Michael S. Moore  
Arizona State University/Fuller Theological Seminary  
Phoenix, AZ 85008

The Pyramid Texts comprise the oldest body of religious literature produced by the priests of Old Kingdom Egypt (late third millennium B.C.E.). Written in primitive Egyptian hieroglyphic, they can be extremely difficult to read, much less understand. Thus any new translation is a welcome event, not least because they exercise such a profound influence upon later Egyptian literature (the Coffin texts, e.g., often cite the Pyramid Texts as “canonical”). Inscribed on the walls of the royal tombs of several pharaohs (Unis, Teti, Pepi I, Merenre, Pepi II, and Queen Neith), the Pyramid Texts were first discovered in 1880, but new finds have been made as recently as 2001 (the texts of Ankhesenpepi II). Important to both Egyptologists and scholars of comparative religion, the Pyramid Texts preserve a fascinating portrait of the nature and structure of the universe, the character and color of the afterlife, and the gods’ role in helping the pharaoh’s ka (individual life force) reunite with its ba (individual “soul”) to transform the dead monarch into a fully-functioning akh (cosmic being).

The present volume includes a short introduction (1–14) followed by clear English translations of the Pyramid Texts of Unis (15–64), the Pyramid Texts of Teti (65–96), the Pyramid Texts of Pepi I (97–208), the Pyramid Texts of Merenre (209–38), the Pyramid Texts of Pepi II (239–308), and the Pyramid Texts of Neith (309–36). This is then followed by variant readings of each text (337–74), a concordance of text numbers (375–
418), a bibliography (419–24), a glossary of Egyptian terms (425–44), and a subject index (445–71). Overall the book sets out to do two things: (1) provide an updated English translation of all the Pyramid Texts (with the exception of Iput II, Wedjebetni, and Ibi); and (2) rearrange them in their most likely order of ritual incantation. From the standpoint of sheer intellectual achievement, it is hard to imagine another contribution to the Society of Biblical Literature’s Writings from the Ancient World series more erudite, more comprehensive, or more accomplished than this one.

The introduction addresses the history of the translation and editing of the Pyramid Texts, their various genres (offering and insignia rituals, resurrection rituals, morning rituals, etc.), their religious function, and their portrayal of the Unseen World. Like other Egyptologists (e.g., S. Quirke, *The Cult of Ra: Sun-Worship in Ancient Egypt* [New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001]), Allen interprets these texts traditionally and exactingly, yet without sacrificing clarity (the glossary is helpful, if not exhaustive). According to Allen, the Egyptians believed that the sun’s eclipse over the western horizon signaled the beginning of its nightly journey through the dim blackness of the netherworld. Like most ancient solar myths, the Egyptian version symbolized this journey as a circuit across the sky (via a Dayboat in the day and a Nightboat at night). Where it differs, however, from, say, the Anatolian (Hattian) myths about the sun-goddess of Arinna (M. Stone, *When God Was a Woman* [New York: Barnes & Noble, 1976] 96–97), lies in the way it (1) imagines each day as a new birth and (2) graphically describes this birth as the regeneration of the sun-god within the womb of Nut (the sky-goddess), before (3) connecting this (re)birthing process to the pharaoh as Osiris’s “humanized clone.”

One of the most interesting of the Pyramid Texts is the so-called “Cannibal Hymn” (PT 273–274//Unis 180a–b), in which the pharaoh’s spirit is urged to devour “the essence and power of all the forces of the universe” (16), including the “bowels” of “every god … when they have come from the Isle of Flame with their belly filled with magic” (51). One need not speculate (à la A. Rosalie David, *The Ancient Egyptians* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982], 1–24) that the Egyptians themselves must have engaged in such cannibalism to appreciate the function and purpose of this old incantation. The priest reciting this spell wanted to make sure that his master found the nourishment he needed to claim his “proper place in front of all the privileged ones in the Akhet” (51—the place in the netherworld where the sun first unites with Osiris). Breaking this down into separate meals, the priest planned out the pharaoh’s menu with alacrity and precision: adult gods in the morning, mid-sized gods in the evening, and young gods for late-night snacking. This is one of the oldest examples of what Paula Brown calls “the efficacy of consumption to acquire the body and spirit of the object consumed” (*Encyclopedia of Religion* 3:60).
While this translation does not (and does not pretend) to replace Kurt Sethe’s standard six-volume edition (Übersetzung und Kommentar zu den altägyptischen Pyramidtexten [2d ed.; Hamburg: Augustin, 1962]), its author and publisher are to be commended for providing beginning students with a comprehensive edition of this aboriginal literature.