The Mystery progress through death

James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1922) attempts to define the shared elements of religious belief and scientific thought, discussing fertility rites, human sacrifice, the dying god, the scapegoat and many other symbols and practices whose influence has extended into twentieth-century culture. Its thesis is that old religions were fertility cults that revolved around the worship and periodic sacrifice of a sacred king. Frazer proposed that mankind progresses from magic through religious belief to scientific thought, and idea that the modern Western world has taken almost as gospel.

Frazer’s thesis was developed in relation to J. M. W. Turner's painting, *The Golden Bough*, of a sacred grove where a certain tree grew day and night a bough from which the Sibyl of Cumae had told Aeneas he needed to enter the Underworld. Turner paints a transfigured landscape in a dream-like vision of the woodland lake of Nemi, "Diana's Mirror", where religious ceremonies and the "fulfillment of vows" of priests and kings were held. Frazer based his thesis on the pre-Roman priest-king at the fane of Nemi, who was ritually murdered by his successor.

In his ritual (though real) death, the king enacted the death and incarnation of a god, a solar deity who underwent a mystic marriage to a goddess of the Earth. He died at the harvest and was reincarnated in the spring. Frazer claims that this legend of rebirth is central to almost all of the world's mythologies.

The Mystery Experience

Plutarch compares initiation w/ death, noting similarities of Gk words for “death” (*teleutan*) & “to be initiated” (*teleisthai*], observing that people passing through each undergo comparable transformations. He likely had in mind the Eleusinian Mysteries, but his words relate to most of the Mysteries:

> At first there is wandering, and wearisome roaming, and fearful traveling through darkness with no end to be found. Then there is every sort of terror, shuddering and trembling and perspiring and being alarmed. But after this a marvelous light appears, and open places and meadows await, with voices and dances and the solemnities of sacred utterances and holy visions. In that place one walks about at will, now perfect and initiated and free, and wearing a crown, one celebrates religious rites, and joins with pure and pious people. Such a person looks over the uninitiated and unpurified crowd of people living here, who are packed together and trample each other in deep
mud and murk, but who hold onto their evil things on account of their fear of death, because they do not believe in the good things that are in the other world. — Quoted in Stobaeus, *Anthology* 4.52.49

Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher, and hence not likely to be sympathetic to mysteries, in fact respected them and their access to something real:

You ought to approach these matters in another way; the thing is great, it is mystical, not common thing, nor is it given to every man. (*Discourses* III, 21)