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MAHAFFY ON THE MYSTERIES.

THERE are few subjects outside the limits of the Bible, if indeed they can be said to stand outside, in which students and expositors of the Word of God take a profounder interest than the celebrated "mysteries" in which at least the moral culture of the classical world rose to its highest point. Nor is it at all easy to obtain any reliable information on this subject. No secret, known to so many, was ever so well kept; and comparatively little has been done as yet to collect the faint and scattered hints on it contained in the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. Every new contribution to this subject, therefore, is very welcome. Such a contribution has been recently made by Professor J. P. Mahaffy, of Dublin University, one of the most accomplished of our modern classical scholars, in his "Rambles and Studies in Greece." As probably many of our readers may find his brief remarks on "the Mysteries" very helpful and instructive, we subjoin them, italicizing the sentences to which we wish to call special attention. They are to be found on pages 152–6 of the book just mentioned, a book worth reading for many reasons.

The wretched modern village of Eleusis is picturesquely situated near the sea, on the old site, and there are to be seen the ruins, not only of the famous temple of Demeter, but also of the Propylæa. . . . These celebrated ruins are wretchedly defaced. Not a column or a wall is now standing, and one can see nothing but vast fragments of pillars and capitals, and a great pavement, all of white marble, along which the ancient wheel-tracks are distinctly visible. There are also underground vaults of small dimensions, which, the people tell you, were intended for the Mysteries. We that know what vast crowds attended there will not give credence to this ignorant guess; and indeed we learn from distinct evidence that the great ceremony took

place in a large building specially constructed for the purpose. The necessary darkness was obtained by performing the more solemn rites at night, not by going down beneath the surface of the earth.

It is, of course, the celebrated Mysteries—the *Greater Eleusiniæ*, as they were called—which give to the now wretched village of Eleusis, with its hopeless ruins, so deep an interest. This wonderful feast, handed down from the remotest antiquity, maintained its august splendour all through the greater ages of Greek history, down to the times of decay and trifling—when everything else in the country had become mean and contemptible. Even Cicero, who was of the initiated himself, and a man of wide culture, and of a sceptical turn of mind—even Cicero speaks of it as *the* great product of the culture of Athens. "Much that is excellent and divine," says he,[1] "does Athens seem to me to have produced and added to our life, but nothing better than those Mysteries, by which we are formed and moulded from a rude and savage life to humanity; and indeed in the Mysteries *we perceive the real principles of life, and learn, not only to live happily, but to die with a fairer hope.*" These are the words of a man writing, as I have said, in the days of the ruin and prostration of Greece. Can we, then, wonder at the enthusiastic language of the Homeric Hymn,[2] of Pindar,[3] of Sophocles,[4] of Aristophanes,[5] of Plato,[6] of Isocrates,[7] of Chrysippus? Every manner of writer—religious poet, worldly poet, sceptical philosopher, orator—all are of one mind about this, far the greatest of all the religious festivals of Greece.

To what did it owe this transcendent character? It was not because it worshipped exceptional gods, for the worship of Demeter and Cora was an old and widely diffused custom all over Greece; and there were other Eleusiniæ in various places. It was not because the ceremony consisted of mysteries, of hidden acts and words, which it was impious to reveal, and which the initiated alone might know. Nay, even within the ordinary homes of the Greeks there were these Mysteries. Neither was it because of the splendours of the temple and its appointments, which never equalled the Panathenæa at the Parthenon, or the splendours of Delphi or Olympia. There is only one reasonable cause, and it is that which all our serious authorities agree upon—*The doctrine taught in the Mysteries was a faith which revealed to them hopeful things about the world to come, and which not so much as a condition, but as a consequence, of this clearer light, this higher faith, made them better citizens and better men. This faith* was taught them in the Mysteries through symbols, through prayer and fasting, through wild rejoicings; but, as Aristotle expressly tells us, it *was reached, not by intellectual persuasion, but by a change into a new moral state—in fact, by being spiritually revived.*

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[1] *De Legg.* ii. 14, § 36. [2] *In Cer.* v. 480. [3] *Thren.* [4] *O.C.* 1042.
[5] *Ran.* 455. [6] *Phæd.* cc. 29, 30. [7] *Paneg.* § 6.

Here, then, we have the strongest and most striking analogy to our religion in the Greek mythology, for here we have a higher faith publicly taught—any man might present himself to be initiated—and taught, not in opposition to the popular creed, but merely by deepening it, and shewing to the ordinary worldling its spiritual power. The belief in the Goddess Demeter and her daughter, the queen of the northern world, was, as I have said, common all over Greece; but even as now-a-days we are told that there may be two kinds of belief of the same truths—one of the head and another of the heart—just as the most excellent man of the world, who believes all the creeds of the Church, is called an unbeliever, in the higher sense, by our Evangelical Christians; so the ordinary Greek, though he prayed and offered at the Temple of Demeter, was held by the initiated at the Mysteries to be wallowing in the mire of ignorance, and stumbling in the night of gloom. He was held to live without light, to die without hope, and in despair.

The very fact that it was not lawful to divulge the mystery has prevented the many writers who knew it from giving us any description from which we might gain a clear idea of this wonderful rite. We have hints of various sacred vessels, of various priests known by special technical names; of dramatic representations of the rape of Cora, and of the grief of her mother; of her complaints before Zeus, and the final reconciliation. *We hear of scenes of darkness and fear, in which the hopeless state of the unbeliever was portrayed; of light and glory to which the convert attained when, at last, his eyes were opened to the knowledge of good and evil.*

But all these things are fragmentary glimpses, as are also *the doctrines* hinted *of the Unity of God, and of atonement by sacrifice.* There remains nothing clear and certain, but the unanimous verdict as to the greatness, the majesty, and the awe of the services, and as to *the great spiritual knowledge and comfort which they conveyed.* The consciousness of guilt was not, indeed, first taught by them, but was felt generally, and felt very keenly by the Greek mind. *These mysteries were its Gospel of Reconciliation with the offended gods.*