

*Utopian Communities of the Ancient World*, by Brent James Schmidt (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010)

It is often said, and not only by classicists, that in order to understand the modern world a person must learn to understand the ancient world. Fascination with antiquity has not diminished in the digital postmodern age, perhaps because people are wondering more and more what life is really all about and what chance there might now be in the age of instant worldwide communication and interdependent global economies to achieve a truly cooperative state of affairs among all peoples of the earth.

Into this picture comes the work of Brent Schmidt on the use of covenantal rituals and practices by several groups in the ancient Mediterranean and the formation, organization, and actualization of their communal or utopian societies. Seeing the roles that sacred rituals played in the life of these utopian groups opens new perspectives on these ancient groups and will be of interest to many readers. The experiments of these groups were not limited to the ivory towers of philosophy. Their members moved heaven and earth to carry out their devout plans and lofty dreams.

This book begins with a lengthy and engaging discussion of modern utopian communities, their successes, and failures. A former Hugh Nibley fellow, Schmidt shows that the fundamental challenges which have faced all of these societies are essentially the same, and remain the cause of basic problems and pressures still today: property, food, sex, social distinctions, political power, and religious leadership.

Most significant and original is this book's collection of ancient sources regarding the leadership and practices of these ancient utopian groups.

Substantial quotes from original sources bring modern readers close to the revered teachings of these charismatic leaders.

The roots of Western civilization run deep in the soils of Jewish, Greek, Roman, and Christian civilizations. This book probes some of the most remarkably idealistic experiments in the annals of history. It exposes the debt that many people today still owe to these traditions for setting the high moral tone and lifting the visionary gaze that inspires some of their most cherished personal and social aspirations. While utopia will always remain beyond human reach, even a dim and distant view of such ideals can keep communities pointed in an optimistic and desirable direction.

—John W. Welch