

Judgment and Afterlife in Ancient Egypt: The Principle of *Ma'at*, Osirian Tradition, and the Comparative Context of Eternal Punishment

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the concept of judgment and afterlife in Ancient Egypt with particular attention to the principle of *Ma'at* and the Osirian tradition, while situating its findings within the comparative context of the doctrine of eternal punishment. The research aims to determine whether the Egyptian system of judgment included the notion of everlasting torment or instead emphasized cosmic balance and annihilation of the unworthy soul. **Methodology:** Employing a qualitative, interpretive, and historical-comparative approach, the study analyzes primary sources such as the *Book of the Dead*, funerary inscriptions, and mummification rituals, alongside secondary scholarship in Egyptology and comparative religion. **Findings:** The findings demonstrate that the Egyptian system of judgment was rooted in the weighing of the heart against the feather of *Ma'at*, the practice of negative confession, and the tribunal presided over by Osiris and forty-two judges. Punishment was most often conceived as annihilation rather than eternal suffering, and the afterlife was envisioned as a regenerative cosmology tied to the Nile's agrarian cycles. These results distinguish the Egyptian view fundamentally from the Christian doctrine of hell. The study further highlights the dual function of judgment: as a religious mechanism to ensure cosmic harmony and as a socio-political instrument reinforcing royal legitimacy and social hierarchy. **Implications:** The implications of this research extend to comparative religious studies, curricular development, and interfaith dialogue, demonstrating that doctrines of eternal hell are historically contingent constructions rather than universal inheritances. **Originality and Value:** The originality of this study lies in its reinterpretation of Ancient Egyptian eschatology as an autonomous system, independent from post-biblical theological frameworks, thereby offering a new comparative lens to clarify the origins of eschatological doctrines across traditions.

Keywords: Afterlife; ancient Egyptian judgment; eternal punishment; *Ma'at*; Osirian tradition.

Introduction

Death is a universal and inevitable aspect of human existence (Rensburg & Eck, 2008, p. 1499). Death has been a central theme across civilizations, provoking diverse beliefs, ritual practices, and eschatological doctrines rooted in cultural, religious, and historical contexts. From the structured funerary traditions of Ancient Egypt to the purification-focused death rites of Zoroastrians and the reincarnation-oriented beliefs in Hinduism and Buddhism, societies have long constructed elaborate systems to make sense of mortality (Erasmus, 2021; Kharanaghi, 2024; Vyas, 2022; Williams & Ladwig, 2012). These systems not only reflect metaphysical expectations of the afterlife but also function as mechanisms of social order and moral instruction, often reaffirming hierarchies, community values, and cosmological frameworks (Pine, 2019; Zaluchu, 2025). Modern expressions of death rituals—such as personalized memorial services or hybrid cultural practices in Caribbean and Malaysian-Chinese communities—demonstrate the continuing

evolution and negotiation of tradition in the face of globalization, individualism, and religious pluralism (Chin, 2024; Clarke & Huggins, 2024). Thus, studying death rituals across cultures reveals both the diversity and universality of human responses to the inevitability of death and the desire to ritualize passage into the unknown (Atabey, 2023; Lobar, Youngblut, & Brooten, 2006).

In ancient Egypt, death was not perceived as the end of life, but as a transformative passage into another realm of existence. This worldview was deeply embedded in their cosmology and funerary culture, in which the soul was believed to journey through the Netherworld (Duat) guided by spells and divine protection. Key texts like the *Amduat* and the *Coffin Texts* provided detailed maps of this journey, reflecting a belief in cyclical rebirth modeled after the sun god Ra's nightly passage and resurrection (Dobbin-Bennett, 2021; Woolfson, 2012). Mummification was not only a physical process but also a theological one, symbolizing the preservation of identity and preparation for divine transformation (Vandorpe & Clarysse, 2019). Rituals, funerary spells, and magical objects were believed to activate the deceased's safe transition, where awakening from death was envisioned through metaphors of loosening bandages and lifting the head—acts symbolizing rebirth and renewed consciousness (Liptay, 2020). Moreover, the moral quality of one's earthly life played a central role in securing favorable judgment by Osiris and the tribunal of gods, linking ethical living with eternal reward (Karagülle Çifçi, 2023). Collectively, these practices affirm the Egyptians' view of death not as a cessation but as a sacred threshold into continuity, moral resolution, and divine integration.

Research on Ancient Egyptian views of death and the afterlife has been conducted from various perspectives. Based on a review of the literature, these studies can be grouped into three main categories: (1) theological-mythological studies, (2) studies on law and the ethics of death, and (3) comparative interreligious studies. Each category contributes significantly, yet still leaves gaps that provide room for further exploration in this research. Theological-mythological studies on Osiris position this deity as the center of the Ancient Egyptian cosmology, explaining death, resurrection, and the judgment of the soul. The myth of Osiris—who was murdered, resurrected by Isis, and restored by Horus—not only functions as a religious narrative but is also represented in funerary rites in which the corpse is associated with a “new Osiris” prepared to undergo moral judgment in the afterlife (Assmann, 2005; Tallet, 2024). The weighing of the heart against the feather of Ma'at determined whether the soul was worthy of eternal life or destroyed by Ammut, rather than eternally punished, underscoring a focus on purification rather than torment (Lee, 2025; J. D. Martin, 2020). Iconographic symbols such as the Djed pillar and the Corn-Osiris represent stability and rebirth, reinforcing the theological message of resurrection (Sørensen, 2017; Sousa, 2014). The cult of Osiris even expanded beyond Egypt, particularly throughout the Mediterranean during the Roman period, demonstrating its adaptability and universal appeal (Gasparro, 2016; Pubblico, 2023). Moreover, modern psychological interpretations read this myth as an alchemical metaphor for the transformation of the soul (Cavalli, 2022). However, these studies have not yet examined in depth whether the Osirian tradition contains a concept of eternal punishment or instead emphasizes cosmic reconciliation and spiritual regeneration.

The second category focuses on law, morality, and the judgment of the soul in Ancient Egypt. Research in this field demonstrates a close interconnection between the legal system, ethical values, and religious beliefs in regulating both life and death. Law did not function independently but was intrinsically bound to the principle of *Ma'at* (truth and justice), such that violations of state law had direct implications for one's spiritual destiny in the afterlife (Leszczyński, 2020; Loktionov & Alexandrova, 2025). Within the

context of the judgment of the dead, the ritual weighing of the heart against the feather of *Ma'at* served as the primary mechanism of moral evaluation, reinforced by the *negative confession* in the *Book of the Dead*, which resembled an “immigration interview” more than a doctrine of eternal punishment (Janák, 2023). Osiris, presiding as the chief judge of this tribunal, embodied the integration of social and cosmic justice (Assmann, 2005; Revez, 2010). Funerary practices—such as mummification, the breaking of vessels (*dšr.t*), and ritual offerings—functioned as both legal and spiritual instruments to safeguard the soul’s passage into the afterlife (Agai, 2015; Hertel, 2023). Although visual motifs such as the scales, the deity Ammut, and the tribunal of forty-two judges convey the impression of a formal courtroom, there was no explicit doctrine of eternal torment; rather, the annihilation of the soul constituted the ultimate consequence of moral failure. Thus, the Egyptian system of law and morality emphasized the restoration of cosmic order over the notion of eternal punishment.

The third category concerns comparative interreligious studies. Ancient Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife not only shaped their own spiritual identity but also exerted a broad transcultural influence on other religious systems through cultural exchange and syncretism. The concept of the weighing of the heart by *Ma'at*, which determined whether a soul was worthy to enter the afterlife or annihilated by Ammut, illustrates a complex system of moral evaluation that inspired similar structures in Zoroastrianism (the Chinvat Bridge), Mesopotamian traditions, Greek religion, and even Buddhist iconography in China, such as the Dunhuang murals (J. D. Martin, 2020). Egyptian multisensory funerary practices—including offerings, aromatic rituals, incantations, and dance—were intended to revive the deceased, and elements of these practices can also be detected in Roman culture and early Christianity (Jiménez, 2021; Pleșa, 2017). Egyptian traditions further shaped the imaginative foundations of heaven-and-hell cosmologies within the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—particularly in relation to divine judgment and the hope of salvation (Campo, 2022; Ellens, 2013). Unlike monotheistic traditions that focus on personal faith, Egyptian beliefs emphasized the active involvement of the living in ensuring the resurrection of the dead through rites, tomb architecture, and food offerings, while also affirming that souls could undergo metamorphosis in order to attain freedom and spiritual sustenance (Agai, 2015; Gill & Smith, 2023). Thus, comparative studies demonstrate that Ancient Egyptian death cosmology possessed remarkable resilience and diffusion, significantly shaping cross-cultural constructions of eschatology well into the modern era.

Although the three categories of studies outlined above have provided broad insights into the theology, ethics, and cross-cultural influence of Ancient Egyptian beliefs concerning death and the afterlife, a critical gap remains largely unaddressed: the absence of the concept of *eternal damnation* in Ancient Egyptian thought and its implications for their cosmology and transcendental ethics. Most scholarship has focused on the process of moral weighing and the resurrection of Osiris, yet often neglects the fundamental question: did the Egyptians truly conceive of “hell” in the soteriological sense, as later articulated in the Abrahamic religions, or did they instead regard *annihilation* as the ultimate consequence of moral failure? Furthermore, no comprehensive study has systematically compared the symbolic dimensions of Egyptian judgment with the doctrine of eternal punishment in subsequent traditions—whether through a close reading of primary funerary texts or by examining their philosophical underpinnings.

This research therefore occupies a critical space in addressing whether the Egyptian system of judgment was primarily **regenerative and symbolic** rather than **repressive and finalistic**, and how this shaped the structure of relationships between humanity, morality,

and divinity. The study aims to evaluate Ancient Egyptian conceptions of judgment and punishment in the afterlife, particularly within the Osirian tradition, to determine whether their beliefs encompassed a notion of eternal punishment for unworthy souls. By comparing Egyptian funerary texts—such as the *Book of the Dead*—with other religious traditions, especially those of Ancient Israel, Canaan, and early Christianity, this research seeks to clarify the doctrinal position of Ancient Egypt, which is often misunderstood in modern discourse. The central focus is to re-examine Egyptian narratives within the historical and theological debates surrounding the origins of eternal punishment, asking whether Egypt truly pioneered this concept or merely formed part of a broader stream of religious thought.

The researcher argues that Ancient Egypt should not be regarded as the primary source or original proponent of the concept of eternal punishment in the afterlife as it is understood within the Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity. Although Egypt made significant contributions to the form and structure of afterlife cosmology, textual evidence and religious rituals emphasize moral balance and the possibility of the annihilation of the unworthy soul, rather than eternal torment. This perspective challenges the assumption that Egypt was the root of the doctrine of eternal hell, which in fact developed later in the context of post-exilic Judaism and early Christian theology. As Spronk (1986) has emphasized, the wholesale adoption of afterlife concepts from one tradition into another is highly improbable; therefore, Egyptian narratives must be understood as an autonomous belief system, distinct from the Christian doctrine of eternal judgment. Within this framework, the present study supports a contextual and comparative approach to uncover the original meaning of the Osirian narrative, while distinguishing Egypt's symbolic legacy from post-biblical theological constructions.

Methods

This study employs Ancient Egyptian funerary texts as its primary unit of analysis, particularly the *Book of the Dead*, tomb inscriptions, and ritual practices such as mummification and the judgment of the dead. These units were selected because they explicitly represent Egyptian beliefs concerning the afterlife and the accompanying moral system. Beyond their role as religious documents, these texts also embody complex cosmological and theological dimensions, making them essential primary sources for uncovering the structure of judgment as well as the notions of punishment and salvation in the Ancient Egyptian conception of death.

The research design is qualitative, adopting an interpretive and historical-comparative approach. Its primary focus is to trace the doctrinal development and symbolic functions of judgment rituals within the Osirian tradition. Through this approach, the study not only examines textual content but also interprets its socio-religious meaning in the cultural context of Ancient Egypt and in cross-traditional comparison. This design enables the researcher to read symbols and narratives contextually, while opening dialogue with other traditions such as Ancient Israel and early Christianity.

The data sources for this study consist of both primary and secondary materials. Primary sources include authoritative translations of the *Book of the Dead*, such as Faulkner's edition, as well as funerary inscriptions and archaeological artifacts related to judgment and burial rituals. Secondary sources comprise contemporary scholarship in Egyptology, religious studies, and the history of theological ideas. The combination of these sources allows for interpretive triangulation across linguistic, iconographic, and

historical dimensions.

Data collection was carried out through textual analysis of ancient writings and relevant archaeological commentary. The researcher also integrates comparative materials from Canaanite traditions, Ancient Israel, and early Christianity to identify continuities, shifts, or divergences in the understanding of judgment and eternal punishment. This strategy helps to illuminate the interconnections and influences among cultures that shared overlapping cosmologies and eschatologies.

The analytic technique employed is thematic content analysis, focusing on categories such as criteria of judgment, ritual enactments, moral reasoning, and doctrinal implications. The researcher examines narratives and symbols of judgment in Egyptian texts and rituals to determine whether they contain indications of a doctrine of eternal punishment, or alternatively, whether annihilation of the soul was regarded as the ultimate consequence of moral unworthiness. A systematic comparative framework is applied to highlight the presence or absence of the concept of eternal punishment in the Egyptian tradition, with the aim of clarifying its doctrinal position, which has often been misunderstood through the lens of Abrahamic religions.

Results and Discussion

1. The Structure and Symbolism of Judgment in Ancient Egypt

The concept of judgment, both in modern legal discourse and in ancient religious cosmologies, carries multiple layers of meaning—ranging from a rational decision to a moral or juridical verdict. In legal terms, judgment refers to an authoritative ruling rendered by a judicial body after careful evaluation of evidence and arguments, often resulting in a binding sentence (Yusuf, 2016). This procedural understanding—where parties are heard, evidence is weighed, and a conclusive determination is reached—finds a compelling parallel in ancient Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife. The Osirian model of post-mortem judgment reflects not only mythological narrative but also a ritualized form of moral arbitration, where the fate of the deceased is decided through symbolic trials and metaphysical evaluations. Thus, understanding the ancient Egyptian judgment requires unpacking its structural, theological, and symbolic dimensions.

For the ancient Egyptians, they believed that for the dead to gain an Osirian resurrection in the afterlife, the individual must be identified with Osiris (James, 1976, p. 156). Osiris was the son of Geb, the sky god and Nut, the earth goddess. He was the first born amongst his siblings Isis, Set and Nephthys and he married his sister Isis. Being the first born and a good person, he became the king of Egypt who was highly respected by all humans that lived on earth and by all the gods that dwelled in the netherworld. Osiris was killed by his brother Set who got jealous of all the accolades Osiris received before the gods and humans. Isis had magical powers which enabled her to raise Osiris from death and Osiris became associated with resurrection and referred to as the god of resurrection (Cain, 2021, pp. 1–2). He had the power to raise and judge the dead (Jordan, 1976, p. 146). Towards the end of the Old Kingdom, the seasonal natural circle of the Egyptian fertile Nile used for agricultural purposes was associated with the power and love of Osiris towards nature and humans. The Egyptians connected the Nile's fertile mud with resurrection attributed to the power of Osiris (El-Shahawy, 2005, p. 73; Murnane, 1992, p. 36).

The ancient Egyptians believed that a deceased person needed to be judged similar to what is found in the features of a modern court of law. From the Egyptian view, the dead would meet forty-two evaluators and judges with Osiris as the chief judge (Willems,

1990, p. 41). The deceased's heart meant the seat of intelligence and was weighed on a scale in the form of a beam balance. It was weighed against the feather of an ostrich which represented the standard for Truth. It was expected that the heart would weigh exactly the same as the feather, but if the heart outweighed the feather, then the soul of the deceased would be expected to be punished. Those who have passed successfully through the Osirian judgment were rewarded and sent to live a joyful life in the Egyptian Heaven (MacGregor, 1992, p. 60).

An example of a court-room judgment can be cited in the case between Ani and Tutu, Ani's wife. Their judgment took place in *Ma-at*,¹ a Hall Court (James, 1976, p. 157). Ani stood before Osiris and his heart was evaluated by the forty-two evaluators. Anubis, the jackal-God of the necropolis who was in charge of the scale, watched over the procession of the judgment and Thoth, the Ibis-headed-God took and kept records of the court procession. The deceased (Ani) denied committing any sin to each of the evaluators until he was finally declared a "true voice," that is, found without guilt. Ani achieved the Osirian resurrection and was finally led to meet with Osiris, the chief judge and the god of resurrection (James, 1976, p. 157).

For the Egyptian afterlife judgment, only one chief judge, Osiris, and other forty-two judges presided over court affairs and the weighing of the deceased heart in addition to his or her confessions are primary in determining whether the deceased shall be declared guilty or not. In ancient Egypt, a deceased might be declared free of sin or not guilty of committing any sin as long as the deceased confesses that he or she is innocent of any sin. This type of confession is refereed as 'negative confessions' because the deceased declared himself or herself innocent (Horn 1981:4). The services of the chief judge and other judges were not temporary but permanent unlike the case that pertained to modern court judges that do serve temporarily. At this juncture, it becomes pertinent to have a background knowledge of the requirements that could qualify a deceased to be set free or be due for condemnation after being judged. Seemed the meaning of judgment is generally connected to concepts like punishment that is severe or mild depending on the crime committed and the nature of the spelt-out punishment for specific crimes, the evidence provided before a court of law and many others, it is pertinent to understand the Egyptian view of what constitute a crime or sin that required being punished or set free after judgment in the afterlife.

2. Criteria for Judgment: What Was Judged and How

While the structure of ancient Egyptian judgment emphasized the moral evaluation of the heart through the weighing ritual and the *negative confession*, one's success in passing the afterlife tribunal was not determined solely by moral integrity or the sins committed during earthly life. Rather, the system resembled a ritualistic and symbolic mechanism that required spiritual preparedness, specific social status, and access to the proper religious knowledge and equipment. In this context, the individual's success in the judgment process depended heavily on the ability to perform and fulfill a series of preparatory practices—ranging from mastery of the *Book of the Dead* as a guide for spiritual navigation, to the support of letters to the dead, and the legitimizing power of

¹ The word *Ma-at* could sometimes be associated with the maintenance of natural order likewise societal norms as it was expected by *Re* (Watson 2010:4) but in this case, it referred to a court-room (James, An Introduction Ancient Egypt, 157). In general, the word *ma-at* seemed to have been used in the cult of Osiris and it referred to the positive standard for judgment or the standard for truth (Bernstein 1993:12).

devotion to worldly rulers such as the king. Furthermore, mummification and tomb design were not merely technical matters of burial; they functioned as symbolic instruments that represented a form of “moral justification.” Thus, the concept of sin and eternal punishment did not appear as absolute categories within this belief system but was instead contingent upon ritual readiness and the social structures surrounding it.

a) The Egyptian Book of the Dead

One of the most central elements in navigating the judgment process and the journey to the afterlife in ancient Egyptian tradition was the *Book of the Dead*. This text was not merely a religious scripture but a practical and spiritual guide that provided concrete instructions for the soul (*Ba*) in facing various obstacles, gatekeeping deities, and, most importantly, the tribunal before Osiris. Containing spells, the names of guardian deities, and the formula of *negative confessions*, the book functioned as a kind of “manual of salvation,” believed to clear the path toward liberation from punishment and to secure eternal life in the hereafter. Ownership and mastery of this text served as indicators of spiritual readiness—an opportunity not available to everyone—demonstrating that access to afterlife salvation was also determined by an individual’s ritual capacity and social standing.

The *Egyptian Book of the Dead* which is an ancient Egyptian funerary text also known as “The Book of Coming [or Going] Forth By Day” (James, 1976, p. 13) or “The Book of What is in the Underworld” (Jordan, 1976, p. 150) was first inscribed on the exterior of the deceased’s sarcophagus but after a period of time, it was written on a papyrus. The name “The Book of the Dead” was given to these Egyptian funerary texts in the nineteenth century CE by a German Egyptologist, Karl Richard Lepsius, who published some parts of the texts in 1842 (Hubert & others, 1996, p. 39). The Book was written by men who understood the paths of Osiris, and by religious leaders, mediums, and traditional elders who were the custodians of the Egyptian culture. In the New Kingdom and in later times during the ancient Egyptian periods, some Egyptian priests collected together the various religious cults of burial concerning the events of the afterlife passed to them by their ancestors and these collections, on papyrus, are called “Book of the Dead.” The Book was written and used by many Egyptians and there are many copies of the Book (Jordan, 1976, p. 150).

More so, parts of the Egyptian Book of the Dead were written in chapters which are not necessarily patterned according to the contents or context. The dead were normally buried together with the Book close to the coffin but since the sixteenth century BCE when the Hyksos came into power, The Book of the Dead was no longer kept in the grave beside the coffin but was put inside the coffin (Bernstein, 1993, p. 13). One of the major objectives of the Book was to guide the soul of the deceased towards his or her journey to the netherworld. Siegfried H. Horn said that the Egyptian Book of the Dead is a “document that describes the experiences that the deceased would have upon reaching the underworld. It also contains the formulas to use in facing one’s judges upon entering the underworld” (Horn, 1981, p. 26).

According to the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the *Ba* or *soul* of a deceased was expected to travel to paradise after bodily death through the routes in the netherworld. The Book described how the *Ba* was expected to travel up on a boat to the sea to meet with Osiris but, on passing through the Milky Way, the soul would have to encounter turbulent and difficult events. For example, the *Ba* would meet monsters and deadly creatures that would torment him or her but the Book of the Dead had secrets on how the deceased soul could escape from the monstrous beings found in the underworld. On

calling the names of each of the monsters as written in the Book of the Dead, the deceased would be set free. Finally, the *Ba* would have to come across forty-two celestial deities who would lead it through seven gates with a gate Keeper, Watcher and a Herald at each gate. The *Ba* would have to call the names of these Keepers, Watchers and Heralds from the Book of the Dead. When the *Ba* successfully called the names of these guardian deities, the *Ba* would then be directed into the presence of Osiris thus gained salvation (Turner, 1993, p. 13). The function of the Egyptian Book of the Dead is dualistic. At some instances, it was meant to assist important personalities and at other instances, it was meant to assist all kinds of people during the afterlife journeys (Jordan, 1976, p. 150).

It is important to note that the Egyptian Book of the Dead illustrates the Egyptian mythologies surrounding the journeys of the dead and describes what would happen to a deceased in the afterlife. The Book of the Dead served as a kind of an amulet aimed at helping the deceased's soul pass through a successful evaluation of human deeds in the afterlife by certain judges (Bernstein, 1993, p. 13). The Book of the Dead could also prevent the judgment of the heart by cautioning the deceased heart from declaring utterances against the deceased. As a result, there was no reason to condemn the deceased to the second death (Spronk, 1986, p. 95). In other words, grace or salvation in the afterlife was made a little bit easier by the confessions of the deceased. All that the deceased was required to do was to open his or her mouth to say that he or she did not commit certain abominable acts or sin or crime. Siegfried H. Horn cited an example of such confessions that was required to be made by a deceased in order to declare himself or herself guiltless before Osiris the chief judge:

I have not blasphemed a god.
 I have not done violence to a poor man.
 I have not done that which the gods abominate.
 I have not killed.
 I have neither increased nor diminished the grain-measure.
 I have not added to the weight of the balance.
 I have not committed evil.
 I have not stolen.
 I have not been covetous.
 I have not told lies.
 I have not committed adultery (Horn, 1981, p. 26)

The Egyptian Book of the Dead was mostly used during the Old Kingdom Period (2650-2150 BCE) through the periods of the rise of Solar religion (James 1976:156) or The New Kingdom (c. 1580-1090) (Bernstein, 1993, p. 13). The rise of Solar religion enhanced the cult of Osiris and allowed men and women of all ranks to gain salvation in accordance with an individual's choice and not necessarily by relying upon a king's choice. The Egyptian Book of the Dead contained inscriptions pertaining to the top secrets of Osiris, prescribing specific ways for attaining the salvation of a deceased in the afterlife (James, 1976, p. 156) which took the form of a spell that ensured success for the deceased in his or her afterlife journeys. An official of the late Old Kingdom stated: 'I am an effective spirit who knows his magic spells; and I know the spells of ascending to the Great God, the lord of heaven' (Murnane, 1992, p. 41). The Book was sometimes equated to a spell simply because it had some magical abilities to release the dead into a better destiny in the otherworld.

b) Written Letters to the Dead

Another Egyptian tradition promote the view according to which dead corpses in ancient Egypt were thought to be powerful or supreme. Letters begging the dead not to harm the living were written and buried together with the deceased. Some of the letters found in tombs were written for a number of reasons some of which was to beg the deceased spirit to be gentle to the living or to direct the deceased person towards the good paths of the netherworld which the deceased had to pass before arriving in heaven. Because of the power ascribed to the dead, the ancient Egyptians appealed for protection, help, guidance and good fortune from the deceased through committed, continual, extensive and expensive funerary offerings (Spronk, 1986, p. 93).

The letters written to the dead are not exactly the same as the Egyptian Book of the Dead because the letters were directed at begging the dead to be good to the living while the Egyptian Book of the Dead was directed at helping the dead to find success in the journeys through the world of the dead. The similarity between the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the ordinary letters written to the dead is that both writings were used as spells in directing the dead in the afterlife. Both the letters and the Egyptian Book of the Dead were kept in the grave. For those Egyptians who failed to experience the Osirian resurrection or had no support or guide from the Book of the Dead or who failed to be reincarnated, their destiny was to temporarily be in the netherworld (Spronk, 1986, pp. 88–89, 95).

c) Devotion to Earthly Leaders

For the ancient Egyptians, having faith in the gods alone was not the standard for attaining salvation, rather to be saved in the afterlife meant devotion to their earthly patrons like their kings and leaders (Rensburg & Eck, 2008, p. 1510). During the late New Kingdom and throughout the Period of Decline, the regard for Egyptian leaders and their role in the afterlife declined. Jordan (1976, p. 147) presumed that it was probably during these periods that ideas about guilt, fear, judgment, and punishment in the afterlife emerged in ancient Egypt.² It is important to note that the ancient Egyptian kings were charged with the responsibility of maintaining the natural order of creation as created by *Re* and they were regarded as the representatives and incarnates of *Re* on earth. Acts of rebellion against the laws of natural order which meant obedience to earthly leaders were to be punished in the afterlife (Watson, 2022, pp. 3–4).

The ancient Egyptians were optimistic about an afterlife and, until the end of the Old Kingdom, blissfulness in the afterlife was meant strictly for kings, leaders and the wealthy and influential privileged people of ancient Egypt. The belief in the democratization of the afterlife for all citizens also began at the end of the Old Kingdom through the Period of Decline (Jordan, 1976, p. 146). It was also during these periods that Egyptians began to doubt ideas concerning resurrection and judgment in the afterlife. For example, during the Period of Decline, there was pessimism and skepticism on whether death was a journey to the otherworld or the end of life, so the Egyptians of this period began to think that it was better to value life on earth than in the afterlife (Davies, 1999, pp. 58–59; Spronk, 1986, p. 68). In addition, a scribe's instructional papyrus of Late Period times indicates how the human soul seeks answers to the problem of afterlife or judgment in the hereafter by questioning the great creator-God Atum:

²Jordan (1976:147) taught that the idea of judgment in relation to guilt and fear in the afterlife is not typical of the Egyptian spirit.

Soul: O Atum, what does it mean that I must go into the wilderness (of death)? It has no water, it has no air, it is very deep, very dark and boundless.

Atum: You will live there without care in a land of silence.

Soul: But one cannot find there the satisfaction of love-making.

Atum: I have put blessedness in the place of water, air and love-making; and peace of mind in the place of bread and beer (Jordan, 1976, p. 147).

Before the period of Delcine, kings had the powers to assist the deceased to gain salvation or not to face judgment in the afterlife. It is not surprising that servants and slaves to kings were willing to die and be buried alongside a deceased king so that he or she could help them gain salvation in the otherworld (Schwantes, 1969, p. 63).

d) Mummification

Mummification of the deceased body can help the deceased to gain salvation in the afterlife. This is so because mummification was sometimes equated with “moral justification” without which the deceased would not resurrect. Mummification was a form of justification (making the deceased right with God) that gave the deceased direct access to be resurrected or even go to heaven “[t]hese two concepts, mummification and justification, are intimately linked” (Mark, 2008, pp. 2–3). Mark further emphasized that mummification could be equated to making a deceased righteous because the ritual enabled the dead to meet and be equated with Osiris:

At the end of the embalming rites, having been returned to life and freed from imputation of wrongdoing, the deceased was endowed with an Osirian-aspect. In fact, the performance of such rites was sometimes described as “giving an Osiris to” someone. Many Egyptian texts for the afterlife are addressed or refer to “the Osiris of” an individual – that aspect or from which the dead person acquired through the efficacy of the rituals performed for his benefit in the embalming place, and in which he was supposed to endure for the rest of eternity (Mark, 2008, p. 3).

Mummification was necessitated to enable the body resurrect and interact with both the spirit world and the physical world: “*Ba* visited the upper world during the day and went back to the body at night” (Garland, 2020, p. 6). Mummification was done to make the body look “normal” in this world and in the otherworld (Spronk, 1986, p. 93). It can therefore be said that mummification is a form of judgment of the dead that declared the dead absolutely righteous and not guilty of any crime or sin.

3. Destination of the Dead: Netherworld and Heaven in Egyptian Thought

In ancient Egyptian belief, the journey of the soul after judgment did not culminate in a strict division between heaven and hell, as found in post-biblical Christian theology. Instead, it unfolded through layered transitions that reflected the notion of spiritual passage. The afterlife was envisioned as the *Duat* or Netherworld—a realm filled with obstacles, guardian beings, and trials that the soul had to overcome before reaching its ultimate destination. Although perilous, the *Duat* was not regarded as a place of eternal punishment but rather as a stage of filtering and purification. For those who succeeded in navigating these challenges, the path opened toward the *Sekhet-Aaru* or Field of Rushes—an ideal agrarian paradise where eternal life and fertility awaited, though still requiring symbolic labor such as cultivation. The divergent destinies of kings, commoners, and the

accursed suggest that the final outcome of the soul's journey was profoundly shaped by social status, ritual legitimacy, and divine sanction. Funerary texts further emphasize that only individuals who were truly guilty or subject to divine curse failed to reach paradise, with no indication of a doctrine of eternal damnation.

a) The Netherworld

The exact location and nature of the Egyptian netherworld is still under debate and this is so because many authors gave various views on what they think the netherworld meant for the Egyptians. Eileen Gardiner noted that the netherworld is mostly associated with an underground or the underworld somewhere down the earth (Gardiner, 2013, p. 1). Bernstein said that the Egyptians believed that the netherworld, or Tuat, was not necessarily located beneath the earth but was located somewhere around the earth and he could not say exactly where on earth (Bernstein, 1993, p. 14). Spronk taught that the ancient Egyptians regarded the netherworld with horror and as a place of discomfort that had probably seven gates³ and that these gates were each thought to be guarded by a gate Keeper, Watcher, a Herald and a god (Spronk, 1986, p. 88). The route to the netherworld was perceived to be full of danger, hardship, hunger, thirst and darkness and this could perhaps be the reason why *Re* was thought to be a provider of light in the netherworld (Davies, 1999, p. 27).

In addition, John Watson described the Egyptian netherworld as a place of immeasurable suffering to the point that the dead was punished to a seeming non-existent: “[t]hey were deprived of their sense organs, were required to walk on their heads and eat their own excrement. They were burnt in ovens and cauldrons and were forced to swim in their own blood, which Shezmu, the god of the wine press, squeezed out of them” (Watson, 2022, p. 2). Although it took longer for a deceased to be helped by *Re* to get to the place of eternal life, the netherworld was not a place of a continual or permanent punishment, as Davies said: “of any Egyptian doctrine of a final catastrophe there is no record” (Davies, 1999, p. 27).

Further information about the Egyptian netherworld can be obtained from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* where it has been portrayed that the netherworld was a place of terror with demons and monsters. An example that demonstrates the perception of the netherworld as a place of no return in ancient Egypt can be described by an interaction between Osiris and Atum.⁴ Atum was required to stay in the netherworld while Osiris was taken to Heaven to be like a god with the stars and to be like *Re*. But Osiris was worried that he would never meet with Atum again. This story suggest that the Egyptian netherworld was regarded as a place of no return (particularly to the physical world in human bodily form) unless the help of the gods were obtained (Spronk, 1986, pp. 88–89, 95).

Leaders, kings and wealthy people of ancient Egypt were thought not to be part of the netherworld experiences. Kings were thought to be representatives of gods on earth, they were not subject to the punishments of the netherworld and this was why an Egyptian king was regarded as “the one who does not go down” to the netherworld (Bernstein, 1993, p. 12) and a Pharaoh was regarded as one “of those who are not punished and not found guilty of crime” (Bernstein, 1993, p. 12). An important idea about the Egyptian

³This is as evident from the function of the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

⁴ Atum was one of the gods of Heliopolitan cosmology who was thought to be the first creation to have emerged from the waters of Nun. In later times, Atum was associated with *Re*, the sun god, and was considered as the setting sun. In much later times, he became associated with *Ptah* and finally with Osiris.

netherworld is that it was regarded as a kind of an intermediate state where the suffering of the deceased was temporary.⁵

In addition, the netherworld for them remained a route that needed to be passed by all those who died except kings and other leaders. The journeys through the netherworld had been described as difficult or a form of punishment and seemingly the most important punishment otherwise the Egyptians rarely nursed a view that there was a place of permanent punishment for the deceased. They had fewer or no cases of people being condemned after being judged by Osiris except for people that were divinely cursed or were sick beyond cure before they died (Horn, 1981, p. 26). An example can be cited by a mortuary text of a blind person who admitted of a guilt because he took a false oath while he was alive: “I am a man who swore falsely by Ptah, lord of truth; and he caused me to behold darkness by day. I will declare his might to him that knows him not, [sic] And to him that knows him, to[o] little and great: Bye ye [a]ware of Ptah, lord of truth!” In other words, with the exception of those that were likely cursed who may incur the same consequences in the netherworld, heaven was seemingly automatic for all sundry.

b) Heaven

Generally, the ancient Egyptians believed that Heaven or Paradise was a good place meant for the blessed dead whose heart did not outweigh the feather in the judgment seat of Osiris (Murnane, 1992, p. 43). They believed that Heaven was located in the east, a place where the sun rises every day and they associated Heaven with the morning star (Spronk, 1986, p. 89). They also believed that in Heaven, kings and leaders would play the same social role as they did on earth and plots would be allocated to kings where servants would continue to farm (Murnane, 1992, p. 43). It was assumed that in ancient Egyptian Heaven, there would be a continuation of the earthly kind of normal life except that laborers or servants would continue to labor or serve, albeit at more ease, compared to their heavy duties while on earth. In addition, the Egyptian Heaven was associated with agricultural fields *Earu* or *Sekhet-Aaron* (field of Reeds) where a large harvest was expected (MacGregor, 1992, pp. 60–61). Ancient Egyptians paralleled agriculture in Heaven to agriculture in the Nile valley except that the harvest in Heaven would be bountiful compared to the harvest in the Nile valley (Murnane, 1992, p. 43).

Egyptians believed that in Heaven crops ‘as high as man’ would be grown and that this blissful place (Heaven) was full of water canals for irrigation. They believed that there would be ‘bread and beer of eternity’ in Heaven. The inhabitants of Heaven were thought to be the spirits of deceased kings, their loyal servants, and those who successfully passed through the judgment headed by Osiris. Before the Period of Decline, it was thought that those loyal to the king, including his family members, would be saved depending on the king’s prerogatives (MacGregor, 1992, pp. 60–61). However, after the Middle Kingdom, the Heavenly rights were extended to all those who could financially or materially afford them (Jordan, 1976, p. 146).

Finally, it is important to note that when a person dies, the ancient Egyptians believed that the dead went on a journey. The journeys led the deceased to heaven or to the netherworld. Assuming that a deceased made it to Sekhet Aaru or Field of Rushes (a farm in Heaven where there was comfort) with his or her new body *sahu*, this did not mark the end of the deceased’s suffering. Egyptians believed that there were wild animals and

⁵ There were no thoughts of the netherworld as a place with different degrees of punishment depending on the deceased’s moral life on earth, and there was also no idea of purgatory as a place where the deceased was allowed to repent in ancient Egypt (cf. Watson 2010:2-5).

reptiles in Sekhet Aaru so the deceased still needed to use the *Book of the Dead* to protect himself or herself from crocodiles, snakes, giant beetles, suffocation from insufficient ventilation, decaying and being forced to eat feces (Turner, 1993, pp. 14–15). To be a farmer at the Field of Rushes was also believed to be an unfavorable destiny for the dead because Egyptians thought that there was no air in the Field of Rushes. However, a deceased might find another region of the Field of Rushes that was highly favorable for agricultural production, happiness, less suffering and with every good comfort including sexual gratification (Turner, 1993, pp. 14–15).

Discussion

This study argues that ancient Egypt cannot be regarded as the primary source or original progenitor of the concept of eternal punishment in the afterlife as later developed within the Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity. The findings indicate that the Egyptian system of judgment—centered on the weighing of the heart, negative confession, and the soul's journey through the Netherworld—emphasized moral balance and alignment with the principle of *Ma'at* (truth and cosmic order) rather than the threat of everlasting torment. Punishment, as described in Egyptian texts and rituals, most often took the form of annihilation for souls that failed to pass the trials, rather than eternal suffering.

These results help explain why the Egyptian system of judgment was highly ritualistic and symbolic: salvation could be achieved through spiritual preparedness, mummification, and the use of the *Book of the Dead*, while failure led to the loss of existence in the afterlife. This framework is therefore fundamentally distinct from the Christian doctrine of eternal hell, which emphasizes perpetual suffering as a moral consequence. As Spronk (1986) has emphasized, the wholesale adoption of afterlife concepts from one tradition into another is highly improbable; hence, the Egyptian view of judgment must be understood as a self-standing cosmological system, not as a direct precursor of post-biblical theology.

Within this framework, the study addresses the question of “why” the Egyptian system of judgment took such a form: it was rooted in their agrarian cosmology, social stability, and the ecological cycles of the Nile River. These orientations produced a vision of the afterlife centered on balance and order rather than on threats of eternal punishment. The Osirian narrative must therefore be interpreted within its original context and carefully distinguished from the theological constructions of Christianity that emerged later.

The findings of this study are consistent with those of Omran (2024) and Manassa (2006), who emphasize the central role of Osiris as the supreme judge and the courtroom as the arena where the fate of the soul is determined through the weighing of the heart and the principle of *Ma'at*. Similarly, Loktionov and Alexandrova (2025) highlight that the presence of forty-two judges in the process of judgment represents the interaction between ritual, literary, and judicial domains in Egyptian tradition. In this sense, judgment was not merely theological but also functioned as a social instrument. However, this study contributes a new perspective by rejecting the assumption that the Egyptian concept of judgment served as the root of the Christian doctrine of eternal punishment. Instead, it emphasizes the Egyptian orientation toward moral balance and the possibility of annihilation for the unworthy soul. Thus, the novelty of this study lies in reading the Egyptian system of judgment not only as a religious practice tied to the Osirian myth but as an independent cosmology, fundamentally distinct from the post-biblical theological

constructions in the Abrahamic traditions.

While the preceding discussion underscored the role of Osiris and the forty-two judges in the judgment process, these structures can only be fully understood within the framework of the principle of *Ma'at*. As Martin (2008) and Reyes (2020) demonstrate, *Ma'at* was not merely the goddess of truth but the cosmic principle that guaranteed order, balance, and justice in the universe. This principle explains why the weighing of the heart against the feather of *Ma'at* became the core of judgment: human morality was not measured against subjective standards but against one's alignment with the universal order. Karenga (2003) further stresses that *Ma'at* functioned as an ethical ideal to be embodied in daily life.

Building on this, Loktionov and Alexandrova (2025) enrich our understanding by showing that the application of *Ma'at* extended beyond the religious-ritual sphere into the judicial domain, where human justice was seen as aligned with cosmic law. Meanwhile, Bleiberg (2024) and Ezzamel (2024) underscore the political-economic dimension of *Ma'at*, which operated as a tool of legitimacy in the distribution of wealth and the preservation of social hierarchy. This comparison reveals the dual meaning of *Ma'at*: as a universal moral standard and as an instrument of power.

If the principle of *Ma'at* served as the cosmological foundation of ancient Egyptian judgment, its most concrete expression is found in the practice of the negative confession within the *Book of the Dead*, particularly in Spell 125. As Janák (2023) demonstrates, the negative confession functioned as a moral declaration affirming an individual's adherence to *Ma'at* by asserting innocence from sins such as theft, falsehood, or murder. Gaber (2009) highlights visual variants in the weighing-of-the-heart scenes, which depict differences between the heart as the object of evaluation and the figure of *Ma'at* on the scales, thus reinforcing the symbolism of moral integrity. Pencheva (2020) further notes that this form of moral evaluation extended beyond eschatological function and influenced other religious visual traditions, including Bulgarian Orthodox art, which adopted elements of the "last judgment" motif. Meanwhile, Huffmon (2021) shows that in the Egyptian context the heart symbolized the seat of memory and wisdom, in contrast to later Christian traditions that emphasized the heart as the locus of sin.

This study concurs with these findings but adds the novelty that the negative confession should be read primarily as a symbolic mechanism to maintain cosmic balance and to avert the annihilation of the soul, rather than as a threat of eternal punishment. Thus, while the negative confession exerted cross-cultural influence, this research underscores the uniqueness of the Egyptian system as autonomous and not to be regarded as the direct root of the Christian doctrine of eternal judgment.

Summarizing the findings, the novelty of this study lies in affirming that the ancient Egyptian system of judgment must be understood as an autonomous cosmology and theology rooted in the principle of *Ma'at* and the agrarian cycles of the Nile, rather than as the precursor of the Christian doctrine of eternal hell. This research distinguishes between the symbolic-ritual function of Egyptian judgment—which emphasized balance, order, and the possibility of annihilation for the unworthy soul—and the absolutist theological doctrines of the Abrahamic traditions, which emphasize everlasting torment. The contribution of this study, therefore, is to clarify the demarcation between the symbolic legacy of Egypt that shaped cross-cultural eschatological imagination and the post-biblical theological constructions that developed within early Christianity. In doing so, it not only strengthens the contextual approach in comparative religious studies but also opens a space to reread the Osirian narrative as a unique model reflecting the intimate relationship between cosmos, ethics, and ecology in ancient Egypt.

The findings of this study affirm that the ancient Egyptian worldview was deeply rooted in the regenerative nature of the Nile's agrarian cycles, where death was not perceived as an absolute end but rather as a transition toward rebirth and reintegration with the cosmos. This aligns with the observations of James (1976) and Murnane (1992), who emphasized the close relationship between the Osirian myth, fertility cycles, and natural order. Within this framework, *Ma'at* emerges as a principle of universal harmony rather than as a threat of eternal punishment. As Karenga (2003) and Martin (2008) note, *Ma'at* functioned as both a moral and cosmic ideal, ensuring balance between humanity, nature, and the divine realm—not as an instrument of everlasting retribution. Thus, the focus of judgment was directed toward the preservation of order and balance rather than the threat of endless suffering.

The implications for comparative religious studies are significant. Davies (1999) and Spronk (1986) emphasize that ancient Egypt did not conceive of final destruction or eternal hell as later articulated in post-biblical Christian theology. Instead, the form of punishment most frequently described was annihilation—the obliteration of a soul that failed to maintain equilibrium. As Pencheva (2020) and Huffmon (2021) illustrate, even though the symbolism of the negative confession influenced later traditions, the Egyptian notion of judgment cannot be directly equated with the Christian concept of a “final judgment.” This research therefore strengthens the argument that the doctrine of eternal hell developed within the Jewish-Christian context, particularly in the aftermath of historical oppression, and not as a direct inheritance from Egypt. In this way, the Osirian narrative can be read as a unique model of regenerative cosmology that underscores the intimate interconnection between ethics, the cosmos, and ecology in ancient Egypt. It also contributes significantly to clarifying the historical origins of the doctrine of hell in comparative religious studies.

The findings of this study suggest that the ancient Egyptian judgment system served a dual function: on the one hand, it acted as a religious mechanism to ensure cosmic order, and on the other, it functioned as a socio-political instrument that reinforced the legitimacy of authority. As Ezzamel (2024) notes, *Ma'at* was employed as an ideological framework for state administration to regulate the distribution of resources and sustain the social hierarchy. In this context, judgment in the afterlife operated not only as a spiritual guarantee but also as a form of social control that encouraged obedience to the king and the broader social order. This reflects a positive consequence: Egyptian belief systems were able to produce social stability and political continuity through the internalization of *Ma'at* in both religious and juridical life (Loktionov & Alexandrova, 2025).

Nevertheless, this study also highlights the dysfunctions within the system. As Bleiberg (2024) demonstrates, access to mummification and the *Book of the Dead* was restricted to the elite or those with sufficient economic means, thereby rendering salvation in the afterlife highly exclusive. In other words, although *Ma'at* was presented as a universal principle, in practice it generated social inequity because spiritual salvation was dependent on ritual and material access. At the same time, Spronk (1986) and Davies (1999) emphasize that the absence of a doctrine of eternal punishment made the Egyptian system comparatively more optimistic, stressing cosmic renewal and regeneration rather than everlasting torment. This reflection reveals that the Egyptian judgment system, while effective in maintaining order, was inherently problematic as it embodied the tension between the ideal of cosmic harmony and the realities of social exclusivity.

The findings of this study carry several practical implications for the development of religious studies and the historical study of eschatology. First, for academic

researchers, there is a need for a more contextual and interdisciplinary approach in interpreting ancient afterlife concepts. In line with the observations of Spronk (1986) and Davies (1999), ancient Egyptian narratives should not be treated as the sole root of the doctrine of hell, but rather as a unique cosmological system with its own internal logic. This can be achieved through comparative research that does not merely focus on the transfer of ideas, but also highlights contextual differences that affirm the autonomy of each tradition.

Second, for the curriculum of religious studies, it is important to include ancient Egypt as a case study of how societies constructed notions of judgment that diverge from Abrahamic models. By emphasizing *Ma'at* as a principle of universal harmony and the regenerative character of the cosmos, students can recognize that conceptions of afterlife justice are not always synonymous with eternal punishment but may also take the form of balance or annihilation. Third, for public discourse and interfaith dialogue, this research may encourage a broader understanding that doctrines of hell and eternal punishment are specific historical constructions rather than universal inheritances. Such an understanding opens space for theological tolerance by acknowledging that each tradition has its own afterlife cosmology that is valid within its cultural context. Accordingly, the concrete steps recommended are: (1) strengthening comparative eschatological research based on both texts and contexts, (2) integrating the study of ancient Egypt into religious and humanities education to broaden comparative horizons, and (3) using these findings as a critical lens for rethinking the origins and socio-doctrinal functions of the concept of hell within Abrahamic traditions.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the concept of judgment in ancient Egypt was grounded in the principle of *Ma'at*, which emphasized cosmic order, moral balance, and the regeneration of life, rather than the doctrine of eternal punishment as later articulated in post-biblical Christianity. The main findings show that the Egyptian mechanisms of judgment—through the role of Osiris and the forty-two judges, the practice of the *negative confession*, and the soul's journey through the Netherworld—functioned primarily as symbolic rites and cosmological mechanisms to preserve universal harmony. Punishment most often took the form of annihilation of the soul rather than eternal suffering, thereby fundamentally distinguishing Egyptian cosmology from Christian theology regarding hell.

The scholarly contribution of this study lies in offering a new reading that emphasizes the autonomy of the ancient Egyptian eschatological system. While reinforcing earlier research that highlighted the ritual, symbolic, and political aspects of Egyptian judgment, this study adds a critical perspective by rejecting the assumption that Egyptian traditions were the direct root of the doctrine of eternal punishment in Christianity. Thus, it proposes a new comparative framework in the study of religions—one that highlights contextual differences and the social functions of afterlife concepts rather than simply tracing lines of continuity across traditions.

The limitations of this research lie in its scope, which remains focused on textual sources and secondary literature, without fully incorporating the latest archaeological findings. Moreover, it has not examined in depth the cross-cultural interactions between Egypt and other Near Eastern traditions that may have shaped eschatological constructions. Future studies are therefore encouraged to integrate philological, archaeological, and cross-cultural comparative approaches more broadly in order to map

the origins and differentiation of afterlife doctrines with greater comprehensiveness.

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