



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

Pyramid Texts

Vol. 2 The Ascent

Chapters 4-6

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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Chapter 4: The Crossing - Ferrymen, Gates, and Threats

Between the earth and the sky lies water.

The Egyptians of the Old Kingdom pictured the beyond as their own country written large: a green and shining marsh-world called the Field of Rushes, cut through by canals, bordered by the winding river the texts call the Winding Watercourse. Heaven is on the far bank. The dead king stands on this one. And like any traveler in Egypt, he cannot simply walk where he is going - he needs a boat, and boats belong to other people.

So the first move on this stretch of the journey is to claim what was laid down for greater travelers before him. Utterance 263 works by precedent, the way a lawyer argues: "The two Reed Floats of the sky are laid down for Ra, that he may cross to the Horizon. The two reed floats of the sky are laid down for Unas, that he may cross on them to Horus of the Horizon, to Ra." What was done for the sun god is now done for the king - the same floats, the same crossing, the same far shore. The spell dresses him for the passage in the panther-skin of a sem-priest - the skin-clad priest of the funeral rites - scepters in his hands, and sends four spirits of the eastern sky ahead of him as heralds, crying his titles to Ra. And it names his pedigree: "His sister is Sothis; the Duat has given him birth." The brightest star in the sky is his sister; the netherworld itself was his mother. A man with that family is not left standing on a riverbank.

When precedent fails, the king invokes Osiris. Utterance 303 recalls the four pure reed-floats once placed for the dead god - "place them for Unas" - and carries the crossing's reward in a single line: "Osiris has ordained that Unas dawn as a second Horus." Not merely across, but risen; not merely ferried, but reborn as the new falcon-king on the far side.

Then there is the ferryman himself.

His name is Kherty - "He Who Is Below" - a sullen figure who poles the barge that Khnum, the potter god, built. The texts are candid about the situation: the ferryman does not have to stop. So the king addresses him with a courtesy that has iron inside it: "Awake in peace, Ferryman of the Sky... Unas comes to you, that you may ferry him in that ferryboat in which you ferry the gods." And before the ferryman can find an excuse, the king files his clearance papers, a declaration of blamelessness phrased with almost comic thoroughness: "There is no accuser among the living against Unas, no accuser among the dead, no accuser among men, no accuser among the gods - no accuser about a goose, no accuser about a bull." No unpaid debts, no grudges, not even a dispute over livestock. The manifest is clean.

But in case the paperwork doesn't move the boat, the king adds his alternative plan, and it is pure Pyramid Texts: "If you do not ferry Unas, he will jump up and place himself on the wing

of Thoth. It is he who will then ferry him over to this other side." Refuse me, and I will ride across on the ibis god's wing like a man hopping a cart - and you will have lost your passenger for nothing. The ferryman always ends up rowing.

Even the boat itself must be conquered by knowledge. In the long ferryman cycle, passage becomes an examination: the king must know the ferryman's name, must know the name of every part of the boat, because in these texts to name a thing is to command it. The dialogue runs like a catechism across the water. "'Bring this to Unas.' - 'Which boat shall I bring to you?' - 'Bring to Unas the one which flies up, which alights.'" Not the boat that merely floats - the one that flies. The king is already thinking beyond the river.

And the far bank has its own keepers. Utterance 304 greets them one by one, and each greeting is a command wearing politeness: the daughter of Anubis at the windows of heaven; the ostrich standing on the shore of the Winding Watercourse; and the four-horned Bull of Ra himself, who must be told, "Bow that western horn of yours for Unas, that Unas may pass." At the Gate of Nun - the gate of the primordial waters, called "Height-Which-Has-Not-Yet-Been-Reached" - the challenge comes like a sentry's call: "Unas comes to you! Let this be opened for him!" A voice from within asks, suspiciously, "Is Unas the little one there?" And the answer comes back with the king's whole résumé in two clauses: "Unas is at the head of the followers of Ra; Unas is not at the head of the gods who create trouble."

Up to this point, everything is negotiable. But underneath every request in these texts - under the precedents, the pedigrees, the paperwork, the politeness - runs something harder, and on the west wall of the antechamber it comes fully into the open. If the gods will not make room for the king, the king will unmake the world.

Utterance 254 turns that confidence into open coercion. The lord of the horizon is ordered to clear the king's path. If passage is denied, the spell imagines the landscape itself collapsing into obstruction: banks join, roads close and the routes of ascent disappear. Any being that blocks the king can become prey. The language is not a timid request; it presents royal speech as a force capable of compelling the cosmos.

The next utterance escalates the threat to the structure of the sky. Shu, the air god who separates Nut from the earth, becomes part of the warning: if the king is obstructed, even the supports of cosmic order can be attacked. The threat is deliberately excessive. It tells every gatekeeper that refusing the king is more dangerous than admitting him.

Other spells achieve the same result by identity rather than destruction. In Utterance 310 the king is bound so closely to Atum that harm to one is imagined as harm to the other.

The threat continues into divine society. Another utterance imagines an obstructing god losing access to food and to the solar boats themselves. To bar the king is to risk exclusion from the very system that sustains divine life.

This is why the tone of the Pyramid Texts can shift so quickly between courtesy and command. The king may present credentials, invoke kinship or ask for passage, but he can also threaten, identify himself with greater powers and insist that the route open. He is not approaching heaven as an ordinary supplicant. The texts construct him as a royal power returning to the divine sphere.

Passage is therefore presented as something the king can secure by knowledge, relationship, command or force. Once the water is crossed and the gates stand open, the imagery changes from negotiation to ascent. The next problem is no longer whether the king may pass. It is how he rises.

Chapter 5: The Ascent

Ask the Pyramid Texts how the king gets to heaven and you will not get an answer. You will get a dozen. He climbs a ladder. He rides the smoke. He flies as a falcon, as a goose, as a grasshopper. He travels as the storm wind. He is lifted on the arms of gods. The spells pile road upon road, and none of them cancels the others - the Egyptians were not choosing between theories but laying down parallel certainties, the way you might drive several stakes to hold one rope. If the king has wings and a ladder and the wind, then no single failure of any road can keep him from the sky.

The oldest and most human of the roads is the ladder. Between earth and heaven, the spells imagine a route made firm by divine power. Utterance 305 places the king between supporting gods as he rises, turning ascent into a family and royal act rather than a solitary climb. Other formulas draw the boundary even more sharply: the king's effective spirit belongs in heaven even while the buried body remains with the earth. The ladder is therefore both route and symbol, a solid answer to the distance between the tomb and the sky.

Horus and Seth - the eternal rivals, the falcon and the storm-lord, enemies in every myth - appear here on the same errand, reconciled for once by the king's need: "Horus and Seth seize the arm of Unas and take him to the Dawn Region." When the two most violent gods in Egypt each take an arm, nobody gets dropped. And in Utterance 306 the whole company of heaven joins the lifting: "The gods lift you on their arms. You ascend, Unas, to heaven; you climb on it in this its name - Ladder." Even the word for the climb becomes the word for the thing climbed. The gods themselves are astonished at what they are seeing: the dead man rising, and Atum pronouncing over him, "Heaven be given to Unas; earth be given to him."

The second road is fire - not burning, but rising. Utterance 267 begins with the ground itself reshaped into a stairway: "The earth is beaten into steps for him towards heaven." Then comes the censuring, the great fumigation of the ritual, and the king goes up the way the smoke goes: "He rises on the smoke of the great fumigation." It is one of the loveliest and strangest images in the texts - a soul ascending on incense, the priest's censer below doing the work of wings. And the spell does not stop at arrival. The king flies "as a goose," and then - the image turns small and hard and wonderful - "he alights as a beetle on the empty throne which is in your boat, O Ra." A beetle settling on the vacant seat in the sun god's barque. Then the squatter's claim, delivered without a flicker of apology: "Stand up, begone, you who do not know the thicket of rushes, that Unas may sit on your seat, that he may row in the sky in your boat, O Ra!" Whoever was warming the throne is evicted. The king rows.

The third road is wings, and the texts return to it more often than to any other. The king is a falcon - the bird of Horus, the bird that hangs highest in Egyptian air. "You have become a falcon," says Utterance 214; "your bones are those of the female hawks, the goddesses who are in heaven." In the passage between the chambers he announces to the sky-goddess herself: "This Unas comes to you, O Nut" - and "his two wings have grown as those of a hawk." Other spells multiply his flying forms. The king can take the shape or power of high-flying birds, cross the sky with falcon imagery, or be compared with swarming creatures that fill the air. The images are deliberately excessive and overlapping. The point is not to choose one zoological route to heaven; it is to make ascent unavoidable.

Even the stars help him off the ground. Sothis - Sirius, the brightest of them - is his sister, and the texts say simply: "Sothis has let Unas fly towards heaven among his brothers the gods."

And in Utterance 302 the flight becomes a farewell spoken over the shoulder, one of the great exits in world literature. The king's face, says the spell, is the face of hawks; his wings are the wings of geese; and then the voice turns to those left behind - to us, standing in the world below - and says: "He flies up, he who flies up, O men. Unas also flies up away from you."

Away from you. The texts do not soften the departure. The king does not linger as a guardian or a ghost; he leaves the human sphere the way a bird leaves a field, and the men below are explicitly, almost pointedly, abandoned to their mortality while he escapes his. It is exultant and it is cold, and both of those are true at once.

There are quieter roads too, and the spells lay them down beside the loud ones. In Utterance 253 the king is washed first - purified in the Field of Rushes, made clean enough for the sky he is about to enter - and then the air itself is ordered to do the lifting: "Shu, lift him up!" Shu is the god of the space between earth and heaven, the emptiness that holds them apart; if anyone can carry a man up through it, he can. And the ladder spells look ahead to what waits at the top: not merely arrival but a place prepared, "the great seat at the side of the god,"

where Horus and Seth deliver him into the Dawn Region like courtiers handing a prince to his throne.

The last road is the wildest, because on it the king does not climb or fly - he is the weather. "Unas is on the way to heaven, with the wind, with the wind," says Utterance 258. "He will not be hindered; there is no one who might hinder him." Utterance 261 makes him the storm itself: "Unas is a heart-thrower, the son of the heart of Shu, spread out with a terrible light; Unas is he who burns before the wind to the limits of heaven and earth; Unas traverses the air and passes over the earth." He is lightning running ahead of the gale, the bright edge of the tempest, and the spell signs him off with his true name: "It is Unas, the message of the Storm."

Ladder, smoke, wings and wind all converge on the same claim: the king cannot be held below. The texts now reach one of the most startling compositions in the Unas pyramid, carved on the east gable of the antechamber and also attested in Teti. Modern scholars call the pair of utterances the Cannibal Hymn. Related motifs survived beyond the Old Kingdom, but this form is exceptional.

Chapter 6: The Devouring of Gods, and the Court of Heaven

The hymn opens with cosmic disturbance. Sky, stars and earth react to the king's appearance, and then the familiar language of divine nourishment becomes deliberately violent. The king does not merely receive offerings from the gods. He consumes divine power itself.

The hymn presents the king as a predator among the gods. Divine beings are treated as quarry, and a sequence of named helpers captures, restrains, butchers and prepares them for him. The imagery is graphic because the claim is extreme: nothing in heaven possesses a power that the king cannot appropriate.

The language of eating is about more than hunger. The gods carry heka, authority, knowledge and life. By consuming them, the king absorbs what makes them divine. Different ranks of gods are assigned to different meals, while other divine beings tend the fire and the cooking. The entire heavenly order is rearranged around the king's appetite for power.

That violence belongs to the ritual logic of the composition. Throughout the Pyramid Texts, food restores life and transfers strength. The Cannibal Hymn pushes that principle to its farthest possible limit. Ordinary offerings are no longer enough. The king's meal becomes the gods themselves.

The result is not a picture of an earthly king practising cannibalism. It is an image of apotheosis. The dead ruler enters heaven as a being who cannot be diminished because the

powers that might rival him have been taken into him. The hymn uses horror to make a theological point: royal transformation is total.

The hymn continues by giving the king the capacities of the beings he consumes. Divine hearts, spirits, magic and authority become his. Crowns and emblems of rule are drawn into the same imagery. What belonged to separate gods is concentrated in one transformed king.

This is why the Cannibal Hymn matters. It is not a side story inserted for shock. It is one of the clearest examples of a principle found throughout the Pyramid Texts: identification creates power. Elsewhere the king becomes Horus, Osiris, a star, a falcon or a companion of Ra. Here the process is expressed through consumption. The king takes divine qualities into himself until no rival power stands outside him.

The ending turns from slaughter to permanence. The king's life is projected into eternity, and the divine powers he has absorbed are imagined as remaining with him. The violent feast has achieved the same goal as the quieter resurrection and ascent spells: he has crossed the boundary of ordinary death.

Later Egyptian funerary traditions continued to reuse and reshape Pyramid Text material, though not every Old Kingdom composition was preserved in the same form. The Cannibal Hymn therefore belongs to a wider tradition of adaptation rather than to a simple story of later Egyptians accepting or rejecting it.

With the threat of exclusion gone, the tone changes. The final movement is reception: the transformed king takes his place among the gods and the stars.

The reception spells announce the king to the divine community and place him among the great gods. He is awakened beside his ka, assigned authority in the company of the Ennead and integrated into the celestial order. The man who began in a sarcophagus is now treated as an effective divine being.

Solar imagery becomes especially strong. The king joins the crew of Ra, participates in the solar boats and shares the sun god's daily movement. He is not merely carried through heaven as a passenger; the texts give him work, status and command within the divine circuit.

At the same time, Nut receives him as a son. The sky goddess opens herself to him, and the king's ascent becomes another birth. Other maternal and nursing images answer the fear of hunger and extinction that ran through the burial chamber. The king who needed offerings below is now sustained within the divine world.

Stellar imagery gives the same promise in another form. The king is associated with the Imperishable Stars, the northern stars whose apparent motion keeps them from setting below the horizon. Some spells give him hard, enduring celestial substance and a place

among these powers. Whether the route is solar, Osirian or stellar, the result is the same: continued existence beyond ordinary human death.

The sky around the king is filled with divine relations. Sothis, Orion, the Morning Star and other celestial powers appear as kin, guides or companions. The imagery does not form one modern astronomical system. It layers different ways of saying that the transformed king belongs permanently to the heavens.

The word that gathers these transformations together is *akh*: an effective, transfigured spirit capable of acting in the divine world. The journey from the sealed burial chamber to the sky is therefore not simply a trip from one location to another. It is a change of state. The king has been awakened, reassembled, fed, protected, ferried, lifted and finally made effective among the gods.

The Pyramid Texts are among the earliest substantial surviving bodies of writing about death, resurrection and divine afterlife. They were first inscribed for kings and later for royal women; parts of their ritual and mythic language were subsequently reused and transformed in Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts and later funerary traditions.

That long afterlife is why the Pyramid Texts matter. They preserve Old Kingdom ritual thought in stone, but they also became a reservoir from which later Egyptians continued to draw. The voice that begins by refusing to leave a dead king powerless ends by placing him in a cosmos where death no longer has the last word.

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