

The Impact of Religious Experiences in Mystery Cults and in the Early Jesus Movement: Similarities, Differences, and What They Teach Us

Using iconography, foundation myths, and literary sources, it is possible to reconstruct how members of different mystery cults understood the impact of their religious experiences on themselves—even if we do not know much about what they experienced. The language used and what is expressed are similar to the understandings of impact expressed in writings of the early Jesus movement (i.e., the New Testament). Two questions in need of more attention are (1) how are these groups' expressions of impact similar yet different, and (2) what do these characteristics teach us about these forms of religion? In the field of classics, scholarly works on mystery cults do not give much attention to these questions. This dearth of discussion reflects a tendency for us to silo our understanding of the different mystery cults. For example, organizational structures in publications on mystery cults typically approach each cult individually either in its own chapter or one after another. Interestingly, the field of biblical studies itself offers little help for these two questions, as prior scholarship typically reconstructs information about mystery cults from New Testament texts or focuses on whether mystery cults influenced the development of Christianity. Such discussions often are theologically driven—evidenced by their questions and outcomes—and sometimes misrepresent the evidence because it is incomplete or poorly chosen. Prior scholarship in both classics and biblical studies still has been helpful in many ways, as forms of religion do need undivided attention at times and theological questions can be important. However, there is more scholarly work to be done regarding these early forms of religion. This paper introduces listeners to three similarities and differences between the various mystery cults' and the early Jesus movement's expressions of their religious experiences' impact. It uses as sources the writings of Plato, Plutarch, Cicero, Apuleius, Hippolytus, the authors of New

Testament texts, as well as iconography and foundation myths. It closely examines those characteristics including how they produce a better understanding of both the mystery cult being discussed and the early Jesus movement. At the conclusion, this paper offers guidance for future comparative work that ensures each form of religion is still engaged on its own terms while also being discussed in the context of other forms.