

= Mysteries of Isis =

The mysteries of Isis were religious initiation rites performed in the cult of the goddess Isis in the Greco @-@ Roman world . They were modeled on other mystery rites , particularly the Eleusinian Mysteries in honor of the Greek goddess Demeter , and originated sometime between the third century BCE and the second century CE . Despite their mainly Hellenistic origins , the mysteries did allude to beliefs from ancient Egyptian religion , in which the worship of Isis arose . By undergoing the mystery rites , initiates signaled their dedication to Isis , although they were not required to worship her exclusively . The rites were seen as a symbolic death and rebirth , and they may have been thought to guarantee that the initiate 's soul , with the goddess 's help , would continue after death in a blissful afterlife .

Many texts from the Roman Empire refer to the mysteries of Isis , but the only source to describe them is a work of fiction , the novel *Metamorphoses* , written in the second century CE by Apuleius . In it , the initiate undergoes elaborate ritual purification before descending into the innermost part of Isis 's temple , where he has an intense religious experience , seeing the gods in person .

Some aspects of the mysteries of Isis and of other mystery cults , particularly their connection with the afterlife , resemble important elements of Christianity . The question of whether the mysteries influenced Christianity is controversial and the evidence is unclear ; some scholars today attribute the similarities to a shared cultural background rather than direct influence . In contrast , Apuleius 's account has had direct effects in modern times . Through his description of them , the mysteries of Isis have influenced many works of fiction and modern fraternal organizations , as well as a widespread , though false , belief that the ancient Egyptians themselves had an elaborate system of mystery initiations .

= = Origins = =

Greco @-@ Roman mysteries were , in the words of the classicist Walter Burkert , " initiation rituals of a voluntary , personal , and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred . " These rituals were dedicated to a particular deity or group of deities , and they used a variety of intense experiences , such as nocturnal darkness interrupted by bright light and loud music and noise , that induced a state of disorientation and an intense religious experience . Some of them involved cryptic symbolism . Initiates were not supposed to discuss some of the details of what they experienced in the mysteries , and modern understanding of these rites is limited by this secrecy . The most prestigious mysteries in the Greek world were the Eleusinian mysteries dedicated to the goddess Demeter , which were performed at Eleusis , near Athens , from at least the sixth century BCE to the end of the fourth century CE . They centered on Demeter 's search for her daughter Persephone in Greek mythology . Eleusinian initiates passed into a dark hall , the Telesterion , and were subjected to terrifying sights , followed by a fiery light and a shout from the hierophant who presided over the ceremony . By this light the initiates saw objects that represented Demeter 's power over fertility , such as a sheaf of wheat , and perhaps other images that referred to the myth of Persephone . In the mysteries of the god Dionysus , which were performed in many places across the Greek world , participants celebrated in a frenzy at night , in the open air . Dionysian celebrations were connected in some way with Orphism , a group of mystical beliefs about the nature of the afterlife .

Isis was originally a goddess in ancient Egyptian religion , which did not include Greek @-@ style mysteries . Some Egyptian rituals were performed exclusively by priests , out of public view , but ordinary Egyptians were never permitted to join in . Other rituals may have reenacted events from Egyptian mythology , such as the ceremonies in honor of Osiris , the god of the afterlife and the mythological husband of Isis , that were performed at Abydos . The Greeks interpreted these myth @-@ based rituals as mysteries . The historian Herodotus , writing in the fifth century BCE , was the first to do so . He referred to Egyptian rites reenacting the myth of the murder of Osiris as mysteries , likening them to the mysteries of Dionysus he was familiar with in Greece . He further said that the Greek worship of Dionysus was influenced by the worship of Osiris in Egypt . Various Greek writers

who came after Herodotus viewed Egypt and its priests as the source of all mystical wisdom . They claimed that many elements of Greek philosophy and culture came from Egypt , including the mystery cults . Burkert and the Egyptologist Francesco Tiradritti both say there is a grain of truth in these claims , as the oldest Greek mystery cults developed in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE , at the same time that Greece was developing closer contacts with Egyptian culture . The imagery of the afterlife found in the mystery cults may thus have been influenced by that in Egyptian afterlife beliefs .

Isis was one of many non @-@ Greek deities whose cults became part of Greek and Roman religion during the Hellenistic period (323 ? 30 BCE) , when Greek people and culture spread to lands across the Mediterranean and most of those same lands were conquered by the Roman Republic . Under the influence of Greco @-@ Roman tradition , some of these cults , including that of Isis , developed their own mystery rites . The mysteries of Isis could have emerged as far back as the early third century BCE , after the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty had taken control of Egypt . The Ptolemies promoted the cult of the god Serapis , who incorporated traits of Osiris and of Greek deities like Dionysus and the underworld god Pluto . Isis 's cult was conjoined with that of Serapis . She too was reinterpreted to resemble Greek goddesses , particularly Demeter , while retaining many of her Egyptian characteristics . The mysteries of Isis , modeled on those in Demeter 's honor at Eleusis , could have been developed at the same time , as part of this mingling of Greek and Egyptian religion .

Another possibility is that the mysteries developed after Isis 's Hellenized cult reached Greece itself , later in the third century BCE . Much of the early evidence of Isis worship in Greece comes from aretalogies , poems in praise of the goddess . The wording of aretalogies from Maroneia and Andros , both from the first century BCE , closely links Isis with mystery rites . Petra Pakkanen says that these aretalogies prove the mysteries of Isis existed by that time , but Jan Bremmer argues that they only connect Isis with the Eleusinian Mysteries , not with distinctive rites of her own . Stronger evidence for mysteries of Isis is found in the first century CE , and they certainly existed in the second . Temples to Isis in Greece may have developed their mysteries in response to the widespread belief that the Greek mystery cults had originated with Isis and Osiris in Egypt . They could have adapted elements of Eleusinian rites , and perhaps Dionysian mysteries as well , to reflect Egyptian mythology . The end product would have seemed to the Greeks like an authentic Egyptian precursor to Greek mysteries . Many Greco @-@ Roman sources claim that Isis herself devised these rites .

Even once the mysteries were established , they were not performed everywhere Isis 's cult was present . The only known sites for her mystery cult were in Italy , Greece , and Anatolia , although she was worshipped in nearly every province of the Roman Empire . In Egypt itself , only a few texts and images from the Roman period refer to the mysteries of Isis , and it is not certain that they were ever performed there .

= = Apuleius 's description of the mysteries = =

= = Context and reliability = =

Several texts from Roman times refer to people who were initiated in the Isis cult . However , the only direct description of the mysteries of Isis comes from *Metamorphoses* , also known as *The Golden Ass* , a comic novel from the late second century CE by the Roman author Apuleius .

The novel 's protagonist is Lucius , a man who has been magically transformed into a donkey . In the eleventh and last book of the novel , Lucius , after falling asleep on the beach at Cenchreae in Greece , wakes to see the full moon . He prays to the moon , using the names of several moon goddesses known in the Greco @-@ Roman world , asking her to restore him to human form . Isis appears in a vision before Lucius and declares herself the greatest of all goddesses . She tells him that a festival in her honor , the *Navigium Isidis* , is taking place nearby , and that the festival procession carries with it garlands of roses that will restore his human form if he eats them . After

Lucius becomes human again , the high priest at the festival declares that he has been saved from his misfortunes by the goddess , and that he will now be free of the inquisitiveness and self @-@ indulgence that drew him into many of his earlier misadventures . Lucius joins the local temple of Isis , becomes her devoted follower , and eventually undergoes initiation .

Lucius 's apparently solemn devotion to the Isis cult in this chapter contrasts strongly with the comic misadventures that make up the rest of the novel . Scholars debate whether the account is intended to seriously represent Lucius 's devotion to the goddess , or whether it is ironic , perhaps a satire of the Isis cult . Those who believe it is satirical point to the way Lucius is pushed to undergo several initiations , each requiring a fee , despite having little money . Although many of the scholars who have tried to analyze the mysteries based on the book have assumed it is serious , the book may be broadly accurate even if it is satirical . Apuleius 's description of the Isis cult and its mysteries generally fits with much of the outside evidence about them . S.J. Harrison says it shows " detailed knowledge of Egyptian cult , whether or not Apuleius himself was in fact an initiate of Isiac religion . " In another of his works , the *Apologia* , Apuleius claims to have undergone several initiations , though he does not mention the mysteries of Isis specifically . In writing *Metamorphoses* , he may have drawn on personal experience of the Isiac initiation or of other initiations that he underwent . Even so , the detailed description given in *Metamorphoses* may be idealized rather than strictly accurate , and the Isis cults may have included many varieties of mystery rite . The novel actually mentions three distinct initiation rites in two cities , although only the first is described in any detail .

= = = Rites = = =

According to *Metamorphoses* , the initiation " was performed in the manner of voluntary death and salvation obtained by favor . " Only Isis herself could determine who should be initiated and when ; thus , Lucius only begins preparing for the mysteries after Isis appears to him in a dream . The implication that Isis was thought to command her followers directly is supported by the Greek writer Pausanias , writing in the same era as Apuleius , who said no one was allowed to participate in Isis ' festivals in her shrine at Tithorea without her inviting them in a dream , and by inscriptions in which priests of Isis write that she called them to become her servants . In Apuleius 's description , the goddess also determines how much the initiate must pay to the temple in order to undergo the rites .

The priests in Lucius 's initiation read the procedure for the rite from a ritual book kept in the temple that is covered in " undecipherable letters " , some of which are " forms of all kinds of animals " while others are ornate and abstract . The use of a book for ritual purposes was much more common in Egyptian religion than in Greek or Roman tradition , and the characters in them are often thought to be hieroglyphs or hieratic , which in the eyes of Greek and Roman worshippers would emphasize the Egyptian background of the rite and add to its solemnity . However , David Frankfurter suggests that they are akin to the deliberately unintelligible magical symbols that were commonly used in Greco @-@ Roman magic .

Before the initiation proper , Lucius must undergo a series of ritual purifications . The priest bathes him , asks the gods for forgiveness on his behalf , and sprinkles him with water . This confession of and repentance for past sins fits with an emphasis on chastity and other forms of self @-@ denial found in many other sources about the Isis cult . Lucius next has to wait ten days , while abstaining from meat and wine , before the initiation begins . Purifying baths were common in many rituals across the Greco @-@ Roman world . The plea for forgiveness , however , may derive from the oaths that Egyptian priests were required to take , in which they declared themselves to be free of wrongdoing . The sprinkling with water and the refraining from certain foods probably come from the purification rituals that those priests had to undergo before entering a temple . On the evening of the final day , Lucius receives a variety of gifts from fellow devotees of Isis before donning a clean linen robe and entering the deepest part of the temple .

The description of what happens next is deliberately cryptic . Lucius reminds the reader that the uninitiated are not allowed to know the details of the mystery rites , before describing his experience in vague terms .

I came to the boundary of death and , having trodden on the threshold of Proserpina , I travelled through all the elements and returned . In the middle of the night I saw the sun flashing with bright light , I came face to face with the gods below and the gods above and paid reverence to them from close at hand .

In a series of paradoxes , then , Lucius travels to the underworld and to the heavens , sees the sun amid darkness , and approaches the gods . Many people have speculated about how the ritual simulated these impossible experiences . The first sentence indicates that the initiate is supposed to be passing through the Greek underworld , but the surviving remains of Roman temples to Isis have no subterranean passages that might have simulated the underworld . The bright " sun " Lucius mentions may have been a fire in the darkness , similar to the one at the climax of the Eleusinian Mysteries . The gods he saw face to face may have been statues or frescoes of deities . Some scholars believe that the initiation also entailed some kind of reenactment of or reference to the death of Osiris , but if it did , Apuleius 's text does not mention it .

Lucius emerges from this experience in the morning , and the priests dress him in an elaborately embroidered cloak . He then stands on a dais carrying a torch and wearing a crown of palm leaves ? " adorned like the sun and set up in the manner of a divine statue " , as Apuleius describes it . The priests draw back curtains to reveal Lucius to a crowd of his fellow devotees . During the next three days , Lucius enjoys a series of banquets and sacred meals with his fellow worshippers , completing the initiation process .

After this initiation , Lucius moves to Rome and joins its main temple to the goddess , the Iseum Campense . Urged by more visions sent by the gods , he undergoes two more initiations , incurring more expenses ? such as having to buy a replacement for the cloak he left behind at Cenchreae ? each time . These initiations are not described in as much detail as the first . The second is dedicated to Osiris and is said to be different from the one dedicated to Isis . Apuleius calls it " the nocturnal ecstasies of the supreme god " but gives no other details . The third initiation may be dedicated to both Isis and Osiris . Before this initiation , Lucius has a vision where Osiris himself speaks to him , suggesting that he is the dominant figure in the rite . At the novel 's end Lucius has been admitted to a high position in the cult by Osiris himself , and he is confident that the god will ensure his future success in his work as a lawyer .

= = Significance = =

= = = Religious symbolism and contact with the gods = = =

Most mystery rites were connected with myths about the deities they focused on ? the Osiris myth , in the case of Isis ? and they claimed to convey to initiates details about the myths that were not generally known . In addition , various Greco @-@ Roman writers produced theological and philosophical interpretations of the mysteries . Spurred by the fragmentary evidence , modern scholars have often tried to discern what the mysteries may have meant to their initiates . But Hugh Bowden argues that there may have been no single , authoritative interpretation of mystery rites and that " the desire to identify a lost secret ? something that , once it is correctly identified , will explain what a mystery cult was all about ? is bound to fail . " He regards the effort to meet the gods directly , exemplified by the climax of Lucius 's initiation in *Metamorphoses* , as the most important feature of the rites . The notion of meeting the gods face to face contrasted with classical Greek and Roman beliefs , in which seeing the gods , though it might be an awe @-@ inspiring experience , could be dangerous and even deadly . In Greek mythology , for example , the sight of Zeus 's true form incinerated the mortal woman Semele . Yet Lucius 's meeting with the gods fits with a trend , found in various religious groups in Roman times , toward a closer connection between the worshipper and the gods .

Ancient Egyptian beliefs are one possible source for understanding the symbolism in the mysteries of Isis . J. Gwyn Griffiths , an Egyptologist and classical scholar , extensively studied Book 11 of *Metamorphoses* and its possible Egyptian background . He pointed out similarities between the first

initiation in Metamorphoses and Egyptian afterlife beliefs , saying that the initiate took on the role of Osiris by undergoing symbolic death . In his view , the imagery of the initiation refers to the Egyptian underworld , the Duat . Griffiths argued that the sun in the middle of the night , in Lucius ' account of the initiation , might have been influenced by the contrasts of light and dark in other mystery rites , but it derived mainly from the depictions of the underworld in ancient Egyptian funerary texts . According to these texts , the sun god Ra passes through the underworld each night and unites with Osiris to emerge renewed , just as deceased souls do .

The " elements " that Lucius passes through in the first initiation may refer to the classical elements of earth , air , water , and fire that were believed to make up the world , or to regions of the cosmos . In either case , it indicates that Lucius 's vision transports him beyond the human world . Panayotis Pachis believes the word refers specifically to the planets in Hellenistic astrology . Astrological themes appeared in many other cults in the Roman Empire , including another mystery cult , dedicated to Mithras . In the Isis cult , astrological symbolism may have alluded to the belief that Isis governed the movements of the stars and thus the passage of time and the order of the cosmos , beliefs that Lucius refers to when praying to the goddess .

However , in the course of the book , as Valentino Gasparini puts it , " Osiris explicitly snatches out of Isis 's hands the role of Supreme Being " and replaces her as the focus of Lucius 's devotion . Osiris ' prominence in the Metamorphoses is in keeping with other evidence about the Isis cult in Rome , which suggests that it adopted more themes and imagery from Egyptian funerary religion and the worship of Osiris in the late 1st and early 2nd centuries CE . Gasparini argues that the shift in focus reflects a belief that Osiris was the supreme being and Isis was an intermediary between him and humanity . This interpretation is found in the book *On Isis and Osiris* by the first @-@ century CE Greek author Plutarch , which analyzes the Osiris myth based on Plutarch 's own Middle Platonist philosophy . However , S.J. Harrison suggests that the sudden switch of focus from Isis to Osiris is simply a satire of grandiose claims of religious devotion .

= = = Commitment to the cult = = =

Because not all local cults of Isis held mystery rites , not all her devotees would have undergone initiation . Nevertheless , both Apuleius 's story and Plutarch 's *On Isis and Osiris* suggest that initiation was considered part of the larger process of joining the cult and dedicating oneself to the goddess .

The Isis cult , like most in the Greco @-@ Roman world , was not exclusive ; worshippers of Isis could continue to revere other gods as well . Devotees of Isis were among the very few religious groups in the Greco @-@ Roman world to have a distinctive name for themselves , loosely equivalent to " Jew " or " Christian " , that might indicate they defined themselves by their exclusive devotion to the goddess . However , the word ? Isiacus or " Isiac " ? was rarely used . Many priests of Isis officiated in other cults as well . Several people in late Roman times , like Vettius Agorius Praetextatus , joined multiple priesthoods and underwent several initiations dedicated to different gods . Mystery initiations thus did not require devotees to abandon whatever religious identity they originally had , and they would not qualify as religious conversions under a narrow definition of the term . However , some of these initiations did involve smaller changes in religious identity , such as joining a new community of worshippers or strengthening devotees ' commitment to a cult they were already part of , that would qualify as conversions in a broader sense . Many ancient sources , both written by Isiacs and by outside observers , suggest that many of Isis 's devotees considered her the focus of their lives and that the cult emphasized moral purity , self @-@ denial , and public declarations of devotion to the goddess . Joining Isis 's cult was therefore a sharper change in identity than in many other mystery cults . Isiac initiation , by giving the devotee a dramatic , mystical experience of the goddess , added emotional intensity to the process .

It is unclear how initiation may have affected a devotee 's rank within the cult . After going through his third initiation , Lucius becomes a *pastophoros* , a member of a particular class of priests . If the third initiation was a requirement for becoming a *pastophoros* , it is possible that members moved up in the cult hierarchy by going through the series of initiations . Nevertheless , Apuleius refers to

initiates and to priests as if they are separate groups within the cult . Initiation may have been a prerequisite for a devotee to become a priest but not have automatically made him or her into one .

= = = Connection with the afterlife = = =

Many pieces of evidence suggest that the mysteries of Isis were connected in some way to salvation and the guarantee of an afterlife . The Greek conception of the afterlife included the paradisiacal Elysian Fields , and philosophers developed various ideas about the immortality of the soul , but Greeks and Romans expressed uncertainty about what would happen to them after death . In both Greek and Roman traditional religion , no god was thought to guarantee a pleasant afterlife to his or her worshippers . The gods of some mystery cults may have been exceptions , but evidence about those cults ' afterlife beliefs is vague . Apuleius 's account , if it is accurate , provides stronger evidence for Isiac afterlife beliefs than is available for the other cults . The book says Isis 's power over fate , which her Greek and Roman devotees frequently mentioned , gives her control over life and death . According to the priest who initiates Lucius , devotees of Isis " who had finished their life 's span and were already standing on the threshold of light ? s end , if only they could safely be trusted with the great unspoken mysteries of the cult , were frequently drawn forth by the goddess ' power and in a manner reborn through her providence and set once more on the course of renewed life . " In another passage , Isis herself says that when Lucius dies he will be able to see her shining in the darkness of the underworld and worship her there .

Some scholars are skeptical the afterlife was a major focus of the cult . Ramsay MacMullen says that when characters in *Metamorphoses* call Lucius " reborn " , they refers to his new life as a devotee and never call him *renatus in aeternam* [eternally reborn] , which would refer to the afterlife . Mary Beard , John North , and Simon Price say *Metamorphoses* shows that " the cult of Isis had implications for life and death , but even so more emphasis is placed on extending the span of life than on the after @-@ life ? which is pictured in fairly undifferentiated terms . "

A funerary inscription from Bithynia , left by a devotee of Isis , provides evidence of Isiac afterlife beliefs outside Apuleius 's work . It explicitly says that because the devotee was initiated into the mysteries of the goddess , he did not " walk the dark road of the Acheron " but " ran to the havens of the blessed . "

Afterlife beliefs in the Isis cult were probably connected with Osiris . The ancient Egyptians believed that Osiris lived on in the Duat after death , thanks in part to Isis 's help , and that after their deaths they could be revived like him with the assistance of other deities , including Isis . These beliefs may well have carried over into the Greco @-@ Roman Isis cult . The symbolism found in Lucius 's first initiation , with its references to death and to the sun in the Egyptian underworld , suggests that it involved Osirian afterlife beliefs , even though Osiris is not mentioned in the description of the rite . As Robert Turcan puts it , when Lucius is revealed to the crowd after his initiation he is " honoured almost like a new Osiris , saved and regenerated through the ineffable powers of Isis . The palms radiating from his head were the signs of the Sun triumphing over death . "

= = Influence on other traditions = =

= = = Possible influence on Christianity = = =

The mysteries of Isis , like those of other gods , continued to be performed into the late fourth century CE . Toward the end of the century , however , Christian emperors increasingly restricted the practice of non @-@ Christian religions , which they condemned as " pagan " . Mystery cults thus died out near the start of the fifth century . They existed alongside Christianity for centuries before their extinction , and some elements of their initiations resembled Christian beliefs and practices . As a result , the possibility has often been raised that Christianity was directly influenced by the mystery cults . Evidence about interactions between Christianity and the mystery cults is poor , making the question difficult to resolve .

Most religious traditions in the Greco-Roman world centered on a particular city or ethnic group and did not require personal devotion, only public ritual. In contrast, the cult of Isis, like Christianity and some other mystery cults, was made up of people who joined voluntarily, out of their personal commitment to a deity that many of them regarded as superior to all others. Christianity has its own initiation ritual, baptism, and beginning in the fourth century, Christians began to refer to their sacraments, like baptism, with the word *mysterion*, the Greek term that was also used for a mystery rite. In this case, the word meant that Christians did not discuss their most important rites with non-Christians who might misunderstand or disrespect them. Their rites thus acquired some of the aura of secrecy that surrounded the mystery cults. Furthermore, if Isis initiates were thought to benefit in the afterlife from Osiris's death and resurrection, this belief would parallel the Christian belief that the death and resurrection of Jesus made salvation available to those who become Christians.

Even in ancient times these similarities were controversial. Non-Christians in the Roman Empire in the early centuries CE thought Christianity and the mystery cults resembled each other. Reacting to these claims by outsiders, early Christian apologists denied that these cults had influenced their religion. The 17th-century Protestant scholar Isaac Casaubon brought up the question again by accusing the Catholic Church of deriving its sacraments from the rituals of the mystery cults. Charles-François Dupuis, in the late 18th century, went further by claiming that all Christianity originated in the mystery cults. Intensified by religious disputes between Protestants, Catholics, and non-Christians, the controversy has continued to the present day.

Some scholars have specifically compared baptism with the Isis initiation described by Apuleius. Before the early fourth century CE, baptism was the culmination of a long process, in which the convert to Christianity fasted for the forty days of Lent before being immersed at Easter in a cistern or natural body of water. Like the mysteries of Isis, then, early Christian baptism involved a days-long fast and a washing ritual. Both fasting and washing were common types of ritual purification found in the religions of the Mediterranean, and Christian baptism was specifically derived from the baptism of Jesus and Jewish immersion rituals. Therefore, according to Hugh Bowden, these similarities come from the shared religious background of Christianity and the Isis cult, not from the influence of one tradition upon the other.

Similarly, the sacred meals shared by the initiates of many mystery cults have been compared with the Christian rite of communion. For instance, the classicist R. E. Witt called the banquet that concluded the Isis initiation "the pagan Eucharist of Isis and Sarapis". However, feasts in which worshippers ate the food that had been sacrificed to a deity were a nearly universal practice in Mediterranean religions and do not prove a direct link between Christianity and the mystery cults. The most distinctive trait of Christian communion? the belief that the god himself was the victim of the sacrifice? was not present in the mystery cults.

Bowden doubts that afterlife beliefs were a very important aspect of mystery cults and therefore thinks their resemblance to Christianity was small. Jaime Alvar, in contrast, argues that the mysteries of Isis, along with those of Mithras and Cybele, did involve beliefs about salvation and the afterlife that resembled those in Christianity. But, he says, they did not become similar by borrowing directly from each other, only by adapting in similar ways to the Greco-Roman religious environment. He says: "Each cult found the materials it required in the common trough of current ideas. Each took what it needed and adapted these elements according to its overall drift and design."

= = = Influence in modern times = = =

Motifs from Apuleius' description of the Isis initiation have been repeated and reworked in fiction and in esoteric belief systems in modern times, and they thus form an important part of the Western perception of ancient Egyptian religion. People reusing these motifs often assume that mystery rites were practiced in Egypt long before Hellenistic times.

An influential example is the 1731 novel *Sethos* by Jean Terrasson. Terrasson claimed he had

translated this book from an ancient Greek work of fiction that was based on real events . The book was actually his own invention , inspired by ancient Greek sources that assumed Greek philosophy had derived from Egypt . In the novel , Egypt 's priests run an elaborate education system like a European university . To join their ranks , the protagonist , Sethos , undergoes an initiation presided over by Isis , taking place in hidden chambers beneath the Great Pyramid of Giza . Based on Lucius ' statement in *Metamorphoses* that he was " borne through all the elements " during his initiation , Terrasson describes the initiation as an elaborate series of ordeals , each based on one of the classical elements : running over hot metal bars for fire , swimming a canal for water , and swinging through the air over a pit .

William Warburton 's treatise *The Divine Legation of Moses* , published from 1738 to 1741 , included an analysis of ancient mystery rites that drew upon Sethos for much of its evidence . Assuming that all mystery rites derived from Egypt , Warburton argued that the public face of Egyptian religion was polytheistic , but the Egyptian mysteries were designed to reveal a deeper , monotheistic truth to elite initiates . One of them , Moses , learned this truth during his Egyptian upbringing and developed Judaism to reveal it to the entire Israelite nation .

Freemasons , members of a European fraternal organization that attained its modern form in the early eighteenth century , developed many pseudohistorical origin myths that traced Freemasonry back to ancient times . Egypt was among the civilizations that Masons claimed had influenced their traditions . After Sethos was published , several Masonic lodges developed rites based on those in the novel . Late in the century , Masonic writers , still assuming that Sethos was an ancient story , used the obvious resemblance between their rites and the initiation of Sethos as evidence of Freemasonry 's supposedly ancient origin . Many works of fiction from the 1790s to the 1820s reused and modified the signature traits of Terrasson 's Egyptian initiation : trials by three or four elements , often taking place under the pyramids . The best @-@ known of these works is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 's 1791 opera *The Magic Flute* , in which the main character , Tamino , undergoes a series of trials overseen by priests who invoke Isis and Osiris .

The Freemason Karl Leonhard Reinhold , in the 1780s , drew upon and modified Warburton 's claims in an effort to reconcile Freemasonry 's traditional origin story , which traces Freemasonry back to ancient Israel , with its enthusiasm for Egyptian imagery . He claimed that the sentence " I am that I am " , spoken by the Jewish God in the Book of Exodus , had a pantheistic meaning . He compared it with an Egyptian inscription on a veiled statue of Isis recorded by the Roman @-@ era authors Plutarch and Proclus , which said " I am all that is , was , and shall be , " which led him to believe that Isis was a pantheistic personification of Nature . According to Reinhold , it was this pantheistic belief system that Moses imparted to the Israelites , so that Isis and the Jewish and Christian conception of God shared a common origin .

In contrast , some people in the wake of the dechristianisation of France during the French Revolution used the imagery of a pantheistic Isis to represent their opposition to the clergy and to Christianity in general . For instance , an esoteric fraternal organization in Napoleonic France , the Sophisian Order , regarded Isis as their tutelary deity . To them , she symbolized both modern scientific knowledge ? which hoped to uncover Nature 's secrets ? and the mystical wisdom of the ancient mystery rites . The vague set of esoteric beliefs that surrounded the goddess offered an alternative to traditional Christianity . It was during this anticlerical era that Dupuis claimed that Christianity was a distorted offshoot of ancient mystery cults .

Various esoteric organizations that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries , such as the Theosophical Society and the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis , repeated the beliefs that had originated with Sethos : that Egyptians underwent initiation within the pyramids and that Greek philosophers were initiates who learned Egypt 's secret wisdom . Esoteric writers influenced by Theosophy , such as Reuben Swinburne Clymer in his 1909 book *The Mystery of Osiris* and Manly Palmer Hall in *Freemasonry of the Ancient Egyptians* in 1937 , also wrote of an age @-@ old Egyptian mystery tradition . An elaborate example of these beliefs is the 1954 book *Stolen Legacy* by George James , which claims that Greek philosophy was built on knowledge stolen from the Egyptian school of initiates . James imagined this mystery school as a grandiose organization with branches on many continents , so that the purported system of Egyptian mysteries shaped cultures

all over the world .