

# THE WISDOM OF THE SAGES: ON THE HOMERIC HYMN AND THE MYTH OF DEMETER

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**T**his article's original manuscript was written in Athens in Greek by Frater Nicholas P. Kephalas after a comprehensive study of the few remaining sources of information which have survived the religious prejudice of the past centuries. The work was accomplished during the 1940s despite the unfavorable conditions that prevailed during World War II and civil war in his own homeland with resultant poverty and destruction. His efforts are dedicated: "To the Imperator of AMORC, Ralph M. Lewis, and to the fratres and sorores of the International Jurisdiction of the Rosicrucian Order, as a token of profound respect and preeminent honor."

*It is evident from the manuscript that it is a work of love—love of the achievements of his ancient forebears, and love of philosophy and the mystical teachings which so greatly influenced the thought of later times. It was necessary to translate the manuscript into English. This was a task that required an excellent knowledge of both Greek and English. The translation was a labor of love for the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, by Frater Peter G. Demos, who lives in the United States, and the manuscript has now been adapted for modern readers.*

If age gives dignity, then we shall acquire a mantle of mental and spiritual poise by this study. It extends into remote antiquity the age of what we cherish and hold to be worthy of us. It is good to feel that our feet are in the soil of the past while at the same time we reach into the future. It prevents us from feeling that we are suspended in an unstable state.

## The Ancient Mysteries

Mysteries are sometimes described as religious truths or secret rites. In the following definition, the word *sacra* refers to things which are sacred, whether these are utensils, objects, or temples. *Kore* means maiden. In her book called *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Jane Harrison discusses the mysteries.

"Mysteries were by no means confined to the religion of Demeter and Kore. There were mysteries of Hermes, of Iasion, of Ino, of Archemoros, of Agraulos, of Hecate. In general, mysteries seem to occur more usually in relation to the cult of women divinities, of heroines and earth-goddesses; from the worship of the Olympians in Homer they are markedly absent. In general, by a mystery is meant a rite in which certain *sacra* are exhibited, which cannot be safely seen by the worshipper till he [or she] has undergone certain purifications."

The religious mysteries of the ancient world were mystical and symbolic ceremonies. Their performance revealed occult and sublime philosophic dogmas to those fortunate enough to receive such initiation. The adjective *fortunate* is employed intentionally, since initiation into the mysteries was obtained only after lengthy trials. Initiation was considered a distinction and a token of priceless honor and accomplishment.

The most famous of all ancient religious mysteries, among which were the Kabeirian of Samothrace, the Dionysian, the Orphic,





A Karyatid from Eleusis. These were the capitals of huge pillars for the Temple. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

Clement of Alexandria who lived from about 150 to 215 CE wrote on the mysteries. However, the leaders of the church discussed the mysteries primarily to refute them as heresies. We glean some information from the Greek dramas and from philosophers such as Plato.

### The Homeric Hymn to Demeter

The reason for the mysteries being established at Eleusis is related to the beautiful and dramatic myth concerning Demeter and her daughter Persephone. This is perhaps the most important myth in all Greek mythology. It is well presented in the Hymn to Demeter, composed probably in the seventh or sixth century before Christ. It was discovered in a Moscow library.

Paul Decharme (1839-1905), a member of the French archaeological school at Athens, states in his work, *Mythology of Ancient Greece*, published in 1879, that the hymn is so well executed that it makes the myth stand out from all the rest as the most beautiful and moving creation of the Greek imagination. The changes of the seasons, the life and death of nature are presented in so vivid and unforgettable a manner as to impress readers that they are observing a mystical tragedy.

The first act of this divine drama deals with the abduction of Persephone. The story opens with Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, playing with the nymphs, daughters of Oceanos, in the center of a green and flowery meadow of Sicily. She was a living picture of youth and beauty. The aromas of the rose, narcissus, lily, iris, hyacinth, and all the other flowers in bloom attracted her, and she ran joyfully about. But in the midst of all that beauty, she noticed suddenly a narcissus that surpassed all others in size, beauty, and fragrance. Fascinated, she extended her hands to pluck it. Then and there the earth opened abruptly, and the infernal and terrible god of Hades rose up out of its depths in a golden chariot. He seized her and immediately transported her to his gloomy kingdom. The young goddess cried out and begged for the help of Zeus, supreme master of all the gods, but in vain. No god and no person heard her plaintive cries.

A free translation from the original hymn states that so long as the goddess Persephone saw the land, the starry skies, the sea with its rushing waves wherein live all kinds of monsters, and the brilliant rays of the Sun, she never lost hope that she would soon see her beloved mother and the entire circle of the gods coming to her rescue. Despite her sorrow, this hope enlivened her imagination and provided entertainment, especially when she heard her voice re-echoed by the mountain peaks and the depths of the sea. When Demeter, her august mother, heard her daughter's plaintive cries, she tore her diadem from her hair, threw a dark shawl over her shoulders, and dived down over land and waves like a bird in search of its offspring.

Then follows the second act of the drama: a thrilling account of Demeter's wanderings in quest of her daughter. The pains and suffering of inconsolable maternal love are beautifully described: "The august goddess wandered for nine days over the

entire Earth with lighted torch in hand. Possessed by torment, she tasted neither ambrosia nor sweet nectar; she did not even have time for sleeping or bathing.”

On the tenth day of her wanderings, Demeter met the goddess Hecate, who became interested in her misfortune. Hecate informed her that she had heard Persephone’s cries but had failed to recognize the kidnapper. Demeter listened intently but remained silent. Then the goddess of vegetation resumed her search with the same persistence and anxiety.

Pity and compassion caused Hecate to accompany Demeter to assist in the search. Shortly the two goddesses came before Helios, the sun god. As the divine witness of all events, he had not failed to see the kidnapping of the virgin. Before Demeter had completed her question, Helios revealed the kidnapper’s identity. He told her that he was none other than Hades, who had taken Persephone for his wife with the permission of Zeus.

### Demeter Seeks Persephone amongst Humans

The sufferings of Demeter were augmented. Angered at Zeus, she departed from Olympus, the home of the gods, and even dropped her divine characteristics.



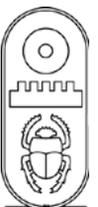
The legendary cave of Pluto (Hades) at Eleusis. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

Through metamorphosis, she became an aged woman. Thus transformed, she wandered from one human habitation to another, seeking her beloved daughter. Her wanderings finally led her to Eleusis.

Again, we quote: “Broken-hearted, she sat on the roadside by the well of Parthenian, where people were wont to obtain their water, in the shade of an olive tree which stood thereby. . . . She pulled down the hood which she had on her head and remained silent for a long time without showing the least interest in anything. There she stayed without food or drink, pining away because of her unending sorrow for her beautiful daughter.”

When the daughters of Celeus, the first mythical king of Eleusis, came to the well of Parthenian to fill their copper amphoras with cool water, they found the old woman sitting there silent. They asked her all kinds of questions. Not wishing to reveal her identity, Demeter said that she had been kidnapped by pirates, who had let her off on the shores of Attica. She stated that she had started inland without knowing where she was going, that she was seeking refuge and would be willing to serve in any household as a nurse or maid. The maidens hastened home to tell their mother about the old woman. Queen Metaneira, their mother, having a baby to rear, told them to fetch the old woman to the palace. Gladdened by their mother’s consent, the maidens announced the good news to Demeter and rushed back to the palace with her.

As the goddess stepped across the threshold, a heavenly splendor shone through the mask covering her face. It lighted the entire hall and betrayed her divinity. Possessed by respect mixed with fear, Metaneira rose from her throne. But the bereaved goddess



let her veil fall over her face immediately and said not a word. All present looked at her and wondered, but she remained motionless and silent. Apparently, nothing could console her or free her from her misery. Only young Iambe, a slave woman, by her jests succeeded occasionally in bringing fleeting smiles to the lips of the embittered goddess. Nevertheless, Metaneira decided to entrust her son, Demophon, to the care of the divine nurse, “. . . and so the child grew as a god without ever being fed any cereal or any milk from his mother’s breast.”

Demeter regularly anointed the infant’s body with nectar and steadily blew over his face as she held him close to her bosom. During the nighttime, without letting his parents know, she hid him in smoldering embers as women of old were wont to hide firebrands. Metaneira discovered this one evening and gave a loud cry, fearing that her baby would be burned. Thus confronted, the goddess withdrew the infant from the embers and scolded the wife of Celeus.

The embers into which Demeter had thrust Demophon were to purge him from all earthly elements and make him immortal. However, Metaneira feared the practice and put an end to it. Thus her son remained unprotected from the dangers of old age and death. Nevertheless, Demophon became a privileged individual, for he had sat on the knees and had slept in the bosom of the goddess.

With her divinity fully revealed, Demeter could no longer hide her identity from the royal circle. She told them: “I am the much honored goddess Demeter, the joy and the interest of gods and mortals. Then let the people build a temple on top of the hill above the Kallichoron (well) in my honor. Let them build it on the most advantageous ground and have them erect an altar underneath it. There I shall teach you how to perform my mysteries hereafter.”



Cosmè Tura, *The Triumph of Demeter*, 1476-1484, Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara.

### A Terrible Year

But the suffering of Demeter still remained unsoothed, and her obstinate wrath brought about terrible events. “She destroyed every harvestable thing and brought unto humankind an awful year. No seed sprouted from the earth because divinely-crowned Demeter had them all well hidden. In vain did the oxen draw the plows over the land. The myriads of white oat seeds were sown for nothing.”

The entire human race would have perished if Zeus had not taken a hand in the matter. He ordered Iris to intervene, but Demeter, the goddess of vegetation, spurned all pleas. She told Iris to inform Zeus that there would be no return to Olympus and that the earth would not produce fruit and grain until her daughter was returned to her. Unable to move her, Zeus was forced to assent. He ordered Hermes, messenger of the gods, to descend to Hades and persuade the ruler of the underworld to let Persephone depart from his realm of darkness.

Mindful of his brother’s plea, Hades consented to let Persephone return to her mother. Because he loved her so much and

wanted her to return to his kingdom in the underworld, before she departed he forced her to eat some pomegranate seeds which prevented her from remaining on Earth all year. Escorted by Hermes, Persephone climbed into her husband's chariot drawn by four untamed horses. She was taken to her mother, and the two embraced each other.

When they stood joyfully apart looking at each other, the mother asked fearfully, "Tell me, my beloved child, did you eat anything before you left the nether world?" When her daughter nodded affirmatively, Demeter knew what had happened and told Persephone that thereafter she would have to return to the underworld for three months of the year.

During the other seasons, Persephone would be permitted to remain with the other immortals. "When the earth will be decorated during the sweet-scented season of spring with myriads of different flowers, you will always come back from the dense darkness to be a superb sight for gods and humans."

In the Homeric Hymn, this very dramatic myth ends with a reconciliation of Demeter and Zeus and the return of Demeter to her abode on Mount Olympus. The promise of Zeus to permit Persephone to return to her mother for part of the year soothed the wrath of the goddess. But Zeus left even this in the hands of Rhea, mother of the gods, to accomplish.

Rhea, approaching Demeter, said, "Come, my daughter, Zeus invites you to return to the circle of the immortals. He promises to grant you most of what you have asked and has consented to allow your child to leave the dreary depths of Hades for part of the year. Come then, my daughter, obey his will. Do not prolong your implacable hatred against Hades and Zeus and do make possible an early harvest for suffering mortals."

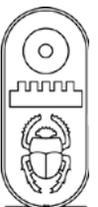
Demeter finally yielded to the pleas of Rhea, and the consequences of her wrath immediately disappeared. She again became a beneficent force, and the desolate lands once more bloomed with vegetation. The interrupted life of nature began again as a result of the agreement between heaven and Earth. But one of the great benefits to humanity was the teaching of her divine science to mortals while she stayed at Eleusis. She ordained that no one should neglect, disbelieve, or make public these teachings.

As the following quotation states, respect for the gods should restrain any tongue: "...and whatever we have thus revealed is no reason why we should fear and lament, for it is a great sin to obstruct speech." (The implication is that there is no reason to state what we are not supposed to reveal.)

The Homeric Hymn to Demeter ends with these important and epigrammatic words: "Blessed are the mortals, inhabitants of Earth, who have seen the great spectacles. But whoever remains uninitiated and never participates in the performance of the sacred ceremonies will be forever deprived of this blessing because they will not possess it even when death shall send them to the gloomy world below."



Frederic Leighton, *The Return of Persephone*, 1891.





The explanation of the religion of the ancient Greeks as provided by the Eleusinian Mysteries superseded the dogmas of polytheism and the superstition of the masses. It became the worthy and highly metaphysical religion of a wise and noble nation.



As practiced at Eleusis, religion presaged the growing eclectic spirit of the ancient world. The Eleusinian Mysteries embodied Greek mythology and a syncretism of the Egyptian mysteries and religious doctrines, tempered by a philosophical argument for rational, moral living. Later, Christianity was to encounter these elements of fusion. Some of the precepts of the Eleusinian Mysteries, and others such as Neoplatonism which were inspired by them, were to leave their impression on Christianity.

### Significance of the Mysteries

Beyond doubt the Eleusinian Mysteries were the apex of ancient Greek religion. According to Ernest Renan, they were the core of everything that was best in ancient religion. As such, they fascinated all antiquity. Their immeasurable value lay in the fact that the Greeks were taught through them to believe in one supreme and absolute God. Through them they came to understand the immortality of the soul and appreciate that eternal life depends on the exercise of piety, purity, and justice in the present life. It was because of these values that philosophers, historians, government leaders, and poets have had the profoundest respect for the mysteries. Every person of importance—

Pindar no less than Plato, Socrates no less than Cicero—unequivocally recognized and appreciated the soul-saving and mind-elevating forces of the Eleusinian rites.

Pindar, who had respect and reverence for every god, wrote of the Eleusinian Mysteries: “Blessed is the individual who dies after seeing these things; for then such a person knows not only life’s purpose, but also its divine origin as well.”

What Isocrates says in the sixth chapter of his *Panegyrics* about the blessed life which the initiate lives is even more clear and emphatic:

“When Demeter at last arrived in the land in her wandering quest for her daughter and became well-disposed toward our ancestors because of the services they had rendered her—which only those initiated can hear about—she gave them two valuable gifts: grain and the ceremonies of the mysteries. With the former, she helped humans to live above the beasts; with the latter, she imbued the participants with the best of hopes for a life hereafter and for existence in general.”

Between such hopes and their realization, which were privileges of the initiated, stood the ideas of suffering and tribulation in regard to life after death, which were dominant in the minds of the uninitiated. It was Triptolemos, the first initiate of Demeter in Eleusis, who, as one of the three judges of Hades, separated the initiated from the uninitiated and the impious and led them to their place of honor in Hades.

Those who were not initiated were deprived of all communion with the gods, of the privilege of seeing the vision of the ever-burning light, and were further compelled to suffer untold torments. Of the different scenes of the abode of Hades, depicted by Polygnotos on the walls of the clubhouse at Delphi, one showed two women “filling” two pitchers without bottoms. An epigram under it stated that they were not initiates.



Triptolemos and Kore, tondo of a red-figure Attic cup, ca. 470–460 BCE, found in Vulci, Italy. Louvre, Paris. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen.

This idea of punishment for the uninitiated is mentioned in the Hymn to Demeter, where Hades says to Persephone: “Here thou wilt be mistress of every living creature, of everything that crawls over the surface of the earth. Here thou wilt receive the greatest of honors. As for those humans who have lived in iniquity, there is in store for them here eternal punishment. Amongst them, of course, there will be those who did not appease thee with sacrifices by failing to fulfill obligations to thee as prescribed.”

Plutarch in *The Soul's Immortality* says, “The perfect person is the initiate. The initiate walks freely and celebrates the mysteries undisturbedly, wearing a crown on his or her head. The initiate lives with the purified and the healthy while looking at the uninitiated masses on earth and at the unpurified beings submerged and lost in darkness and filth. The initiate also walks past the fear and malice of death to Hades' happiness.”

The founders of the mysteries of antiquity, as well as the mystai, have surrounded death with an extraordinary veneration, for to them it was not one tremendous mystery but the continuation of life with new horizons and better conditions.

St. Augustine speaks favorably of the mysteries, saying they cleansed human beings

of every sin and freed the human soul from the chains of ignorance and superstition. Cicero assures us that by means of the mysteries the Athenians spread concord and philanthropy. Socrates, Hippocrates, Aristotle, and a great number of other important sages of antiquity expressed themselves likewise about the Eleusinian Mysteries.

Plato, being an initiate, spoke of the mysteries with respect, calling their founders excellent spirits and divine individuals. In the *Phaedo* he says, “Virtue is the purification of the soul from pleasures, fears, and sorrows, and from all other similar conditions. Temperance as well as justice, bravery, and wisdom are, each in its own way, such purifications. Therefore, they who established for us these ceremonies (Eleusinian), evidently were not superficial people because the allusion has been made from time immemorial that those who arrive in Hades uninitiated or without having participated in the ceremonies will remain in mire; but those who have purified themselves and have taken part in the mysteries will, when they arrive there, dwell among the gods.”

*Persephone had annulled  
the unbridgeable distance  
between Hades and Olympus.  
Mediatrice between the two  
divine worlds, (Persephone)  
could thereafter intervene in  
the destiny of mortals.*

– Mircea Eliade

