

MYSTERY CULTS

BOWDEN (H.) *Mystery Cults in the Ancient World*. Pp. 256, ills, maps, colour pls. London: Thames & Hudson, 2010. Cased, £28. ISBN: 978-0-500-25164-5.

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This book goes refreshingly against the grain of twenty-first century scholarship on ancient mystery cults. Current trends are what one might call Neo-Cumontian, and they dwell, obsessively in my view, on the transformation of ‘oriental’ into ‘Roman’, i.e. European, religions. Two factors perhaps go some way towards explaining these trends: first, the coincidence of the centennial celebrations of Franz Cumont’s early publications; secondly, and more disturbingly, post-9/11 what-and-whither-the-West worries. A standard-bearer of this Neo-Cumontianism is J. Alvar’s weighty *Romanising Oriental Gods*, a work which unfortunately was published too recently (2008) for Bowden to take into account.

Though wider in scope (Greek mysteries from the earliest times are treated, as well as mysteries of the Roman imperial age), B.’s book is considerably briefer than Alvar’s and will serve a different primary readership. The Introduction and chapters run to just 216 pages, and many of these are filled in whole or in part by the illustrations which, together with the plates, are the glory of the book. B. cannot therefore bring controversial issues to conclusion, even if that were his intent. He does, however, review various issues with great skill and clarity, offering pointers in the scholarship and indicating his preferred directions. This will make his book ideal for undergraduates. Graduate students and university teachers and researchers will also want to read it, perhaps even using it to recalibrate their own views. Precisely because it is minimalist about links between early Christianity and the mystery cults and sceptical about the intellectual pay-off in drawing analogies between the two sets of phenomena (pp. 24, 206–11), scholars of Christian Origins should consult the book. The general reader whose interests lie in the history of ancient religions will both learn from and thoroughly enjoy it.

Despite the title, B.’s focus is not so much the mystery *cults* as the *initiations* mediated by the cults, and in some instances not by cults at all but by freelance initiators, for example the itinerants with ‘books of Musaeus and Orpheus’ against whom Plato inveighs (pp. 139–40). Chapter 6, ‘Private Initiation’, is important here, as is Chapter 7, ‘Words Written on Gold’, on the gold tablets, which B. suggests may be made-to-order products for those who had not actually undergone rites of initiation, in a group or otherwise, ‘but had instead bought a gold “ticket to heaven” as an alternative way in’ (p. 155).

B. insists that for the most part initiation into a mystery was an end in itself (pp. 21–2): ‘[T]he reason for seeking initiation was in order to become an initiate – to gain a new status and to establish a closer relationship with the divine’ (p. 215). For the cults (as opposed to the private initiations examined in Chapters 6 and 7, where purification from debilitating ancestral guilt or a preferred deal in the afterlife were sought) I think he is right, whether one has in mind mysteries administered to visitors and locals in a particular location (e.g. the Eleusinian mysteries, Chapter 1; the mysteries of the Great Gods of Samothrace, Chapter 2) or mysteries with an ongoing cult life, regular or intermittent (e.g. mysteries of Dionysus, Chapter 5; of Isis, Chapter 8; of Mithras, Chapter 9).

In effect, B. returns us to Walter Burkert’s view of the mystery cults as mediators of what the latter termed, in the title of the fourth and final chapter of *Ancient*

Mystery Cults (1987), 'The Extraordinary Experience'. Like Burkert, B. does full justice to all other aspects of the cults, and thanks to his copious illustrations fuller justice to cult sites, artefacts and iconography. He also manages, by the skilful ordering and development of the chapters in which each set of mysteries/initiations is introduced, a diachronic narrative. One may be grateful, moreover, that this is not a *grand* narrative, over-endowed with links, influences and teleology.

But how does a twenty-first century academic address 'encountering the sacred' (B.'s final chapter title), when the encounterers took their 'extraordinary experience' to the grave two millennia ago? What they experienced and what they thought they had encountered was usually a secret. In some instances, confusion even about the names of the gods suggests that initiates and initiators alike would have been hard pressed to tell you precisely whose mysteries they had entered or administered (see especially Chapter 2 on the Kabeiroi and the Great Gods).

Better to comprehend the ancient experience of 'encountering the sacred' and to locate it on the larger map of the history of religions, B. compares analogous phenomena from modern times, where we have the double advantage of living subjects and anthropologically trained observers. In his final chapter, he adduces the experiences of snake-handling in twentieth-century American Pentecostal sects (pp. 217–21). In his introductory chapter (pp. 15–17) he draws on the researches of the anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse into initiations in the culture of the Baining (not Baktaman, as B.) people of New Guinea. This is an important move, because Whitehouse has generalised from his field research to propose a theory of two 'modes of religiosity', the 'imagistic' and the 'doctrinal' (see, for example, *Modes of Religiosity: a Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*, 2004). The characteristics of its rites of initiation make Baining religion archetypally 'imagistic'. On the same criteria, B. argues, ancient mystery cults were clearly imagistic. In the Cognitive Science of Religion, it must be admitted, Whitehouse's 'two modes' theory is by no means a reigning orthodoxy (some are still asking 'where's the Science?'). However, its application by B. to the phenomena of Greek and Roman religion is an omen of profitable things to come.

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GREEK POLITICAL THOUGHT

CARTLEDGE (P.) *Ancient Greek Political Thought in Practice*. Pp. xviii + 169. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Paper, £14.99, US\$24.99 (Cased, £40, US\$70). ISBN: 978-0-521-45595-4 (978-0-521-45455-1 hbk).

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C.'s new book is a lively, fast-paced 'introduction' (p. 143) to major aspects of Greek history and thought from 1300 B.C. to A.D. 120 (the death of Plutarch). Two chapters introduce its themes and 'problematics', moving concisely over a range of topics including the 'primacy of politics' in Greece, the *polis* as stateless community, and the ethical quality of Greek as against modern politics. Then six Narratives summarise the history of consecutive eras, each followed by one or two chapters on aspects of that era's politics or thought. The final chapter outlines Greek democratic legacies in Western history, ending with teledemocracy. This