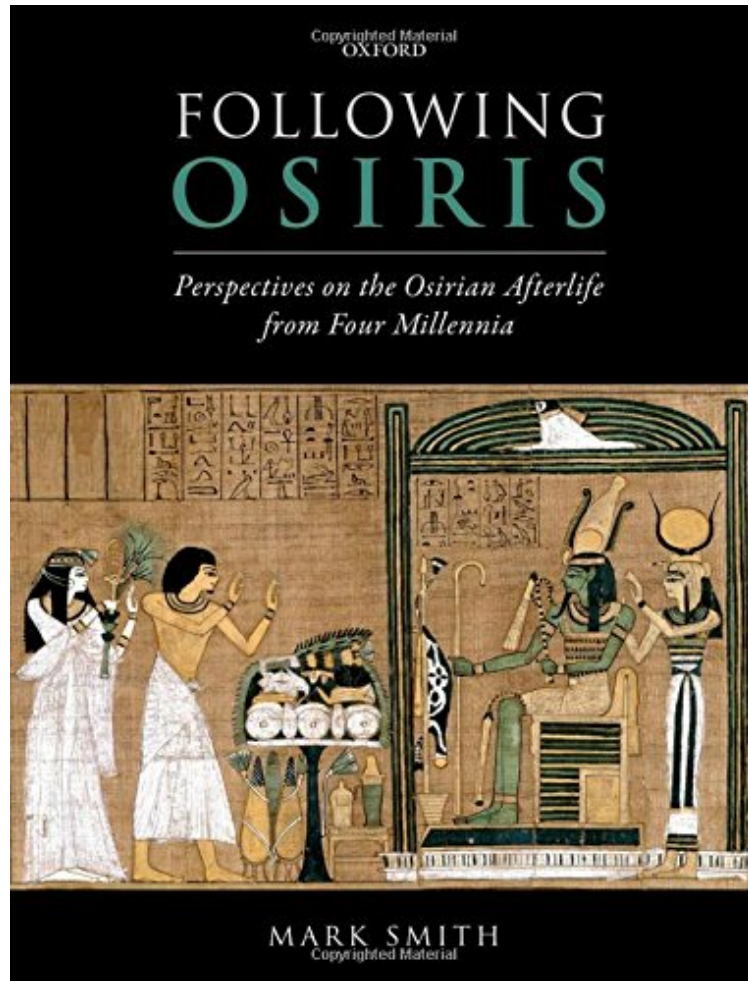


Following Osiris: Perspectives on the Osirian Afterlife from Four Millennia

Mark Smith

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Mark Smith : Following Osiris: Perspectives on the Osirian Afterlife from Four Millennia before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Following Osiris: Perspectives on the Osirian Afterlife from Four Millennia:

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A thorough, harsh, and necessary reexamination of Osiris and the afterlifeBy DAJThis is not a complete treatment of Osiris. For example, it gives only an outline of the mythology that surrounds him. Neither is it a comprehensive study of afterlife beliefs. Instead, it is a study of major points in history in which beliefs about Osiris and the afterlife changed. Chapters One and Two examine the evidence for afterlife beliefs from the Predynastic Period to the early Old Kingdom. Chapters Three and Four are about the late Old and Middle Kingdoms, during which Osiris appeared in the record and became the most important afterlife deity. Chapter

Five examines Osiris' position during Akhenaten's religious revolution and his relationship with Ra in New Kingdom funerary texts. Chapter Six discusses the transition to the Ptolemaic Period and the relationship between Osiris and his Hellenized offshoot Serapis, and Chapter Seven the extinction of Osiris' worship during the Roman Period. Each chapter examines the relevant evidence very thoroughly, so the amount of research that must have been needed to write the entire book is staggering. The book is less a description of its subject than a massive pile of foundational work, establishing clearly what the belief in Osiris was and was not. Thus, it is much more aimed at scholars than at the general public and more about dispelling old ideas than establishing new ones. In each of the seven parts, Smith attacks previous assumptions and speculation on the topic. Most of the time he is able to show that these assumptions only hold up if one fails to look at all the evidence rather than a selected subset of it. He demolishes the "democratization of the afterlife", the claim that commoners were not considered able to enter the afterlife until the end of the Old Kingdom, and rejects the idea that entering the afterlife entailed becoming one with Osiris. He also takes apart the "solar-Osirian unity", the claim that Osiris and Ra were thought to fuse into a single deity in the underworld rather than just mutually empowering each other. In other cases, such as the origins of Osiris, he dismisses some hypotheses while leaving others simply unproven, saying there's just not enough evidence to draw a conclusion. Sometimes he rejects long-standing ideas that Egyptologists take for granted. While the concept of the democratization of the afterlife has never made much sense to me and should have died out long ago, I admit I was unsettled when reading that pyramids do not symbolize either the sun or the mound of creation. Smith ends up opposing so many Egyptologists on so many issues, large and small, that it feels as if he's disagreed with everybody about something or other (except Joachim Friedrich Quack, whose work is cited and endorsed in just about every chapter). Just as a matter of statistics, he can't be right about everything, particularly the numerous points where he says this or that scholar has misread an ancient text or inscription. Yet the large conclusions in each chapter are hard to refute. Moreover, Smith's results aren't simply negative. They clarify how Osiris evolved over time and how he relates to Ra, Hathor, and Serapis. Some of Smith's insights apply to Egyptian religion as a whole. For instance, he lays out a method for reliably interpreting ritual texts, including funerary texts, to discern the beliefs that underlie them. He points out that, even though many works treat the Greco-Roman Period as a single era, the religion of the Ptolemaic Period was in many ways a continuation of the Late Period, while the Roman Period saw major changes even before the coming of Christianity. Perhaps most importantly, Smith pushes Egyptology to be more rigorous in its treatment of evidence. He repeatedly emphasizes that political changes do not necessarily cause, or even relate to, changes in religion. He shows that we must assess all the relevant evidence, not just a particular subset of it, in order to understand a belief. And he warns against speculating and stretching the evidence. As harsh as his criticism can be, it proves that Egyptologists have too often failed to live up to these standards. It's hard to say what impact a book will have so soon after being published, but I wouldn't be surprised to see this one reshape the study of ancient Egyptian religion.

Osiris, god of the dead, was one of ancient Egypt's most important deities. The earliest secure evidence for belief in him dates back to the fifth dynasty (c.2494-2345BC), but he continued to be worshipped until the fifth century AD. Following Osiris is concerned with ancient Egyptian conceptions of the relationship between Osiris and the deceased, or what might be called the Osirian afterlife, asking what the nature of this relationship was and what the prerequisites were for enjoying its benefits. It does not seek to provide a continuous or comprehensive account of Egyptian ideas on this subject, but rather focuses on five distinct periods in their development, spread over four millennia. The periods in question are ones in which significant changes in Egyptian ideas about Osiris and the dead are known to have occurred or where it has been argued that they did, as Egyptian aspirations for the Osirian afterlife took time to coalesce and reach their fullest form of expression. An important aim of the book is to investigate when and why such changes happened, treating religious belief as a dynamic rather than a static phenomenon and tracing the key stages in the development of these aspirations, from their origin to their demise, while illustrating how they are reflected in the textual and archaeological records. In doing so, it opens up broader issues for exploration and draws meaningful cross-cultural comparisons to ask, for instance, how different societies regard death and the dead, why people convert from one religion to another, and why they abandon belief in a god or gods altogether.

About the Author Mark Smith is Professor of Egyptology at the University of Oxford and Lady Wallis Budge Fellow in Egyptology at University College, Oxford. Originally from the USA, he earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, Illinois, in 1979.