CHAPTER TWO

THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF ISIS

What is of prime importance in comprehending the great appeal Isis had for women is an understanding of precisely what she represented and what her essential attributes were. It is difficult to ascertain her original significance since her widespread appeal tended to cause an increasing accumulation of spheres that she governed and attributes that she possessed. Each new quality that she took on was accompanied by the assumption of a new name, and these forms and names grew so numerous that she came to be addressed as πολύμορφος,1 πολυώνυμος,2 and μυριώνυμος.3

Originally, Isis existed independently. It is particularly difficult to determine her character at this time when she was not as yet bound together with Osiris, since there is no concrete evidence from this early period that gives any clue to her identity. She seems to have been a cosmic deity, either a goddess of heaven and mother of the Sun-god, or the embodiment of the fertile land of the Delta, possessing creative powers such that she brought forth Horus without aid of a husband.4 Her motherlike character seems to have been with her from the earliest times. More important for our purposes are the traits she possessed when, at the end of the development of the Egyptian religion, she and her son Horus were joined together with Osiris, the god of vegetation and death; henceforth, the three deities were considered a unit, although one might appear alone in an inscription or art form. The Pyramid Texts, the oldest body of Egyptian religious texts, inscribed on the walls

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1 B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt (edd.), The Oxyrhynchus Papyri XI (1915) 1380.9, hereafter referred to as P. Oxy. 1380.
2 VS 325=CIG 3724; P. Oxy. 1380.97, 101-102. In Apul., Met. 11.22 she is called dea multinominis.
3 VS 505=IGRR 1.1391; VS 351; VS 639=CIL 5.5080; VS 656=CIL 3.4017; VS 692; VS 698=CIL 3.882; VS 721; VS 749=CIL 13.3461; VS 808. Vidman notes (VS 505) that all of these inscriptions seem to date from approximately the same period, i.e., the first-second century A.D.
of the pyramids at Sakkara where Egyptian kings of the fifth and sixth dynasties were buried, furnish a series of unconnected allusions to the myth that grew around the triad to explain their origins and significance. From these allusions it is evident that the myth of Isis and Osiris was already at that early date very familiar to the Egyptians. Plutarch in his treatise *De Iside et Osiride*, written in 118 or 119 A.D., has however, supplied us with a complete, connected version of the myth. Relying on a variety of literary sources relating to Egypt, Plutarch introduced some new elements and omitted some old ones. However much the mythological allusions in the Pyramid Texts were conflated and however varied Plutarch’s sources were, the roles of the main deities in the myth remained essentially constant. Isis performed three major functions which cannot be completely separated from one another.

In her first appearance, in the Pyramid Texts, Isis, as sister of Osiris, played the role of a mourner in conjunction with her sister Nephthys when they found their brother Osiris dead, either as a result of an encounter with Seth or of drowning. Not as yet designated as the wife of Osiris, Isis assisted her brothers and sisters in the embalming rites that resulted in his revival. The rites involved an elaborate display of grief as handed down in three Ptolemaic texts now called “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys,” “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys,” and “The Hour-watches.” These were a series of chanted solos or duets which were a part of the dialogue used in the enactment of the passion of Osiris. The papyrus containing “The Songs” dates back at latest to the fourth century B.C., but an inscription from Ikhernofret reveals that such Osiris rites were at least as old as the Middle Kingdom.

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5 Griffiths 17.
6 For a discussion of Plutarch’s sources see Griffiths 75-100.
7 Ibid., 34.
8 R. O. Faulkner, “The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus-I,” *JEA* 22 (1936) 121-40. This is a translation and commentary of “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys.” A transcription of the papyrus is published by R. O. Faulkner in *The Papyrus Bremner-Rhind* (*Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca*, 3) i.
11 Faulkner, *JEA* 22 (1936) 122.