

The Urantia Book

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Excerpts on:

The Mystery Religions

But the average men of these times could not grasp, nor were they much interested in, the Greek philosophy of self-realization and an abstract Deity; they rather craved promises of salvation, coupled with a personal God who could hear their prayers. They exiled the philosophers, persecuted the remnants of the Salem cult, both doctrines having become much blended, and made ready for that terrible orgiastic plunge into the follies of the mystery cults which were then overspreading the Mediterranean lands. The Eleusinian mysteries grew up within the Olympian pantheon, a Greek version of the worship of fertility; Dionysus nature worship flourished; the best of the cults was the Orphic brotherhood, whose moral preachments and promises of salvation made a great appeal to many.

Page-1080

The emerging Roman state conquered politically but was in turn conquered by the cults, rituals, mysteries, and god concepts of Egypt, Greece, and the Levant. These imported cults continued to flourish throughout the Roman state up to the time of Augustus, who, purely for political and civic reasons, made a heroic and somewhat successful effort to destroy the mysteries and revive the older political religion.

Page-1081

The last stand of the dwindling band of Salem believers was made by an earnest group of preachers, the Cynics, who exhorted the Romans to abandon their wild and senseless religious rituals and return to a form of worship embodying Melchizedek's gospel as it had been modified and contaminated through contact with the philosophy of the Greeks. But the people at large rejected the Cynics; they preferred to plunge into the rituals of the mysteries, which not only offered hopes of personal salvation but also gratified the desire for diversion, excitement, and entertainment.

Page-1081

The Phrygian and Egyptian mysteries taught that the divine son (respectively Attis and Osiris) had experienced death and had been resurrected by divine power, and further that all who were properly initiated into the mystery, and who reverently celebrated the anniversary of the god's death and resurrection, would thereby become partakers of his divine nature and his immortality.

Page-1081

The Phrygian ceremonies were imposing but degrading; their bloody festivals indicate how degraded and primitive these Levantine mysteries became. The most holy day was Black Friday, the "day of blood," commemorating the self-inflicted death of Attis. After three days of the celebration of the sacrifice and death of Attis the festival was turned to joy in honor of his resurrection.

Page-1082

5. THE CULT OF MITHRAS

The Phrygian and Egyptian mysteries eventually gave way before the greatest of all the mystery cults, the worship of Mithras. The Mithraic cult made its appeal to a wide range of human nature and gradually supplanted both of its predecessors. Mithraism spread over the Roman Empire through the propagandizing of Roman legions recruited in the Levant, where this religion was the vogue, for they carried this belief wherever they went. And this new religious

ritual was a great improvement over the earlier mystery cults.

The mystery religions spelled the end of national beliefs and resulted in the birth of the numerous personal cults. The mysteries were many but were all characterized by:

1. Some mythical legend, a mystery--whence their name. As a rule this mystery pertained to the story of some god's life and death and return to life, as illustrated by the teachings of Mithraism, which, for a time, were contemporary with, and a competitor of, Paul's rising cult of Christianity.

Page-1337

But do not make the mistake of confusing the teachings of Jesus with the mysteries. The popularity of the mysteries reveals man's quest for survival, thus portraying a real hunger and thirst for personal religion and individual righteousness. Although the mysteries failed adequately to satisfy this longing, they did prepare the way for the subsequent appearance of Jesus, who truly brought to this world the bread of life and the water thereof.

Page-1337

Paul, in an effort to utilize the widespread adherence to the better types of the mystery religions, made certain adaptations of the teachings of Jesus so as to render them more acceptable to a larger number of prospective converts. But even Paul's compromise of Jesus' teachings (Christianity) was superior to the best in the mysteries in that:

1. Paul taught a moral redemption, an ethical salvation. Christianity pointed to a new life and proclaimed a new ideal. Paul forsook magic rites and ceremonial enchantments.

Page-1338

3. The mysteries were built upon myths. Christianity, as Paul preached it, was founded upon a historic fact: the bestowal of Michael, the Son of God, upon mankind.

Page-2086

Christianity is an extemporized religion, and therefore must it operate in low gear. High-gear spiritual performances must await the new revelation and the more general acceptance of the real religion of Jesus. But Christianity is a mighty religion, seeing that the commonplace disciples of a crucified carpenter set in motion those teachings which conquered the Roman world in three hundred years and then went on to triumph over the barbarians who overthrew Rome. This same Christianity conquered--absorbed and exalted--the whole stream of Hebrew theology and Greek philosophy. And then, when this Christian religion became comatose for more than a thousand years as a result of an overdose of mysteries and paganism, it resurrected itself and virtually reconquered the whole Western world. Christianity contains enough of Jesus' teachings to immortalize it.

Page-1080

All Greece became involved in these new methods of attaining salvation, these emotional and fiery ceremonials. No nation ever attained such heights of artistic philosophy in so short a time; none ever created such an advanced system of ethics practically without Deity and entirely devoid of the promise of human salvation; no nation ever plunged so

quickly, deeply, and violently into such depths of intellectual stagnation, moral depravity, and spiritual poverty as these same Greek peoples when they flung themselves into the mad whirl of the mystery cults.

Page-1080

This formal and unemotional form of pseudoreligious patriotism was doomed to collapse, even as the highly intellectual and artistic worship of the Greeks had gone down before the fervid and deeply emotional worship of the mystery cults. The greatest of these devastating cults was the mystery religion of the Mother of God sect, which had its headquarters, in those days, on the exact site of the present church of St. Peter's in Rome.

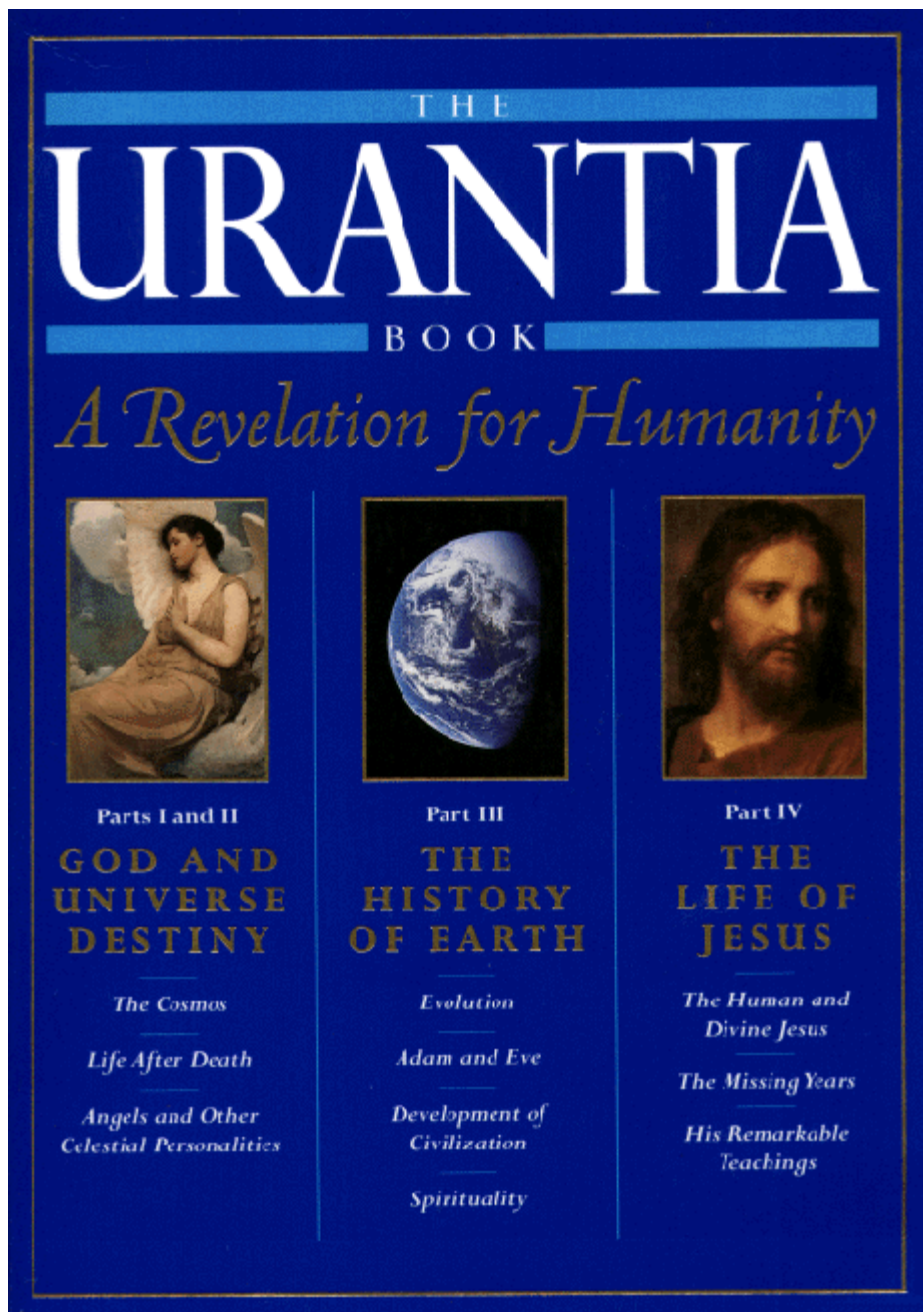
The majority of people in the Greco-Roman world, having lost their primitive family and state religions and being unable or unwilling to grasp the meaning of Greek philosophy, turned their attention to the spectacular and emotional mystery cults from Egypt and the Levant. The common people craved promises of salvation--religious consolation for today and assurances of hope for immortality after death.

The three mystery cults which became most popular were:

1. The Phrygian cult of Cybele and her son Attis.
2. The Egyptian cult of Osiris and his mother Isis.
3. The Iranian cult of the worship of Mithras as the savior and redeemer of sinful mankind.

The rituals of the worship of Isis and Osiris were more refined and impressive than were those of the Phrygian cult. This Egyptian ritual was built around the legend of the Nile god of old, a god who died and was resurrected, which concept was derived from the observation of the annually recurring stoppage of vegetation growth followed by the springtime restoration of all living plants. The frenzy of the observance of these mystery cults and the orgies of their ceremonials, which were supposed to lead up to the "enthusiasm" of the realization of divinity, were sometimes most revolting.

But the Christians made a shrewd bargain with the pagans in that they adopted the ritualistic pageantry of the pagan while compelling the pagan to accept the Hellenized version of Pauline Christianity. They made a better bargain with the pagans than they did with the Mithraic cult, but even in that earlier compromise they came off more than conquerors in that they succeeded in eliminating the gross immoralities and also numerous other reprehensible practices of the Persian mystery.



Parts I and II
**GOD AND
UNIVERSE
DESTINY**

The Cosmos
Life After Death
*Angels and Other
Celestial Personalities*

Part III
**THE
HISTORY
OF EARTH**

Evolution
Adam and Eve
*Development of
Civilization*
Spirituality

Part IV
**THE
LIFE OF
JESUS**

*The Human and
Divine Jesus*
The Missing Years
*His Remarkable
Teachings*