

Stop Copying Me!

Is The Story Of Jesus Stolen From Pagan Beliefs And Traditions?

I have two young children who are getting to the age where they are beginning to interact with one another, and annoy each other! One of the ways they do so is by copying one another. You know the drill: one child says, “Stop copying me!” The other then responds, “Stop copying me!” et cetera ad infinitum. Such conversations eventually wear down even the most resolute of parents!

It has also been claimed by some that there is nothing new in the Gospel’s claims that Jesus was a divine, virgin born, resurrected savior of the world. These elements were copied from earlier myths and were incorporated into the cult of Christ. For example, D.M. Murdock has stated, “In other words, we are convinced that ‘Jesus Christ’ may well be a fictional character created out of older myths, rituals, and symbols.”¹ Bill Maher, a political commentator, likewise claimed, while speaking to an actor dressed as Jesus in his film *Religulous*:

“Does it ever bother you that the story of a man who was born of a virgin, was resurrected – your bio – was something that was going around the Mediterranean for at least a thousand years?”²

This view, called the Christ Myth, or Cosmic Christ, theory has had many advocates over the years in some form or another. Beginning in the first and second century, pagans and Christians alike were commenting on parallels between Jesus and pagan myths. But this belief became most popular in German theological circles in the 1800’s and has continued with scholars like Gerald Massey, David Strauss, Kersey Graves, Alvin Boyd Kuhn, Bruno Bauer, D.M. Murdock, Tom Harpur, G.A. Wells, and Richard Carrier, documentaries like *The God Who Wasn’t There*, *Zeitgeist*, and *Religulous*, and even popular books and movies like the *Da Vinci Code*.

Specifically, it is claimed that long before Jesus, gods such as Horus, Osiris, Mithras, Dionysus, Balder, Krishna, and Attis were born on December 25th, of a virgin, had disciples, performed miracles, died, and rose again. The heart of the issue is that, if it can be proven that first century Jews merely hijacked these ideas from other religions in order to invent a new religion around Jesus Christ, who may have not even been a historical person, this would greatly diminish or even destroy the essence of

Christianity. No Christ, no Christianity. In response, this article will show that these claims are greatly exaggerated or untrue. There are at least four reasons for rejecting the Christ Myth theory.

I. This Theory Commits The False Cause Fallacy

The false cause fallacy is a term used to describe an illogical approach to an issue in which a person rejects or accepts a particular idea because of its source, rather than because of the arguments for the idea itself. Stated simply, it is the false belief that similar ideas require a similar source. An example would be when I was in seventh grade and my little sister, who was in first grade at the time, was crying on the school bus and I went to comfort her. The bus driver then said to us, “I should have known you were her older brother, you both look alike.” The problem is that I am adopted and am not biologically related to her! Our common appearance was not an indicator of a common source!

Claiming that Christian beliefs borrowed from earlier pagan beliefs SIMPLY because parallels exist is a logical fallacy. Even if a belief is held because of another false belief, this does nothing to demonstrate that the belief held is false. It must first be demonstrated that the claims of the Gospels are false on their own terms before one can hypothesize about the origins of such belief.

Yet, when one examines the Judaism from which Christianity did originate, there is disgust for other religions. Judaism was passionately monotheistic and believed that God was holy and not to be mixed with the religious views of other nations.³ If early Christians knew these parallels, so did the Jews they were seeking to convert. For Christians to yank these beliefs from pagan worship would have been manifestly rejected by first century Jews.

II. The God Of The Bible Often Used Parallels To Other Gods To Demonstrate Superiority

To have parallels between Christianity and the religions that predate it is really no surprise. There are numerous examples of God purposely doing things to demonstrate His power and authority over the false gods His people had begun to worship.

For example, in the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, when God performed the plagues to free His people and to deliver judgment,⁴ it has been well

¹ Murdock, D.M. *Christ In Egypt: The Horus- Jesus Connection*. Stellar House Publishing, 2009. Pg. 25.

² Maher, Bill. *Religulous*. DVD. Directed By Larry Charles. Thousand Words Productions, 2008.

³ See Exodus 20

⁴ See Exodus 7-11

documented by scholars such as John J. Davis⁵ that each of the plagues was a direct attack on the various gods of Egypt. It was thought that Ra was the sun god, so the God of the Israelites blocked out the sun. The Nile gods were also often worshipped, so God turned the water to blood. For Christianity to purposely incorporate the claims of other religious viewpoints would very much be in line with earlier practices of showing that, while other religions claimed their gods could do these things, Jesus really did do them, showing His true power! Since God is all-knowing and often works through prophecy, it would not be surprising if many parallels were allowed to come into existence by Him for the ultimate purpose of foreshadowing Jesus.

III. There Is Historical Evidence For The Claims Of Christianity

Unlike these various pagan myths, the beliefs of Christianity are centered in history. It is claimed that, around 30-35 A.D., a virgin born Jesus was crucified as a sacrifice for the sins of others and rose again three days later, proving His divinity.

The beauty of Christianity is that there is ample evidence to support such claims. First, the Gospels have been shown to be very reliable in their recollection of facts and in their preserved presence today. Even Bart Ehrman, a leading critic of the Bible, has written that, “The essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament.”⁶

Second, the facts surrounding Jesus, such as his life, ministry, death, empty tomb, and the sacrifice of His disciples are abundantly evidenced from the New Testament writings, the writings of the church fathers and at least nine non-Christian writers from the first two centuries, such as Josephus and Tacitus. There is nothing like this for the pagan myths before Christ. Evidence like this has led modern New Testament scholars, like John Dominic Crossan, who denied the resurrection, to write, “That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical ever can be.”⁷ Likewise, Michael Grant, a secular historian, has written:

“To sum up, modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory. It has again and again been answered and annihilated by first-rank scholars. In recent years no serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus—or at any rate very few, and they have not succeeded in disposing of

the much stronger, indeed very abundant, evidence to the contrary.”⁸

To illustrate this issue, see if you can name the ship that fits the following description. It starts with “T,” was described as unsinkable, struck an iceberg, there were a shortage of lifeboats, and many people drowned. If you are thinking the Titanic, you would be right. But this was also true of a fictional story about a ship called the Titan, written in 1898, fourteen years before the Titanic sailed.⁹ Imagine someone concluding that, therefore, the Titanic never existed! That would be ludicrous! There is evidence to believe that the Titanic really existed and did all those things regardless of any parallels that came before it. The same is true of Jesus. Even if there are parallels, there is good reason to believe that Jesus really did the things ascribed to Him.

IV. The Parallels Are Not Parallel

When one examines the original sources, the alleged parallels are nothing of the sort. Many are exaggerations and redefinitions, the result of later additions to make beliefs seem more like the popular Christianity of the day, or even flat out lies. In all reality, because the primary sources do not uphold the alleged parallels, proponents often simply quote other scholars quoting other scholars, rather than the original documents. Let’s examine just three of the most commonly cited parallels to illustrate. Though these different myths contain many alleged parallels, for the sake of space, the discussion will be limited to the most significant ones.

I. Horus

Horus was an Egyptian god. Leading Christ-Myth proponent D.M. Murdock describes him, among other things, as being born of the virgin Isis Meri on December 25th, “crucified” between two “thieves”, resurrected on the third day, and called many divine names like the “Way, the Truth, and the Life,” “Messiah,” the “Son of Man,” “the Word made flesh,” and “Iusa,” while his father Osiris was the KRST.¹⁰ But none of the primary sources support these ideas. Some of the most reliable information about these beliefs even comes from writings dated later than the New Testament!¹¹

More specifically, the Bible never claims that Jesus was born on December 25th. Instead, though there are differences between some of the Egyptian

⁸ Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels*, New York: Scribner, 1995, p. 200.

⁹ Robertson, Morgan. *The Wreck Of The Titan*. Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013.

¹⁰ Murdock. *Christ In Egypt*. Pg. 44.

¹¹ Porter, Stanley E. and Bedard, Stephen J. *Unmasking The Pagan Christ: An Evangelical Response To The Cosmic Christ Idea*. Clements Publishing, 2006. Pg. 60.

⁵ Davis, John J. *Moses And The Gods Of Egypt*. BMH Books, 2006.

⁶ Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus*. HarperOne, 2007. Pg. 252.

⁷ Crossan, John Dominic. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1991. Pg. 145.

and Greek texts, the primary sources¹² agree that Horus the child was not born of a virgin but was the result of a sexual union between the goddess Isis (with no specific mention of “Isis Meri”) and her brother/husband Osiris, an Egyptian king/god who had been murdered by his brother Set for sleeping with their sister Nephthys, who was Set’s wife. Set tricked Osiris into climbing into a coffin which was then thrown into the sea and Osiris drowned. When Isis found Osiris’ body, she hid it until Set found out, at which point he cut Osiris into fourteen pieces. Isis then gathered all the pieces of her dead husband, exempt his reproductive “member,” which had been eaten by a fish. She then magically conceived Horus with his corpse while in the form of a bird. Horus then grows up to battle Set and ultimately prevails.

For his death, Horus himself was never crucified. The closest he comes to it is a picture with his arms outstretched to the heavens as the sky god, as even Murdock herself admits.¹³ He did, however, die as a child by the sting of a scorpion, but was then raised back to life through magic spells when Isis pleaded with the god Thoth. But this was nothing like the voluntary death of Jesus. Osiris was too raised, but not like Jesus. He never returned to life, but was spiritually raised to become god of the underworld.

While some names for Horus are similar to Jesus, there are no references in the primary sources to names like “Iusa.” Further, the name KRST is Egyptian for “burial,” while CHRIST is Greek for “anointed one.”¹⁴ And though he was called “Savior,” the only one Horus saves is his father Osiris by getting revenge through his defeat of Set.

2. Mithras

The cult of Mithras was a mystery religion from the Romans that had come from the Persians, so many forms of Mithraism were very entrenched in a Zodiac worldview mixing various beliefs and practices, both early and late. Concerning its relation to Christianity, Muslim scholar Yousaf Saleem Chishti writes, “...many critics are constrained to conclude that Christianity is the facsimile or the second edition of Mithraism.”¹⁵ He claims Mithras was a son of God, was born of a virgin, was crucified, and rose from the dead on the third day,

¹² Most of the primary source information for Horus can be found in the research of E.A. Wallis Budge (Budge, E.A. Wallis. *Legends Of The Egyptian Gods: Hieroglyphic Texts And Translations*. Dover Publications Incorporated, 1994.) and in the writings of Plutarch (Plutarch. *Concerning Isis and Osiris*. XVIII. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plu/pte/pte04.htm>)

¹³ Murdock. *Christ In Egypt*. Pg. 335.

¹⁴ Leprohon, Ron, cited in Gasque, W. Ward. *The Leading Religion Writer In Canada... Does He Know What He's Talking About?* Posted August 9, 2004 on History News Network.

¹⁵ Chisti, Yousaf Saleem. *What Is Christianity?* World Federation of Islamic Missions, 1970. Pg. 87.

atonement for the sins of man before returning to his heavenly father.¹⁶ Others have also pointed out the importance of baptism and the eating of a sacramental meal in the worship of Mithras.

While there are little actual documents for Mithras, because this was a secret religion, there are artifacts, graffiti, and later documents that play out the events of his life.¹⁷ ¹⁸ Most of the written accounts come from after the life of Jesus and even from Christian authors like Justin Martyr¹⁹ and Tertullian.²⁰ In other words, what parallels do exist are quite possibly additions made to Mithraism to make it more like the popular Christianity!

In the documents we have, Mithras was not born of a virgin but appeared full grown out of a rock. While rocks are technically virgins, this is hardly parallel! While some quote earlier sources from the Persians, those accounts have the Mithras-like-god being born of the preserved seed of a god, still very different from Jesus. Most importantly, Mithras did not die, much less rise again. Rather, he slayed a bull whose blood spilled out plants which symbolized life. It is his defeat of the bull that leads to his title as savior. Mithras was then thought to judge the souls of the departed and lead them through the spheres of the seven planets to the equivalent of heaven.

In terms of the practice of baptism for Mithras followers, it was not a baptism like that of Jesus. First, this baptism was secret and Christian baptism was public. Second, this baptism consisted of the initiate standing in a pit while a bull was scarified above and the blood was dripped down over the person while Christian baptism was a picture, in water, of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Finally, the commemorative meal for Mithras was of the bull while the Lord’s Supper is a memorial of Jesus’ own body and blood.

3. Dionysus

As a third example, consider Dionysus, the Greek god of wine. The Zeitgeist movie itself declares,

“Dionysus of Greece, born of a virgin on December 25th, was a traveling teacher who performed miracles such as turning water into wine, he was referred to as the “King of

¹⁶ Ibid, Pg. 87-88.

¹⁷ Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds Of Early Christianity*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003. Pg. 287.

¹⁸ A summary of Mithraic art can be found at <http://www.mithraeum.info/ModernImagery.htm>

¹⁹ Martyr, Justin. *Dialogue With Trypho*. Cited in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2012. Pg. 233-234.

²⁰ Tertullian. *On Prescription Against Heretics*. Cited in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3. Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2012. Pg. 262-263.

Kings," "God's Only Begotten Son," "The Alpha and Omega," and many others, and upon his death, he was resurrected."²¹

Yet again, however, the primary sources just do not bear this out.²² There are no sources before Christianity describing him as being born on December 25th. And as for his virgin birth, Dionysus was not born of a virgin at all. There are two different but related accounts. In the first, his human mother, Semele, was impregnated by Zeus in human form. When Zeus' wife Hera found out, she convinced Semele to demand to see Zeus in his glory, but the awesomeness of the sight killed her. Zeus then took the baby from her womb and carried him in his own thigh until he was ready to be born.

In the second version, Semele is simply the vehicle for Dionysus to be reborn into the world after being torn apart by the Titans as a child. In the stories, either Zeus drinks a concoction made with his heart and impregnates Semele with lightning, or Semele drinks it and becomes pregnant. But even in this case, Dionysus was the offspring of Zeus and his daughter Persephone. But this alternative is significant because it is also the only source for the idea that Dionysus was killed and resurrected.

In regards to his performing miracles like turning water to wine, all ancient deities performed miracles and one would expect the god of wine to do such a thing. Only he did not turn water into wine, but filled empty wine jugs. And while he did do much teaching while traveling, his teaching revolved around how to make wine and get drunk.

In each of these cases, when the parallels are considered head to head, there is nothing in pagan mythology like the virgin born Jesus who was God incarnate, born non-sexually to a mortal woman, who would grow to perform miracles that are externally evidenced, would voluntarily give His life to pay for the sins of others, and would rise three days later as He predicted, leaving behind an empty tomb, never to die again.

Conclusion

Despite the growing popularity of internet bloggers claiming that Jesus didn't exist and that His story is just copied from earlier myths, either in part or in whole, this article has shown that there is no good reason to take this claim seriously and in fact there are good reasons to think Jesus really did what He claimed. Perhaps the Apostle Peter's own words

are the most helpful in approaching this issue. He relates his own experiences when he writes,

"For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased " and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."²³

The real Jesus is a person that you cannot ignore. You can reject Him or accept Him, but you cannot escape His reality. But the best you can do is to heed the instructions of the Apostle Paul who wrote, "That if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."²⁴

²¹ Joseph, Peter. Zeitgeist: The Movie. Online Transcript. https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Zeitgeist_the_movie/Transcript.

²² A Listing Of Primary Sources For Dionysus Can Be Found At <http://www.theoi.com/Cult/DionysosCult.html>.

²³ 2 Peter 1:16-21. All Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960,1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995. Used by permission.

²⁴ Romans 10:9, NAU.