

ANCIENT TEXTS ON THE EGYPTIAN MYSTERIES

The initiatic and mystical character of ancient Egypt is attested from the time of the Pyramid Texts (Old Kingdom – ca. 2350 BCE) through the Greco-Roman era. Ancient authors consistently considered Egypt the font of ancient wisdom, and described the mysteries and initiatic character of the Egyptians. Here are selected passages from ancient Egypt and the classical world on the Egyptian mysteries, adapted for modern readers.

“O King, thou didst not depart dead; thou didst depart living, so thou sittest upon the throne of Osiris, thy sceptre in thy hand, thou commandest the living; Thy sceptres are in thy hand, commanding those of secret places.”

– *Pyramid Texts* (Old Kingdom – ca. 2600–2400 BCE)¹

“A stairway to heaven shall be laid down for him, that he may ascend to heaven thereon; he ascends on the smoke (incense) of the great censuring; ... he flies as a goose; he alights as a scarab, upon the empty throne which is in thy boat, O Rē.”

– *Pyramid Texts* (Old Kingdom)²

“When they have addressed this God whilst rowing along his boat, they cry out, and they bring him to rest in the Field of the Nepertiu Gods who are in the following of Osiris. If these scenes be done in writing according to the similitudes which are in the hidden places of the palace, and if a person hath knowledge of these words ... they shall act as magical protectors ... upon earth, regularly, unfaillingly and eternally.”

– *Amduat*, Second Hour
(New Kingdom ca. 1560–1060 BCE)³

“Whosoever knoweth these things, being attached to his place, shall have his bread with Ra. Whosoever knoweth these things, being a soul and a spirit ... shall never enter the place of destruction.”

– *Amduat*, Third Hour (New Kingdom)⁴



Entrance to Karnak Temple, Luxor, Egypt. Painted by H. Spencer Lewis during Egyptian trip of 1929.

“The hidden Circle of Amentet, through which this great god travelleth and taketh up his place in the Tuat. If these things be made with their names after the manner of this figure which is depicted at the east of the hidden house of the Tuat, and if a man knoweth their names whilst he is upon earth, and knoweth their places in Amenti, he shall attain to his own place in the Tuat, and he shall stand up in all places which belong to the gods whose voices are *maat*, even as the divine sovereign chiefs of Ra, and the mighty ones of the palace, and this knowledge shall be of benefit to him upon earth.”

– *Amduat*, Ninth Hour (New Kingdom)⁵

“Here is the opening of the book of the worship of Rē in the [Fullness of Being], of the worship of Temt in the [All-that-is]. The person who understands this work founded upon the Earth, like a porcelain figure at sunset, which is Rē’s triumph... Anyone who has knowledge on Earth, has knowledge after death.”

– *The Litany of the Sun* (New Kingdom)⁶

“I was introduced into the Divine Book, I beheld the excellent things of Thoth; I was equipped with their secrets; I opened all the passages; one took counsel with me on all their matters.”

– Inscription on a statue of Amenhotep, son of Hapi (19th Dynasty–New Kingdom)⁷

“If this Chapter be known by the deceased he shall become a perfect Spirit-soul in Khert-Neter, and he shall not die a second time, and he shall eat his food side by side with Osiris. If this Chapter be known by the deceased upon earth, he shall become like unto Thoth, and he shall be adored by those who live. He shall not fall headlong at the moment of the intensity of the royal flame of the goddess Bast, and the Great Prince shall make him to advance happily.”

– *Book of the Dead*
(Saite Period Version, 600–500 BCE)⁸

“On this lake they perform by night the show of his [the unnamed] sufferings, and this the Egyptians call Mysteries...”

– Herodotus (5th century BCE)⁹

“The ceremonies and rites of Osiris agree in everything with those of Dionysus, and that those of Isis and Demeter are one and the same, differing in nothing but the name. . . . The feigning of Hermes to be the conductor of souls was derived from the old Egyptian custom that he who brought back the dead body of Apis (when he came to the place), delivered it to him who represented Cerberus. . . .”

– Diodorus Siculus (ca. 90–30 BCE)¹⁰

“These philosophic priests . . . gave up the whole of their life to the contemplation and worship of divine natures and to divine inspiration; . . . through contemplation, science; and through both, [they procured] a certain

occult exercise of manners worthy of antiquity.”

– Chaeremon the Stoic (1st century CE)¹¹

“For the illumination, which is present through the invocations, is self-appearing and self-subsisting;...and goes forth into manifestation through the divine energy and perfection....By such a purpose, therefore, the gods being gracious and propitious, give forth light abundantly to the Theurgists, both calling their souls upward into themselves, providing for them union to themselves in the Chorus, and accustoming them, while they are still in the body, to hold themselves aloof from corporeal things, and likewise to be led up to their own eternal and noetic First Cause...”

“For when we become entirely soul, and are outside of the body and soaring on high with all the gods of the nonmaterial realm, we occupy ourselves with sublime visions.

“The [Egyptian priests] do not, by any means, contemplate these [sacred] things with the reasoning faculty alone, but they also teach that, by means of the sacerdotal theurgy, the aspirant may mount up to the higher and more universal, and those conditions established superior to Fate and to God the Creator (Demiurgos), neither becoming attached to the realm of matter, nor taking hold of anything else besides only the observing of a proper time.”

– Iamblichus of Chalcis (ca. 245–325 CE)¹²

Endnotes:

¹ *Pyramid Texts*, Utterance 213, section 134-135. Adapted from Samuel A.B. Mercer. *The Pyramid Texts*. New York, Longmans, Green, 1952, 58. In public domain.

² *The Pyramid Texts*, Utterance 267, Section 365-366. Adapted from Mercer, 89.

³ Adapted from E.A. Wallis Budge. *The Book of Am-Tuat*. (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1905), 43.

⁴ Translated by E.A. Wallis Budge. *The Gods of the Egyptians* (Chicago: Open Court, 1904), Vol 1: 214.

⁵ Adapted from E.A. Wallis Budge. *The Book of Am-Tuat*, 187-188.

⁶ Edouard Naville, *La Litanie du Soleil: Inscriptions Recueillies dans les Tombeaux des Rois à Thèbes* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1875). Translation adapted for modern readers.

⁷ Translation in James H. Breasted. *Ancient Records of Egypt*. Vol 2: 374 section 915.

⁸ *Book of the Dead*, Chapter 135 (Saite Period Version) Translation in E.A. Wallis Budge, *Book of the Dead*. www.lysator.liu.se/~drokk/BoD/Papyrus_Ani.txt

⁹ Herodotus, *The Histories* Book 2:65, 170-171, trans. G. C. Macaulay (1890; New York: Macmillan and Co., 1914).

¹⁰ Adapted from Diodorus Siculus, “On Egypt” Book 1:7. *The Historical Library of Diodorus the Sicilian*, trans. G. Booth (London: Printed by W. McDowall for J. Davis, 1814), 1:58, 95.

¹¹ Chaeremon, cited in Porphyry, “On the Abstinence from Animal Food,” Chap. 4 in *The Select Works of Porphyry*, trans. Thomas Taylor (London: T. Rodd, 1823).

¹² Iamblichus, *Theurgia or the Egyptian Mysteries*, trans. Alexander Wilder (New York: The Metaphysical Publishing Co., 1911), chap. 4, 55 and 58-59; chap. 12, 204-205; and chap. 16, 257.

