

Mystery Cult Terminology Among Jews and Christians

Thematic and linguistic connections between mystery cults and early Christianity have been noted for well over a century (Smith 1991). While much research remains (perhaps necessarily) speculative, tracing specific terminology offers the possibility to demonstrate specific concrete links. In this paper, I trace the development of two words central to ancient mystery cults, *μυστήρια* and *τέλειος*. Ultimately, I conclude that the way these terms are used by a wide array of authors in both the Septuagint and the New Testament creates a connection between the religions behind these texts and the popular mystery cults of the day.

The term *μυστήριον* is derived from a root referring to initiation, and originally referred to the secret object or concept at the center of a mystery cult (Burkert 1987). The plural *μυστήρια* itself originally referred to the proceedings of a mystery cult. In the Septuagint, the term is occasionally used (notably almost all in later books which were originally written in the Hellenistic period) to refer to things hidden by God and occasionally revealed to chosen mortals. New Testament authors then build on this usage in a variety of ways that hearken back to Greco-Roman mystery cults, beginning chronologically with Mark's reference to "the *μυστήριον* of the kingdom of God" (4:11). The connection grows stronger still in the letters of Paul, who refers to the "revelation of the *μυστήριον* hidden throughout the ages", likening the Christian message to the secret of a mystery cult which has finally been divulged.

Mystery cults frequently used terms from the *τελ-* root to refer to elements of the process of initiation; famously, the central initiation chamber at Eleusis was known as the *τελεστήριον*, while initiates were said to be *τέλειος* upon completion of the rites (Burkert 1987). The family of terms is used with religious connotations pertaining to a special level of closeness to God in the

Septuagint: Moses demands that “you must be τέλειος before the Lord your God” (18:13), and Leviticus speaks of “the τετελειώμενος high priest” (4:5). These connotations continue in the New Testament: Jesus tells others to “be τέλειοι, as your Father in heaven is τέλειος” (Matthew 5:48), while the Deutero-Paulines also make use of similar phrasing. Finally, the book of James contains an elaborate and systematic use of the family of terms, opening the letter with something like a process of initiation one must endure “so that you might be τέλειοι” (1:4).

The use of these terms creates both an implicit and, as I argue, an explicit link between the minority Jewish and later Christian religions of the day and the more widely accepted Greco-Roman mystery cults. By using such terminology, Jews and Christians both revealed their own way of thinking toward their practices and beliefs and also encouraged others to see them in the same light. It is not only Greeks who possess practices revealed from above to mortals for enlightenment and a better life in this world and the next; rather, Jews and Christians possess their own μυστήρια which lead those initiated to become τέλειοι.

Bibliography

Burkert, Walter. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Harvard: 1987.

Smith, Jonathan Z. *Drudgery Divine*. Chicago: 1991.