

Hebrews. This evidence is only supported further by the more general point that this was a standard feature of all mystery cults, and Christianity clearly was one (as shown in Element 11), so we should expect it shared this feature as well, especially as even pre-Christian Judaism had similar traditions of secret doctrines.<sup>120</sup>

**Element 14:** Mystery cults spoke of their beliefs in public through myths and allegory, which symbolized a more secret doctrine that was usually rooted in a more esoteric astral or metaphysical theology. Therefore, as itself a mystery religion with secret doctrines, Christianity would have done the same.

The most explicit discussion of this fact can be found in Plutarch's book on the myths and teachings of the mystery cult of Isis and Osiris, which he wrote and dedicated to a priestess of that cult, Clea.<sup>121</sup> Plutarch says the highest aim of any religion is to learn the truth behind its stories and rituals, the truth about the gods. And part of that consisted in realizing that the stories and narratives of the gods were only allegories for higher truths:

Clea, whenever you hear the mythical stories told by the Egyptians about their gods—of their wanderings, dismemberments, and many experiences like these—you must remember what I said earlier and not think that any of these things is being said to have actually happened like that or to have actually come to pass.<sup>122</sup>

He then goes on to summarize what is essentially the 'gospel' of Isis and Osiris, a typical mythic narrative of events transpiring on earth leading

community that organizes and expands over three continents (as Paul's letters show Christianity already had) will rapidly need a clear hierarchy and organization within a matter of years. To assume that no one thought of this or saw any need for it for a whole century (much less three) is absurd. Likewise, since Paul reveals there were already at least two levels of initiation in the cult, there is no reason to assume there were not more. If there were already two, there could just as easily have been four (as Josephus attests the Essenes already had). Paul's letters just never had an occasion to discuss the details of this.

120. For further support of this last point see the analysis of Margaret Barker. 'The Secret Tradition', *Journal of Higher Criticism* 2 (Spring 1995), pp. 31-67; and Margaret Barker, 'The Temple Roots of the Christian Liturgy', in *Christian Origins: Worship, Belief and Society* (ed. Kieran O'Mahony; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. 2003). pp. 29-51. On secrets and initiations in Judaism see previous notes.

121. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 1.351c and 351f (this Clea was also the dedicatee of his book on *The Bravery of Women* 1.242e-f). Another discourse on this topic was delivered by Maximus of Tyre, in his fourth oration, 'Poetry and Philosophy on the Gods' (sometime in the second century), which also explicitly links allegorical mythmaking to mystery cult practice.

122. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 11.355b.

to Osiris's death and resurrection.<sup>123</sup> He then closes by repeating the point that Clea knows better than to really believe these stories, that 'in fact, you yourself detest' those who take them literally, and that she (like all true believers) sees them as 'but window dressing' that points us to something else more profound.<sup>124</sup>

Plutarch then goes on to survey what this underlying truth might actually be. He first brings up the theory of Euhemerus that all such tales are the mythification of past kings into current gods, but then he rejects this as impious and absurd.<sup>125</sup> Instead, 'better', he says, is the theory that these earthly tales are of the 'sufferings' (*pathēmata*) not of gods or men, but of 'great divinities' (*daimonōn megalōn*, 'great demons' in Christian vernacular), divine beings with incarnate bodies capable of suffering and corruption. This, he says, was just as in other mystery cults (he alludes definitely to those of Dionysus and Demeter, meaning the Bacchic and Eleusinian mysteries, of which Clea was also a participant), where there are also 'mythical stories' told of the wanderings and sufferings of those gods, but 'all is concealed behind mystic sacraments and initiations, not spoken or shown to the multitude', thereby preserving the truth. Plutarch says the stories of Isis and Osiris 'have the same explanation'.<sup>126</sup> Hence it's important to note that Paul also speaks of 'the sufferings' (*pathēmata*) of Christ, just as Plutarch says 'the sufferings' of other savior gods were spoken of in other mystery cults.<sup>127</sup> As Plutarch explains, the true story is that Isis and Osiris are celestial gods engaged in a war in outer space between good and evil demons.<sup>128</sup> The tales that relate their adventures on earth are just an allegory for this higher reality, which is actually going on in heaven (see Element 37).

Plutarch also explores another explanation, in which a god's narrative myth is reduced to purely naturalistic and mystical allegories, and thus not about actual beings at all—but he indicates this is not the view he shares.<sup>129</sup> He prefers the demonological theory, and accepts the other more thoroughgoing allegorization as only a supplemental explanation at best, concluding that 'individually these theorists are wrong, but collectively they are right' because all the things they describe are a *part* of the gods in question, not

123. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 12.355d–19.358e.

124. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 20.358e–359a.

125. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 21.359c–24.360d.

126. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 25.360d–f.

127. 2 Cor. 1.5 and Phil. 3.10. Likewise 1 Pet. 1.11; 4.13; 5.1 (on which see Chapters 7 and 11).

128. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 26.361b–27.361e.

129. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 32.363d–46.369e; 49.371a–80.384c.