

Background of the Mystery Cults: Modern Fraternal Organizations Borrow from Them; Ancient Mythology as Para-History; the Secrets of the Cults

33. Those involved in religion have “theologies” that are based on extrabiblical concepts and are rightly called myths. The most famous are ones were popular in Greece and Rome although each borrowed from those arising in the Middle East.
34. The word “myth” comes from the Greek **μῦθος, muthos**: “tale, story, narrative; fiction (the opposite of **λόγος, logos**, historic truth).”¹
34. Ancient mythology may be loosely described as folklore: widely circulated but unsupported stories, tales, and sayings, or, what the following excerpt describes as “para-history”:

The Greek and Roman myths are an inescapable part of our cultural background and heritage. They originated in a wide variety of different ways and in response to a great many different social and psychological needs. They were invented to explain natural phenomena in a pre-scientific world ... to justify customs and institutions, to endow the gods with dramatic personalities and careers, to glorify nations and tribes and families and hierarchies and priesthoods, to fill out early history by inventive additions, to indulge wishful thinking by tales of adventure and heroism and, sometimes, merely to amuse and entertain: to beguile the long hours of darkness, or the tedium of a dusty journey, or a perilous tossing on the sea. (p. 1)

What they tell us is not historical truth. It is truth of another kind, which can perhaps be described as para-history: and in its effects upon what the Greeks and Romans ... did and thought, it seems almost as significant and stimulating and uplifting as their actual past histories in which they took so much pride.² (p. 2)

35. The mystery cults of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian mythology were all developed from doctrines of demons whose base motivation was fear.
36. Fear came from a combination of uncertainty and ignorance. Having no scientific understanding of the earth’s rotation around the sun and the seasons that resulted, ancient societies assumed that unseen gods controlled these things.
37. In an agricultural society, life was austere enough without one’s livelihood being dependent upon the weather. So the imaginary gods were appeased, often with human sacrifices, so that the sun would “come back” and nourish the crops.
38. From all of this there emerged cults that assumed they had discovered how best to placate the gods and each had its mystery doctrines that were to be followed.
39. An overview of the cult religions in the Mediterranean world is the subject of this excerpt:

¹ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, “μῦθος,” in *A Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 1151.

² Michael Grant and John Hazel, “Introduction,” in *Gods and Mortals in Classical Mythology: A Dictionary* (New York: Dorset Press, 1979), 1-2.

Nearly every region of the Mediterranean world had its own mystery religion. Although they had certain beliefs and practices in common, they were distinct religions. Central to them was how they used the annual plant cycle of sowing and reaping to symbolize a cycle of life, death and rebirth among humans. The concept of an afterlife, which was never very important for traditional Greek and Roman religions, was a significant element in mystery religions. In addition, secret ceremonies were central to mystery religions (hence the “mystery” element). Those who were initiated into the cult’s secret rites were thereby bound to their fellow adherents. The initiates also learned the central secret of the group, typically involving how to achieve union with the cult’s deity. Another common element of mystery religions was a myth telling how the deity had either defeated his or her enemies or returned to life after death. As the cult member shared in the god’s triumph, he or she was redeemed from the earthly and temporal. The mystery religions had little use for doctrine or argumentation. Instead, and in addition to their desire for redemption, they emphasized the pursuit of a sense of oneness with their god and ultimately the attainment of immortality.³

40. It is apparent from this synopsis why the Lord and Paul used the concept of mystery to convey the doctrines of the New Testament. The unique doctrines of the Church Age were unknown prior to our Lord’s revelation of a few and the New Testament writers’ exposition of the rest.
41. The cult religions which sought after false gods provided a readily understood vocabulary to present the revelation of heretofore unknown doctrines from the one true God.

³ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 96.