

## Religion: public display & private worship

Apuleius and the cult of Isis

This passage comes from a Roman novel from the 2nd century AD called the *Metamorphoses*, but also often referred to as *The Golden Ass*. The story follows the character Lucius and revolves around his insatiable curiosity and desire to see and practise magic (which leads to him spending a large part of the novel trapped in the body of a donkey). It ends with Lucius finding redemption and being accepted into the cult of Isis, a closed cult, with secret initiations. This passage describes the initiation:

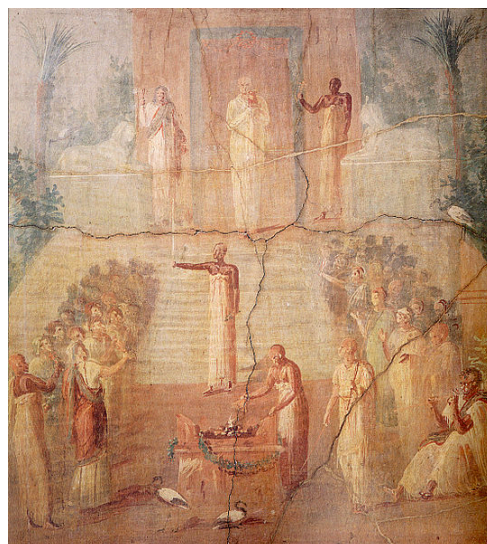
Apuleius *The Golden Ass* 11.23 (translation A. S. Kline)

quaeras forsitan satis anxie, studiose  
lector, quid deinde dictum, quid factum:  
dicerem si dicere liceret, cognosceres si  
liceret audire: sed parem noxam  
contraherent aures et linguae illae  
temerariae curiositatis. nec te tamen  
desiderio forsitan religioso suspensum  
angore diutino cruciabo: igitur audi, sed  
crede, quae vera sunt. accessi confinium  
mortis et calcato Proserpinae limine per  
omnia vectus elementa remeavi; nocte  
media vidi solem candido coruscantem  
lumine; deos inferos et deos superos  
accessi coram et adoravi de proxumo.  
ecce tibi rettuli quae, quamvis audita,  
ignores tamen necesse est: ergo quod  
solum potest sine piaculo ad profanorum  
intellegentias enuntiari, referam.

*And now, diligent reader, you are no doubt keen to know what was said next, and what was done. I'd tell you, if to tell you, were allowed; if you were allowed to hear then you might know, but ears and tongue would sin equally, the latter for its profane indiscretion, the former for their unbridled curiosity. Oh, I shall speak, since your desire to hear may be a matter of deep religious longing, and I would not torment you with further anguish, but I shall speak only of what can be revealed to the minds of the uninitiated without need for subsequent atonement, things which though you have heard them, you may well not understand. So listen, and believe in what is true. I reached the very gates of death and, treading Proserpine's threshold, yet passed through all the elements and returned. I have seen the sun at midnight shining brightly. I have entered the presence of the gods below and the presence of the gods above, and I have paid due reverence before them.*

Do you think this religious ending is to be taken seriously, or do you think it is a joke?

Do you think that by making the initiations more 'mysterious' and secret, people become more curious about them?



Right: wallpainting from Pompeii showing the worship of Isis.