Why Socrates Died: Dispelling the Myths by Robin Waterfield

He Died For Us?

A revisionist account of the most famous trial and execution in Western civilization—one with great resonance for American society today. Socrates' trial and death together form an iconic moment in Western civilization. In 399 BCE, the great philosopher stood before an Athenian jury on serious charges: impiety and “subverting the young men of the city.” The picture we have of it—created by his immediate followers, Plato and Xenophon, and perpetuated in countless works of literature and art ever since—is of a noble man putting his lips to the poisonous cup of hemlock, sentenced to death in a fit of folly by an ancient Athenian democracy already fighting for its own life. But an icon, an image, is not reality, and time has transmuted so many of the facts into historical fable. Aware of these myths, Robin Waterfield has examined the actual Greek sources and presents here a new Socrates, in which he separates the legend from the man himself. As Waterfield recounts the story, the charges of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens were already enough for a death sentence, but the prosecutors accused him of more. They asserted that Socrates was not just an atheist and the guru of a weird sect but also an elitist who surrounded himself with politically undesirable characters and had mentored those responsible for defeat in the Peloponnesian War. Their claims were not without substance, for Plato and Xenophon, among Socrates' closest companions, had idolized him as students, while Alcibiades, the hawkish and notorious self-serving general, had brought Athens to the brink of military disaster. In fact, as Waterfield perceptively shows through an engrossing historical narrative, there was a great deal of truth, from an Athenian perspective, in these charges. The trial was, in part, a response to troubled times—Athens was reeling from a catastrophic war and undergoing turbulent social changes—and Socrates' companions were unfortunately direct representatives of these troubles. Their words and actions, judiciously sifted and placed in proper context, not only serve to portray Socrates as a flesh-and-blood historical figure but also provide a good lens through which to explore both the trial and the general history of the period. Ultimately, the study of these events and principal figures allows us to finally strip away the veneer that has for so long denied us glimpses of the real Socrates. Why Socrates Died is an illuminating, authoritative account of not only one of the defining periods of Western civilization but also of one of its most defining figures. 4 pages of illustrations.
My Personal Review:
...than the title indicates. The author is tremendously intelligent, knowledgeable and thoughtful. His tone is scholarly but never dry. He's simply a great writer. The big surprise, however, is how much is not directly about Socrates at all, but about Athens. And not the iconic Athens of stately, silent, yellowing marble.

The famous are there along with the less known sons of "billionaire" families who helped bring down Socrates. These young rowdies, with way too much time on their hands, dressed and acted outlandishly, formed drinking clubs, went on destructive rampages, gambled and cruised the gymnasia and baths looking for boys. They liked girls too, and the stories of Alcibiades alone could explain why Athenian women were kept hidden.

And fortunately Alcibiades rates as many pages as his teacher and antithesis Socrates. Considered the handsomest man in Greece, Alcibiades was apparently a rich, reckless, narcissistic satyr. Once Socrates' lover, and later a general, he learned rhetoric from the older man and used it to become the idol of the Greek world. Before he was murdered he seems to have double-crossed at least twice everyone who trusted him. Having a hearty sexual appetite, he seduced men and women alike and was even reputed to have had orgies with his mother and sisters; fleeing Athens, he sought safety in Sparta, but then had to light out again after he impregnated the king's wife. Obviously the book is not dull.

In this Athens Waterfield finds unexpected parallels with our world today: As wealth increases, so does the stress of empire. The population is bitterly divided by competing interests, and struggles erupt between elites and democrats, rich and poor, young and old, farmers and businessmen. Then there's the religious strife of 2,000 cults in a city of 350,000 and the seemingly endless war between Sparta and Athens that spreads to Sicily and Asia Minor as both sides insanely try to goad the Persian Empire to join in. These Greeks are not models of classical good sense and rational action, and Alcibiades seems to have had a hand in everything that went wrong.

Readability is gained partly at the expense of footnotes; there are none -- although the end notes and the extensive bibliography are good. There's also a useful glossary for those unfamiliar with Greek.

This is above all a book of ideas, and believe me, it will leave you with plenty to think about.

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