

Spiritual Study for Initiates and Members of
Circulos Tenebris Matrem Arcanas
Circle of the Dark and Mysterious Mother



Spiritual Study & Scholarship

Sometimes when people hear the words study and scholarship, they think of Ph.D. students and religious theologians. You don't have to be working on a degree or have any advanced schooling to be able to study spiritual teachings. What you do need is an open mind and some dedicated time to read. There are many good books on varying spiritual Traditions that can help you figure out what deities and types of spirituality you want to learn more about. Often, it is good to get a basic understanding of a Tradition before diving into their source works so that you have a foundation to go from.

Source Works

When I mention source works, I usually get asked what makes a text source material? The answer is that source texts are the texts that other authors use to put together their non-fiction books on a given subject. They are the base materials that describe beliefs, theology, and ideas in a spiritual or religious Tradition.

Some example source works are:

- The Bible - Christianity
- The Torah - Judaism
- The Talmud – Judaism
- The Midrash - Judaism

- The Zohar – Kabbalah
- The Sefir Yetzirah - Kabbalah
- The Bahir - Kabbalah
- Likutei Maharar – Jewish Mysticism
- The Quran – Islam
- Gnostic Gospels – Gnostic Tradition
- Pistis Sophia – Gnostic Tradition
- Bhagavad Gita - Hinduism
- Mahabharata – Hinduism
- The Upanishads – Hinduism
- The Vedas - Hinduism
- The Sutras - Buddhism
- The Poetic Edda – Norse Tradition
- The Prose Edda – Norse Tradition
- The Mabinogi – Welsh Celtic Tradition
- The Book of Going Forth by Day – Egyptian Tradition
- Various books of mythology from various cultures
- And much more

How to Read Source Works

There are a couple things to keep in mind when reading source works.

1. For the most part, source works were not originally in English. This means that they have been translated and have the bias of the translator included in the writing.
2. Many of these works are very, very old so some of the concepts are being guessed at because there is no one left who understood the original meanings.
3. Always understand that spiritual literature is meant to be symbolic. Literal meanings are usually not the point, but instead a deeper spiritual teaching is at the heart of the message.
4. Try to understand something of the culture in which the source work was written by so that you understand context.

Exegesis and Pardes

Exegesis is a fancy term that really means how to understand and decode what you're reading. This is what scholars do – they read a text and try to get a meaning from it.

The best way of doing this exegesis that I've found is the Jewish tradition of Pardes. Pardes (transliterated from Hebrew) means Orchard and is the idea of looking at the fruit of a source work in various ways. Remember that ancient Hebrew has no vowels so Pardes is effectively PRDS.

- P – Peshat – “Surface” or literal (direct) meaning

- R – Remez – “Hints” or the deep meaning beyond just the literal sense (allegory)
- D – Derash – “Inquire”. The comparative meaning as given through similar occurrences in other works (first from the same Tradition and then from others).
- S – Sod - “Secret” (Mystery) or the esoteric/mystical meaning as given through inspiration or revelation.

The idea is not to determine the meaning of what you’ve read until you look at all four aspects (PRDS). This also means that as new facts come about from your understanding, other sources, or from inspiration then your understanding of the text will change. PRDS assumes that our beliefs and understanding changes over time and is never constant.

Different Versions

There are often many translations of a source work. For instance, the Christian Bible comes in many, many different varieties: NIV, King James, NRSV, New Living, Catholic, etc. etc. etc. So, the question becomes, which one do you use? I use two methods for picking translations of any source work. First, I try to find one that has the latest scholarship available. The King James version of the Bible was originally published in 1611. There have been newer versions of some Biblical texts that have been found since then and so I would go with a much newer translation. I also look at what is the easiest to understand and resonates with me. Again, using the King James Version of the Bible – it is written in a very old style of English that is painful for me to read. So, even if it is an updated version of scholarly information, I don’t enjoy reading the particular language. This is true of most source works. There are many translations – some newer with more scholarship and some that are just plain easier to understand and read.

I usually try to find two versions of any source work I’m studying or at least one version of the source material and one commentary or summary. I do this because I want to get at the hidden meanings of the text and the more ways, I can see the translation, the better idea I have of getting at all the possible meanings behind the text. A great example of this are the various Gnostic Gospels contained in the Nag Hammadi Library. Because the Nag Hammadi Library was found in 1945 there are several new translations of the texts. But... because the original gnostic traditions were virtually wiped out by the Church, no one knows exactly what they believed. It’s very helpful for me to read two different translations so I can get a better understanding of possible meanings (since I can’t read the original Coptic).

Interlinear texts are also very helpful. Interlinear versions of books are ones in which the original language is presented along side the English. This is not available for many texts, but you can find some with interlinear text or notes. For example, I only know some very basic Hebrew, but I find interlinear versions of Jewish or Kabbalistic works very helpful because I can see what word is actually being used in certain instances. In English versions of most works (especially the Bible) they use the word God for any mention of deity. As you may know there are many, many names for God in Hebrew and which one is being used is very important to understand the text.

Synopsis

All this being said, the idea of study and scholarship is really about learning more about a Tradition that you are going to follow or incorporate into your spiritual path. You can't expect to know every detail of any Tradition and you don't have to know every language that a Tradition uses for the source works, but the more you read and experience, the more you will be able to have knowledge and revelation in the spiritual path you have chosen. Remember to follow the PRDS tradition where you look at the literal meaning, the deep meaning, the comparative meaning, and the esoteric meaning before coming to any conclusions. Be open minded and know that as you grow and change, so will your understanding of any spiritual writing.