē* of Horus is Orion, and the *psukhē* of Seth is Arktos.

§29 (359D) That only the people of Thebes, unlike the other locales, do not contribute to the entombment of animals in connection with all the ‘star gods’. That this is because the people of Thebes think that no god is ‘mortal’ [*thnētos*], except for one Kneph.

§30 (359E) We see here a condemnation of Euhemerism, but no mention yet of Euhemerus by name.

§31 (359F) The star called Argo by the Greeks is the *eidōlon* ‘image’ of the ‘ship’ [*ploion*] of Osiris for the Egyptians.

§32 (360A) Euhemerus of Messene is now mentioned by name. By implication, according to Plutarch, it is the ‘turning (of gods) into stars’ [*katasterismos*] that makes it easier for Euhemerists to transfer the gods who are in the sky back to earth as humans.

§33 (360B) Plutarch’s essay arrives at the first mention of Alexander the Great, in the context of a short-list of two men of great accomplishment, the other great man being Cyrus the Great. He ponders how Alexander led his military forces almost ‘to the ends of the earth’ [*epi peras tēs gēs*], and yet men like him have kept only the name and the ‘memory’ [*mnēmē*] of noble kings. {We see here a conscious downgrading of Alexander’s cult in Egypt.} Then Plutarch cites Plato on the hubris of appropriating ‘sacred appellations’ [*epōnumiai*] for humans and of founding temples in their honor. Their repute [*doxa*] flits away in the manner of smoke, he says, and in this context he quotes Empedocles.

§34 (360D) The painter Apelles represents Alexander as wielding a thunderbolt; by contrast, Lysippus the sculptor represents him as wielding a spear. That is Alexander's 'genuine repute' [*alēthinē doxa*], and he does deserve that much.

§35 (360D–E) Plutarch approves the stance of the likes of Pythagoras, Xenocrates, Plato, and Chrysippus (listed not in that order) about the likes of Seth and Osiris and Isis: that these gods do not possess an unmixed 'divine essence' [*theion*]. Here is where the essay introduces the word *daimones*. Things that are 'subjects of singing' [*āidomena*] among the Greeks, and Plutarch mentions the 'wanderings' [*planai*] of Demeter as one of many such subjects, are just as extreme as the 'things spoken in myth' [*muthologoumena*] about things concerning Osiris and Seth 'and others'. {Plutarch obviously has in mind such themes as the 'wanderings' [*planai*] of Isis.} The same goes for the things that are 'saved' (the verb is *diasōzein*) for 'rites of sacred mysteries' [*mustika hiera*] and 'rites of initiation' [*teletai*]. There is an 'analogous rationale' [*homoios logos*] going on here, Plutarch says.

§36 (360F and following) He gives an extended discussion of *daimones*, including the Homeric usages of *daimonie* and *daimoniē*, plus the Iliadic contexts of the expression *daimoni isos* 'just like a *daimōn*'.

§37 (361A–B) How Plato shows an antithesis between Olympian gods and *daimones*.

§38 (361B) On *daimones* as attested in Hesiodic poetry.

§39 (361D) On Seth as the quintessential *daimōn*.

§40 (361D–E) Isis, as the sister and wife of Osiris and as the conqueror of Seth, does not overlook what she has gone through (1) her sacred 'struggles' [*āthloi*], (2) her sacred 'ordeals' [*agōnes*]; (3) her sacred 'wanderings' [*planai*]; and (4) her many deeds of 'mental skill' [*sophia*] and 'physical strength' [*andreia*]. Isis will not settle for 'non-remembering' [*amnēstia*] and 'silence' [*siōpē*] concerning these things. So she mixes into the 'most holy rites of initiation'

[*hagiōtatai teletai*] the physical visualizations or ‘images’ [*eikones*] and the ‘hidden meanings’ [*huponoiai*] and the ‘re-enactments’ [*mimēmata*] of the ‘sacred experiences’ [*pathēmata*] that she underwent ‘back then’ [*tote*]. And so she ‘made them holy’ [*kathōsiōse* = made *hosia*], as a ‘teaching’ [*didagma*] of ‘ritual correctness’ [*eusebeia*] and as a *paramuthion* (‘*muthos* that serves to give comfort’), intended for men and women who are in the grip of ‘analogous misfortunes’ [*homoiai sumphorai*].

§41 (361E) On account of their noble ‘striving’ [*aretē*], Isis and Osiris are *metabalontes* ‘transformed’ from *daimones agathoi* to *theoi*. They are thus like Herakles and Dionysus, of a ‘later’ era. Like those gods, they have, ‘not incongruously’ [*ouk apo tropou*], ‘cult-honors’ [*timai*] everywhere ‘of the mixed kind’ [*memigmenai*], but ‘they have the greatest power’ [*dunamenoι megiston*] ‘on the surface and below the surface of the earth’ [*huper gēn and hupo gēn*]. {Compare the antithesis of *epikhthonioi* and *hupokhthonioi* in Hesiod *Works and Days* 123 and 141, analyzed in Nagy 1999:153–154.}

§42 (361E) They say that Sarapis is none other than Pluto and that Isis is none other than Persephassa. {Note the localized cult version of the name here.} Plutarch cites Archemachus of Euboea and Heraclides Ponticus; the second source, he adds, offers the opinion that the *khrestērion* ‘oracle’ in Kanobos is that of Pluto.

§43 (361F) In this context of Pluto, Plutarch’s essay narrates the story of Ptolemy Soter and the king’s dream about seeing a *kolossos* ‘statue’ of Pluto. How a *kolossos* from Sinope was identified as the referent of the dream and brought to Alexandria.

§44 (362B) Plutarch disapproves of the kind of thinking that equates Hades allegorically (*allēgorōûsi*) with the *sōma* in abstract opposition to the *psukhē*. It is *beltion* ‘better’ to identify (*eis t’auto sunagein*) Osiris with Dionysus and Sarapis with Osiris! That Sarapis / Osiris received (*tukhonta / tukhonti* {as emended by some editors}) this *prosēgoria* ‘form of address’ when he

‘transformed’ [*metebale*] his *phusis* ‘nature’. {Compare the usage at §41 (361E).} For that reason, Sarapis is ‘common’ [*koinos*] to all, ‘as I am now aware (δῆ) that those who have taken part in his sacred rites (*hiera*) know Osiris to be’ (*hōs dē ton Osirin hoi tōn hierōn metalabontes isasin*). {My translation interprets the last accusative, *ton Osirin*, as picking up on the initial clause, *beltion de ton Osirin eis t’auto sunagein tōi Dionusōi*. In other words, those who have taken part in his sacred rites know Osiris as the one who is universal to all. Notice that the δῆ here is an emendation from δέ, via Bernardakis. That is, these participants of the cult now know Osiris to be Sarapis? Is this the way Plutarch’s archaizing model can be suited to the Egyptian religious world view that was current in his time? Here is the way I currently understand it: It is better to think of Osiris as the equivalent of Dionysus, and it is better to think of Sarapis as the equivalent of Osiris. Dionysus is the permanent model for Greeks; Sarapis is the current model for Egyptians. Osiris is an archaic priestly model for Plutarch. Maybe the expression *hote tēn phusin metebale* ‘when he transformed his nature’ refers to the changeover to Sarapis as the new god of Ptolemy Soter. For the equation of Osiris and Sarapis, the Loeb translation (Babbitt 1936) cites only 376A, but that reference is not very helpful: it just says that some Egyptian traditions feature Osiris as presiding over *pneuma* while other Egyptian traditions feature Sarapis. See §§96–97.}

§45 (362C) Sarapis is the name for ‘the one who puts into order’ [*kosmôn*], or arranges, everything. Then Plutarch gives a quasi-linguistic “folk” etymology. He is asserting this linguistic explanation in the general context of rejecting various Greek and other non-Egyptian formulations concerning Sarapis, Apis, and Osiris. He rejects the idea that Sarapis is the name of the soros of Apis.

§46 (362C) Plutarch is also attracted to another “folk etymology” of Sarapis, which he now proceeds to explain. Again, he evidently prefers such quasi-linguistic explanations to various contradictory religious explanations.

§47 (362D) ‘Most priests’ (*hoi de pleistoi tōn hierēōn*) say that Osiris and Apis ‘are entwined as one and the same thing’ [*eis t’auto...sumpeplekthai*]. They teach that Apis is the *emmorphos eikōn* ‘physical image’ of the *psukhē* of Osiris. {Cf. §24 (359A–B) on the Memphis version.} But Plutarch now offers yet another “folk etymology,” and this quasi-linguistic explanation is his preferred one.

§48 (362D–E) More meditations by Plutarch on names. How the place underneath the earth is *Amenthē*, meaning ‘the one who gives and takes away’. {Cf. the Homeric theme of Phthia as *bōtianeira*.}

§49 (362E) Plutarch recaps: Osiris and Isis ‘transformed from good *daimones* into gods’ [*ek daimonōn agathōn eis theous metēllaxan*].

§50 (363A) The *Puthagorikoi* think of Seth as *daimonikē dunamis* ‘power of *daimones*’.

§51 (363B) How the Egyptians, unlike the Greeks, think that whatever is ‘marked for sacrifice’ [*thusimon*] is ‘not near-and-dear to the gods, but just the opposite’ [*ou philon tois theois, alla t’ounantion*].

§52 (363D) Again he rejects allegorizing of the type Kronos = Khronos, Hera = Aēr.

§53 (364C) That the bull of Heliopolis, called Mneuis, is sacred to Osiris and that some say he is the same is the father of Apis.

§54 (364D) How Homer (as in *Iliad* XIV 201) learned from the Egyptians that water is the source of all. {With reference to my work on *Iliad* XIV 201 (Nagy 2009 2§§132, 140, 146), I note with interest what Plutarch says about Okeanos.} So Okeanos is Osiris and Tethys is Isis.

§55 (364E) Plutarch turns to his addressee: you of all people, Clea, know (*gignōskein*) that Osiris is the same as Dionysus. After all, you are priestess (*arkhēis*) of the *Thuiades* in Delphi. And you have also been ‘consecrated’, *kathōsiōmenē*, in the ‘sacred rites of Osiris’ [*Osiriaka hiera*], through the priestly connections of both your father and mother [*apo patros kai mētros*]. Still, for the sake of others who are not initiated, if I need to provide further testimony (*marturia*), while all along avoiding mention of those things that are taboo (*ta men aporrhēta kata khōran eōmen*). {I note again Plutarch’s usage of the verb *eân* ‘bypass’ (ἐῶμεν).} So I restrict myself to those things that they, the priests (*hiereis*), ‘ritually perform’ [*drōsi*] in a public setting, *emphanōs*, when they are ‘entombing’ [*thaptontes*] the Apis. When they ‘convey’ [verb *parakomizein*] his *sōma* on an improvised bier (*epi skhedias hotan parakomizōsin epi skhedias to sōma*), what is happening is *bakkheia*, a Bacchic ritual.

§56 (364F–365A) Furthermore, the narratives regarding the Titans and the rites celebrated by night agree with [*homologeî de kai ta Titanika kai Nuktelia*] those things that are said about the *diaspasmoi* ‘dismemberments’ of Osiris, as also about his *anabiōseis* ‘resurrections’ and *palingenesiai* ‘rebirths’ (*tois legomenois Osiridos diaspasmois kai tais anabiōsesi kai palingenesiais*). {Note the distancing plurals, implying varieties of detail in visualization!}

§57 (365A) The Egyptians point out, *deiknuousi*, the *thēkai* ‘depositories’ {we may compare *bibliothēkē*} of Osiris ‘in many different places’ [*pollakhou*], as Plutarch says he has already remarked, and so too do the people of Delphi ‘hold a local customary belief’ [*nomizousi*] that the ‘remains’ [*leipsana*] of Dionysus are ‘in their locale’ [*par’ autois*], ‘right next to the oracle’ [*para to khrēstērion*]. That is where they say that the ‘remains’ [*leipsana*] ‘are stored away’ [*apokeisthai*]. {The verb *apokeisthai* ‘to be put away, stored away’ is the passive of the verb *apotithenai* ‘put away, store away’, the noun-derivative of which is *apotheta* ‘things stored away’, as applied to writings that are not ‘published’ or ‘made public’.}

§58 (365A–B) That Dionysus is ‘in charge of’ [*kurios*] whatever is liquid or wet, *hugra phusis* (‘the nature of wetness’), not solid or dry. {Note the usage of *phusis* ‘nature’ here. We see here an indirect reference to the sacramental relationship of Dionysus with Demeter: Dionysus is to what is wet as Demeter is to what is dry, Demeter is to bread as Dionysus is to wine.}

§59 (365C) Seth throws the ‘male member’ [*aidoion*] of Osiris into the river [*potamos*], and Isis cannot find it. {I note the metonymy here.}

§60 (365F–366A) Sirius is the star of Isis, qua *hudragōgos* (‘bringer of what is wet’).

§61 (366A) That the Nile is the effluence [*aporrhoē*] of Osiris, while the *sōma* of Isis is the Earth.

§62 (366B–C) Horus is the legitimate [*gnēsios*] son of Isis, while Anubis is the illegitimate [*skotios* ‘night-dark’] son of Nephthys.

§63 (366D) The ‘confinement’ [*katheirxis*] of Osiris in the ‘coffin’ [*soros*] is the ‘concealment’ [*krupsis*] of the waters and their ‘disappearance’ [*aphanismos*]. That is the message of the enigma [*ainigma*] that is being made, *ainittesthai*. {See also §7 (355A).} What did happen, namely, that Osiris disappeared [*aphanisthēnai ton Osirin*], happened in the month of Athyr.

§64 (366E) The four things that are to be ‘lamented’ [*penthoumena*]: (1) the receding of the Nile; (2) the ceasing of the North winds; (3) that the days become shorter than the nights; (4) the defoliation. {What seems to be missing in this picture? It is the fact that there is no mention of the dismemberment, at this point}.

§65 (366F) On the 19th day, they go down to the sea. The *stolistai* ‘keepers of the sacred robes’ and the priests bring forth the ‘sacred chest’ [*hiera kistē*] which has inside it the golden ‘box’ [*kibōtion*]. {On *kibōtos* and *kibōtion* as words designating a container of texts that are waiting to be activated in performance, see Nagy 1990a:171–172, 431.} Into that they pour some

potable water (*potimou ... hudatos*). Then there is a sacred shout [*kraugē*], now that Osiris has been ‘found’ [*heurēmenou*].

§66 (367A) Afterward, while Isis was taking back (*analambanousēs*) Osiris and while she was was nurturing (*auxanousēs*) Horus, Seth was not allowed to be annihilated, since the ‘fiery element’ [*purōdes*] is needed as the antithesis to the wet element.

§67 (367B) In the course of time, Horus overpowered Seth. {I take it that this formulation works on the level of myth, not on the level of nature, where such teleology would seem counterintuitive. I say teleology here in the light of consider Plutarch’s usage of the expression *khronōi* ‘in the fullness of time’ here) }

§68 (367C) How Homer ‘sang’ [*ēidei*] that the Pharos was a day’s sail distant from land. In Plutarch’s time, this is no longer the case, he says: Pharos is now ‘part’ [*meros*] of the land, because of the alluvial deposits of the Nile.

§69 (368C) That the Apis is an *eikōn empsukhos* ‘animated image’, that is, an ‘image animated by the *psukhē*’ of Osiris. He is begotten by ‘generative light’ [*gonimon phōs*] from the moon, descending upon a cow in heat. {We see here, I think, a way of perceiving this *eikōn* ‘image’ as one that conveys reality – that is, reality as perceived in the given culture.}

§70 (368D) When the full moon is eclipsed by the sun, it falls into the shadow of the earth, just as Osiris falls into the *soros* ‘coffin’.

§71 (368E) When Nephthys gave birth to Anubis, Isis took the child as her own. The term here for her action is *hupoballetai*. {Cf. *hupodekhomenē* as discussed at §92 (375A–B) and §99 (377B).} Nephthys is what is below the earth and invisible, as opposed to Isis, who is what is above the earth and visible, and so Anubis is the horizon. In *eidos* ‘visualization’ he is likened to a dog. {Cf. Socrates’ expression *nai ton kuna*.}

§72 (368E) Anubis is like Hekate, in that he is both ‘Olympian’ [*Olumpios*] and ‘chthonic’ [*khthonios*].

§73 (369B) Citing Heraclitus, Plutarch speaks of the *palintonos harmoniē kosmou* ‘the string-tension [*harmonia*], from bending back what is stringed, of the cosmos’, as with the bending-back of the lyre-frame or of the bow.

§74 (369C–D) The upshot of it all is this: *ho te bios miktos ho te kosmos* ‘both life and cosmos are mixed’.

§75 (369D–E) More basics: *hoi de ton men ameinona theon ton d’heteron daimona kalousin* ‘they call the better entity a *theos* and the other one a *daimōn*. {I note the euphemism inherent in *heteros* ‘other’. And it signals the marked member of the opposition.} Right after this formula: as *Zōroastrēs ho magos* says, etc.

§76 (369F) Still with reference to Zoroastrian teaching: patterns of differentiating the *theos* who is *agathos* ‘good’ vs. the *daimōn* who is *kakos* ‘evil’.

§77 (370A) How Oromazdēs expanded three times his earlier size and ‘distanced himself’ [*apestēse*], as far from the sun as the sun is from the earth. {So the already distant “*deus otiosus*” needs ever-increasing distance to compensate for his ever-increasing greatness. Cf. the “distal” function of *ekeînos* ‘that one’ in sacred contexts, as discussed by Nagy 2001:xxvii note 20.}

§78 (370C) Such, then, is the *muthologia* of the magi [*magoi*].

§79 (370C–D) On *Harmonia* as daughter of antithetical elements represented by Aphrodite and Ares. {Another case of *coincidentia oppositorum*.}

§80 (370D) Homer quoted on *eris*, XVIII 107; the Loeb translator (Babbitt 1936) claims that “Plutarch modifies the line to suit his context.”

§81 (370E) On the categories of the *Puthagorikoi*.

§82 (370F) Aristotle and Plato on identity and difference, *t'auton* and *thateron*.

§83 (371D) 7th of Tybi, the *aphixis* 'arrival' of Isis from her wanderings in Phoenicia. Cakes with stamped images of the hippopotamus qua Seth.

§84 (371D) In Apollonopolis, crocodile qua Seth.

§85 (371E) Representing Osiris by way of *ophthalmos* 'eye' and *skēptron* 'scepter'.

§86 (371E) Comparison with Homer {*Iliad* VIII 22} on Zeus as *hupatos* 'supreme' and as *mēstōr* 'creator' {The translation 'creator' needs to be queried.}.

§87 (371E) Osiris is also represented as a hawk. Details here on the lore about the movement / stance of the hawk at the moment that it has escaped the crocodile.

§88 (372B) Celebration of Eyes of Horus, 13th of Epiphi, when the moon and sun are aligned in a perfectly straight line.

§89 (373A) What they (we see here a general 'they') 'say in *muthoi*' [*muthologoûsi*] is not 'out of keeping' [*apo tropou*], namely, that the *psukhē* of Osiris is *aidios* 'eternal' and *aphthartos* 'imperishable', but that Seth 'often' (*pollakis*) *diaspân* 'dismembers' and *aphanizein* 'causes to disappear' his *sōma*, while Isis, in the course of her wanderings, *planōmenē*, 'searches' for it, *anazēteîn*, and then she 'puts it back together', *sunharmottein palin*. For 'that which really is' (to ... on) and is 'perceptible' (*noēton*) and 'good' (*agathon*) is superior to destruction and to 'transformation' [*metabolē*]. But the *eikones* 'images' that the sensible (*aisthēton*) and the corporeal (*sōmatikon*) put into shape, as well as the 'wordings' [*logoi*] and the 'visualizations' [*eidē*] and the 'likenesses' [*homoiotētes*], do not last (*diamenousi*) forever, just like impressions of seals (*sphragides*) in wax do not last. {This formulation seems meant to contradict the reported formulation of the priests in Memphis about the *empsukhos eikōn* 'animated image' of Osiris, on which see §24 (359A–B).} They can be overwhelmed by 'that which is disordered' [*ataktion*] and 'that which is confused' [*tarakhōdes*], which fight against Horus, whom Isis generates as the

eikōn ‘image’ of the universe (*kosmos*) that is perceptible (*noētos*). Accordingly, Horus is put on trial by Seth on the charge of being not unalloyed – the way his father is unalloyed. Horus is *nenotheumenos* ‘made illegitimate’, according to this charge, because of the corporeal or somatic element in him. But Horus wins his case when Thoth, that is (*toutesti*), the *logos*, testifies. How *phusis* ‘naturalness’ restores the *kosmos* as it is ‘redrawn’ [*metaskhēmatizomenē*] with reference to what is perceptible, *noēton*.

§90 (374E) That Horus is ever reborn, *aeigenēs*.

§91 (374E) ‘Myths (*muthoi*) must be used not as if they were words (*logoi*) and nothing more’ (*khērēsteon de tois muthois oukh hōs logois pampan ousin*), but we must adopt whatever is relevant, *prosporon*, in each myth according to its ‘likeness’ [*homoiotēs*] {not in the sense of ‘verisimilitude’ (I disagree here with the Loeb translator, Babbitt 1936) but in the sense of ‘analogy’ to one’s own situation, I think}. How we must not be swayed by the *doxai* ‘opinions’ of philosophers by conceiving of the *sōma* as *apsukhon ti kai apoion*, that is, inanimate (without a *psukhē*) and undifferentiated.

§92 (375A–B) When Seth intrudes, Isis seems melancholy [*episkuthrōpazein*] and is said to lament [*pentheîn*]; then she seeks (*anazētein*) and organizes (*stolizein*) whatever *leipsana* ‘remains’ and *sparagmata* ‘dismembered members’ of Osiris there may be. She is a ‘receiver’ [*hupodekhomenē*] {compare §99 (377B); compare also *hupoballetai*, where Isis is ‘taking up’ the child Anubis, as noted at §71 (368E)}, thus becoming a hider-away, *apokruptousa*, of things that perish, *phtheiromena*, from which she reveals (*anaphainei*) ‘the things that are generated all over again’ [*palin to gignomena*], and ‘she emits them from herself’ [*anhiēs in ex hautēs*].

§93 (375B) *phēs in ho muthos* ‘the myth says’: that Seth cohabits with Nephthys, but that Osiris had secret sex with her. Nephthys is the ‘extreme parts’ [*eskhata merē*] of matter, which is why they call her *Teleutē*. {This word also means ‘initiation into the mysteries’.}

§94 (375D) Plutarch thinks that Isis is a Greek name as well as an Egyptian one. Modern linguistics does not support Plutarch.

§95 (375D–E) Osiris as a combination of the words *hosios* and *hieros*. Sacrifice of white vs. saffron-colored (*krokios*) roosters to Anubis vs. Hermanubis.

§96 (375F–376A) In the so-called books of Thoth, Horus is the name of the power that drives the revolution of the sun. Osiris is the power that drives the *pneuma*; but others say that it is Sarapis. So here is a case of Osiris / Sarapis variation.

§97 (376A) Plutarch formally claims that Osiris is Hellenic but that Sarapis is ‘foreign’ [*xenikos*]. And that both belong to one god and one divine power [*dunamis*].

§98 (376F–377A) Whatever is ‘organized’ [*kekosmēmenon*] and ‘good’ [*agathon*] and ‘beneficial’ [*ōphelimon*] we may think of as the ‘activity’ [*ergon*] of Isis and the ‘image’ [*eikōn*] and ‘re-enactment’ [*mimēma*] and ‘wording’ [*logos*] of Osiris.

§99 (377B) Osiris gives the ‘authoritative beginnings’ [*arkhai*], and Isis is the one who is the ‘receiver’ [*hupodekhomenē*] (compare also §92 (375A–B)) and the ‘distributor’ [*dianemousa*].

§100 (377B) Plutarch has little patience with those who allegorize (1) the burial of Osiris as the sowing of grain and (2) his ‘resurrection’ [*anabioûsthai*] as its sprouting.

§101 (377D) That Isis is universal to all humans.

§102 (377E) Faulty allegorizing is like calling the warp and woof, *nēmata* and *krokai*, the ‘weaver’.

§103 (378B) The amulet [*phulaktērion*] of Isis is interpreted (*exhermēneuetai*) as the *phōnē alēthēs* ‘true voice’.

§104 (378D) The counsel that ‘we’ give to those who come to Delphi *eis to khrēstērion* ‘to the oracle’: *hosia phronein, euphēma legein* ‘think those things that are divinely sanctioned, speak those things that are good to say’ (the sacred context of ‘euphemism’).

§105 (378D) So how are we to deal, Plutarch asks, with their *thusiai* ‘sacred rites’, given that they are *skuthrōpai* (melancholy) and *agelastoi* (without laughter) and *penthimoi* (lamenting)?

§106 (378E) On Demeter *Akhaia* and her *akhos* ‘lament’ over the *Korē*. This month, which is *sporimos* ‘for sowing’, the season of the Pleiades, is called Athyr in Egypt, Pyanepsion in Athens, Damatrion in Boeotia.

§107 (378F) On lullabies (*kateunasmoi*) and wake-up songs (*anegerseis*) of the Phrygians.

§108 (379A) Sowing as a reaction to wilting.

§109 (379C) A kind of rationalizing: why pray for renewal of crops while mourning the harvest when you will do it all over again the next year?

§110 (379C–D) On the metonymy of images of gods as gods.

§111 (379E) Egyptians get a bad reputation for worshipping animals as gods. Plutarch sees a slippage in their religion on this score.

§112 (379F) Osiris makes divisions of military units (cf. the English term “division”).
{Compare the corpus metaphor again.} Plutarch mentions this detail in terms of the system of animal ‘insignia’ [*episēma*] for naming the divisions.

§113 (380B–C) Oxyrrhynchus vs. Kynopolis, taboos of eating pike vs. dog.

§114 (380C) That all animals are subdivisions of Seth.

§115 (380D) Burning human victims and then scattering their ashes with winnowing fans (*likmôntes ēphanizon kai diespeiron*). This is during the Dog Days, *en tais kunasin hēmerais*.

§116 (380E) That *koinai timai* for gods are a sign of their universality.

§117 (381F) For the first time, we see the more elevated form *Puthagoreîoi* not the lower form *Puthagorikoi*. The context: numbers as symbols of gods.

§118 (382C) Finally, we see here some degree of grudging approval of the idea of animals as gods.

§119 (382D–E) When people make contact with the pure truth, *alētheia kathara*, they think they possess it all.

§120 (382E) The priests, setting a sanctioned point of reference and speaking in opaque ways (*aphosioumenoi* and *parakaluptomenoi*), carefully explain the subtext (*met’ eulabeias hupodēloûsi*): that this god, Osiris, has authority (*arkhei*) and reigns (*basileuei*) over the dead (*tōn tethnēkotōn*). That he is Hades or Pluto. But since it is not known how it is ‘true’ [*alēthes*], the idea disturbs (*diatarattei*) people that the *hieros* ‘sacred’ and *hosios* ‘holy’ Osiris truly (*alēthōs*) ‘abides’ [*oikeîn*] both in the earth and under the earth (*en gēi kai hupo gēn*), where the *sōmata* are hidden away (*kruptetai*) of those who are believed (*dokountōn*) to have reached their ‘fulfillment’ [*telos*]. And yet, at the same time, Osiris is most distant from the earth (*apōtatō tēs gēs*); he is unsoiled (*akhrantos*) and undefiled (*amiantos*) and pure (*katharos*) of all matter, *ousia*, that receives destruction and death. But for the *psukhai* of humans here, *entauthoî*, which are surrounded by *sōmata* and *pathē*, it is hard to make contact, *metousia*, with this god, except in terms of vague dreamlike images, by way of philosophy. But when these *psukhai* are detached from the present world into the invisible and unseen, then this god becomes their leader (*hēgemōn*) and king, dependent as these *psukhai* are on the desire for the ineffable (*mē phaton*) and unspeakable (*mē rhēton*) beauty for humans (*anthrōpois kallos*). The ancient formula (*palaios logos*) makes it clear (*apophainei*) that Isis is *erōsa* ‘lusting after’ this *kallos*. {Compare Sappho’s “poetic manifesto” in the “New Sappho.”}

§121 (383A) In sum, *tauta men oun houtōs ekhei ton malista theois prepon ta logon* ‘these things have in this way the formula that most befits the gods’.

§122 (384A) How the *Puthagoreîoi* use the plucked sounds [*kroumata*] of the lyre before sleep, following up on these sounds with song (*exepāidontes*).

§123 (384B) Plutarch quotes from Pindar *Olympian* 1 on seeing the sun shining through the desolate ether (*erēmas di' aitheros*).

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