

**THE MYSTERIES, PAGAN &  
CHRISTIAN;  
BEING THE HULSEAN  
LECTURES FOR 1896-97**

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The Mysteries, Pagan & Christian; Being the Hulsean Lectures for 1896-97 by S. Cheetham

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# THE MYSTERIES

## PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN

BEING THE  
HULSEAN LECTURES FOR 1896-97

BY

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## PREFACE

FROM the time of the revival of learning to the present day the Mysteries of paganism have attracted much notice and been the subjects of much wild theorising, as well as of much scholarly and careful investigation. According to the prepossessions with which they set out, different inquirers have arrived at the most curiously various results, as is natural where the evidence is fragmentary and inconclusive.

The older view of the pagan Mysteries was, that in them was taught an esoteric doctrine, better and nobler than that of the popular religion, which had been handed down from primeval antiquity through a constant succession of priests or hierophants, and imparted from age to age to select votaries who kept the secret of their knowledge. As to the original source of this recondite science opinions varied

widely, some deriving it from a primitive revelation to all mankind, some from the Old Testament, some from the hidden wisdom of India or Egypt. Among others, this thesis is maintained by De Sainte Croix in his *Recherches sur les Mystères du Paganisme*, and by Creuzer in his well-known *Symbolik*. Our countryman Warburton held a peculiar theory, that while pagan teachers placed the rewards of goodness in a future world from which no man returned to prove their falsity, Moses alone had the courage to promise to his followers rewards and punishments in this world, in the sight of men. Hence he was led to examine the promises of future retribution given in the Mysteries, and to maintain that they were "the legislator's invention, solely for the propagation and support of the doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments"—a contention in which he has probably had but few followers. See his *Divine Legation of Moses*, bk. ii. ch. 4.

The fancies and false reasoning of the early inquirers were rudely shaken by the epoch-making work of C. A. Lobeck, which he called



*Aglaophamus*. In this he examines more particularly the statements of ancient writers with regard to the Eleusinian, the Orphic, and the Samothracian Mysteries, but the book is of the highest importance for the study of the subject generally. In this for the first time all the important authorities are criticised and interpreted by an acute and thoroughly competent scholar, and the statements and theories of such writers as De Sainte Croix and Creuzer (who in this matter largely follows him) are shown to be in many cases utterly baseless. Access to these societies was, he shows, not difficult; they were open to all on easy conditions, without distinction of sex or station; their priests were persons endowed with no extraordinary knowledge, but, in the case of civic Mysteries at least, simple citizens capable of discharging the peculiar ritual with which alone they were concerned. The notion that they propagated a secret doctrine is one borrowed from the East, or from modern ecclesiastical associations, and is utterly alien from classic thought. Lobeck introduced order where all had been chaos, and distinguished

where his predecessors had confused; Greek traits were cleared from Oriental, and private separated from public rites. The Orphic Mysteries, for instance, which really belonged to a kind of secret society, were shown to be different in kind from the Eleusinian. It must be confessed, however, that Lobeck treats his subject in too hard and unsympathetic a spirit, tending to ignore the aspirations after higher things than those of the common life which were after all found in the Mysteries.

Ottfried Müller has in several places expressed opinions on the Mysteries by which, even where he is not wholly right, he has thrown much light on the subject. (See his art. "Eleusinia" in Ersch and Gruber's *Encyclop.* i. 33, p. 287 ff., and *Griech. Literatur*, i. 25 and 416 ff.) He finds the ground of all mystic rites and associations in the worship of the Chthonian deities. It is this worship, he thinks, that man delights to express in dim symbols and undefined aspirations. This proposition cannot be accepted literally, for other deities besides the Chthonian were worshipped in Mysteries; but it does seem to be true that

the doctrines as to the fate of souls in the world to come, which were prominent in the Mysteries, were intimately connected with the worship of the divinities beneath the earth who cause the life of plants and trees.

What is really known of the Mysteries is admirably summarised by L. Preller in his articles on "Eleusinia" and "Mysteria" in Pauly's *Real-Encyclopädie*, which I have found lucid and trustworthy guides in the intricacies of a perplexed subject matter. There are also many suggestive observations on the Mysteries in his *Griechische* and *Römische Mythologie*. In the more recent works which I have consulted I have rarely found reason to depart from Preller's conclusions. Excellent brief histories of them are found also in Maury's *Histoire des Religions de la Grèce antique* (tom. ii.), and in Döllinger's *Heidenthum und Judenthum*, pp. 108 ff., 385 ff., 447, 498.

Many able writers have discussed the question, how far were Christian Institutions influenced by the pagan Mysteries. Isaac Casaubon, in his *Exercitationes* (p. 478 ff. ed. Genev. 1655), points out that the termin-