

Did the New Testament Reports of Jesus Originate from Pagan Myths?

By Peter Salemi

Did the Apostles of Jesus Christ borrow from paganism? One major argument against the historicity of the New Testament Jesus has been the similarity of mythological elements found in pagan religions during the same time the early Christian church was active. One source asks:

“If you Christians believe the stories of Jesus’ miracles, if you believe the story of Jesus’ miraculous birth, if you believe the story that Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into Heaven, then how can you refuse to believe precisely the same stories *when they are told of the other Savior Gods*: Herakles, Asklepios, the Dioscuri, Dionysos, and a dozen others I could name?” (Documents for the Study of the Gospels, by David Cartlidge, p.17).

Is there an answer to this challenge? These ancient religions which contained stories of resurrections, dying saviors, baptismal initiations, miraculous births, and the like; *the inference, of course, is that the early Christian writers borrowed these stories and attributed them to Jesus as they formulated the Christian religion.* However what do the *facts* say?

Cultural Background

Before we delve into this we must understand the Apostles background, and mind set.

The Bible tells us that these people were Jews. The Christian Church at that time was keeping the Law of God, “Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of *Jews* there are which believe; and they are all *zealous of the law*.” (Acts 21:20). Now what does the law say about borrowing from the pagan religions? “Learn *not* the way of the heathen” (Jer 10:2).

In the book of Deuteronomy it says, “When the LORD thy God shall cut off the nations from before thee, whither thou goest to possess them, and thou succeedest them, and dwellest in their land;

“Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, *How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise.*

“Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods.

“What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.” (12:29-31); so the church who were diligently keeping the law of God, they, reading these scriptures would *not* have borrowed from paganism.

The Apostle Peter wrote, “For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his

majesty.” (2 Peter 1:16). Clearly the church itself admits that they did not borrow from myths, but that what they saw heard and wrote down actually happened.

Now Palestine at that time also, as Norman Anderson states, “There is no evidence whatever...that the mystery religions had any influence in Palestine in the early decades of the first century...” (Christianity and World Religions, pp.53-54). The Jews who were the majority in Palestine at that time were the main influence and would not have tolerated paganism to influence the Jews.

Now if there was a chance to borrow from paganism, the Apostle Paul could have done so in Lystra in Acts the 14th chapter. Paul healed a lame man, and after this, “And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, *The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men.*

“And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker. “Then the priest of Jupiter, which was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people.” (vv.11-13). If there was a time the church could have borrowed from the pagans this was it, even just to attract more people to the faith, they could have done it right then and there. But No!

Notice what the Apostle Paul and Barnabas did, “*Which* when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard *of*, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out, “And saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these *vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein:* “And with these sayings scarce *restrained* they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them.” (Acts 14: 14-15, 18).

The fickle crowd was so disappointed, the next day they wanted to stone Paul and leave him for dead (v.19).

So obviously there was *no way* when it came to compromising or borrowing from the pagans to create the religion of Christianity. Like the Old Testament, God did not tolerate this with Israel and the same was happening with the Christian church.

What do the facts tell us, and who borrowed from whom?

The Mystery Religions

Solomon said, “The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.” (Proverbs 18:17 ESV). At first glance this accusation of the church borrowing from the Mystery religions seems believable with all the similarities that one sees in their practices and doctrines. But “...skeptical critics, by *ignoring* or *withholding* certain facts, often give a distorted picture of Christianity’s alleged relationship with the Mystery Religions” (A Ready Defense by MacDowell, p.168, emphasis added).

First off, notice the statement, “If you Christians believe the stories of Jesus’ miracles, if you believe the story of Jesus’ miraculous birth, if you believe the story that Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into Heaven, then how can you refuse to believe precisely the same stories *when they are told of the other Savior Gods*: Herakles, Asklepios, the Dioscuri, Dionysos, and a dozen others I could name?” (Documents for the Study of the Gospels, by David Cartledge, p.17). Notice how it’s worded! This falls into the fallacy of “Coloring the Evidence.” They use *Christian terminology* to describe pagan beliefs! Then “they marvel at the awesome parallels they think they have discovered” (Nash; Christianity and the Hellenistic World, p.126).

When one comes to read what these people believed and practiced it is very different from the practices and beliefs of the Christian Church, but the skeptics would describe these beliefs with *Christian* language and terminology. Notice for example, after Isis gathered together the pieces of Osiris’s dismembered body; Osiris became “Lord of the Underworld.” The skeptics say this is a “death burial and resurrection of the pagan deity,” and Christianity borrowed from this. But they fail to mention, “Whether this can be rightly called a resurrection is questionable, especially since, according to Plutarch, it was the pious desire of devotees to be buried in the same ground where, according to local tradition, *the body of Osiris was still lying.*” (ibid, p.73). Skeptics not only use Christian terminology, but also withhold the facts and ignore, or withhold the rest of the story. This is just one example of many. The fact is according to French scholar Andre Boulanger: “The conception that the god dies and is resurrected in order to lead his faithful to eternal life is represented *in no Hellenistic mystery*” (ibid, p.73, emphasis added).

Jesus’ Sacrifice

Many try to equate the death of the mystery savior-gods to the death of Jesus. But Nash gives 6 differences between the death of the pagan gods and the Jesus:

- (1) None of the so-called savior-gods died for someone else. The notion of the Son of God dying in place of his creatures is unique to Christianity.
- (2) Only Jesus died for sin. It is never claimed that any of the pagan deities died for sin. As Wagner observes, to none of the pagan gods, ‘has the intention of helping men been attributed. The sort of death that they died is quite different (hunting accident, self-emasculatation, etc.)’
- (3) Jesus died once and for all (Hebrews 7:27; 9:25-28; 10:10-14). In contrast, the mystery gods were vegetation deities whose repeated death and resuscitation depict the annual cycle of nature.
- (4) Jesus’ death was an actual event in history. The death of the god described in the pagan cults is a mythical drama with no historical ties.
- (5) Unlike the mystery gods, Jesus died voluntarily. Nothing like the voluntary death of Jesus can be found in the mystery cults.

- (6) And finally, Jesus' death was not a defeat but a triumph. Christianity stands entirely apart from the pagan mysteries in that its report of Jesus' death is a message of triumph. (ibid, pp.171-172).

What of the "Lord's Supper." Did it come from the Mystery Religions? No! Just a simple reading of the Gospels reveals that the Lord's Supper is the Passover meal, "Where wilt thou that we prepare for thee to eat the passover?" (Matthew 26:17). The origins of the Lord's supper comes from the Old Testament feast that took place centuries before the Mystery Religions, and if there are any similarities, "...it is often Jewish elements which predate both Christianity and the myth, which lent to both religions" (MacDowell, p.170).

Nash explains, "Of all the mystery cults, only Mithraism had anything that resembled the Lord's Supper. A piece of bread and a cup of water were placed before initiates while the priest of Mithra spoke some ceremonial words.... Any quest for the historical antecedents of the Lord's Supper is more likely to succeed if it stays closer to *the Jewish foundation of the Christian faith* than if it wanders off into the practices of the pagan cults. As noted in the case of Christian baptism, the Lord's Supper *looked back to a real, historical person and something He did in history during the Last Supper*. And as every student of the New Testament knows, the occasion for Jesus' introduction of the Christian Lord's Supper was the *Jewish Passover feast*." (ibid, p.159, emphasis added).

Mithra came from Persia and Babylon where the Jews were in exile for 70 years. During that time the pagans could have easily borrowed from the Jews Passover rituals and incorporated it into their religion. Also, Mithra did not penetrate the Roman Empire till 100 A.D. (see MacDowell, p.171) long *after* the Christian Church was established so it could not have influenced the church.

Who influenced Whom?

There is an interesting chapter in the book of Acts that shows the followers of the goddess Diana were upset that many abandon that practice and it was actually affecting the idol makers business. This caused a huge riot in Ephesus crying "Great *is* Diana of the Ephesians." (See Acts 19:21-41). The gentiles saw that they were losing followers to Jesus, and would do anything to attract the people back, "...many fail to recognize that the growth of the Christian church was so explosive that other religions *adopted* Christian elements in order to attract Christians and to prevent the loss of their adherents to Christianity...[the pagans took] steps to turn the tide" (A Ready Defense, MacDowell, p.170). The heathen religions were known to borrow from other religions, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND!

Early Christianity was an exclusivistic faith. As J. Machen explains, the mystery cults were nonexclusive. "A man could become initiated into the mysteries of Isis or Mithras *without at all giving up his former beliefs*; but if he were to be received into the Church, according to the preaching of Paul, he must *forsake all* other Saviors for the Lord Jesus Christ....Amid the prevailing syncretism of the Greco-Roman world, the religion of Paul, with the religion of Israel, stands absolutely alone." (Machen, 9, emphasis added) This Christian exclusivism should be a starting point for all reflection about the possible relations between Christianity and its pagan

competitors. Any hint of syncretism in the New Testament would have caused immediate controversy.

If one notices that any similarities between Christianity and the Mystery Religions, the similarities in the Mystery Religions all date from *the second century A.D.* onwards-*long after* Christianity was established! (See MacDowell *He Walked among us*, pp.175-197). If there was any influence it was the Christians that influenced the pagans and *not* the other way around!

What about Christianity borrowing festivals like Easter and Christmas that are obviously taken from the old festivals of the Sun Cults of the Romans Empire?

MacDowell admits, “There is a flip side to the coin. Following the first century A.D., Christianity's chief rival was Mithraism. Mithra, according to the Romans, was Sol Invictus (unconquered sun). The worship of Mithra therefore became associated with the sun, and, in A.D. 274, the date of its major festival was established as December 25, the date of the winter solstice. Apparently, ‘Sometime before 336 the church in Rome, unable to stamp out this pagan festival, spiritualized it as the Feast of the Nativity of the Sun of Righteousness.’ The exact date of Jesus’ birth has been a matter of debate for centuries, but it does seem clear that in this instance the date of the Christmas celebration was influenced by pragmatic rather than historical factors. *In addition, after the third century there is increasing evidence of pagan and secular doctrines affecting changes in Christian belief. But these are later developments.* There is *no evidence* that the origin of Christianity occurred by influence of the mystery religions. *Its roots were too deeply sunk in Jewish soil.*” (*He Walked Among Us*, p.191, emphasis added). It was only when the church became more and more *gentile*, and less *Jewish*, that the church became apostate and started borrowing from the pagan religions, but this was not so in the beginning of the Christian church. They were rooted in the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the doctrines of the Bible!

Based on History

Another clear difference between Christianity and the Mystery religions is that unlike the mysteries, the religion of the Apostles was grounded on events that actually happened in history. The mysticism of the mystery cults was essentially non-historical. Their myths were dramas, or pictures, of what the initiate went through, not real historical events, as Paul regarded Christ's death and resurrection to be. The Christian affirmation that the death and resurrection of Christ happened to a historical person at a particular time and place has absolutely no parallel in any pagan mystery religion.

“And the difference between the mythological experiences of these nebulous figures and the crucifixion ‘under Pontius Pilate’ of one of whom eyewitnesses bore testimony to both his death and resurrection is again obvious.” (Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions*, pp.53-54).

Read through a number of the Greek myths and then read through the gospel accounts and you will notice a marked difference in the overall flavor of the material. Concerning the Gospel of John, Blaiklock says: “I read him often in his simple Greek without translating and always gain an overwhelming impression of his directness, his intimacy with theme and reader. Simply read

the story of the wedding at Cana (but correctly rendering, ‘Mother, what is that to do with me?’) and feel the homely atmosphere, Mary’s embarrassment, the best man’s feeble joke (chapter 2). Follow on to the story of the rabbi (chapter 3) who came in the night and was annoyed at first because the answer to the question he was not allowed to ask was given by allusion to the books of Ezekiel and Numbers (Ezekiel 136:25-27; Numbers 21:4-9). And then read the story of the conversation at Sychar’s well, with the Samaritan fighting her losing battle of words with the strangest Jew she had ever met (chapter 4). Read on to the poignant account of the Passion Week with its climax in the vivid resurrection stories paralleled for simple reality only by the narrative in Luke. Simply read. *These men were not writing fiction. This is not what myth sounds like. This is history and only thus set down because it was reporting.*” (Jesus Christ Man or Myth, pp.77-78, emphasis added).

New Testament translator and scholar J. B. Phillips describes his experience this way: “I have read, in Greek and Latin, scores of myths, *but I did not find the slightest flavor of myth here.* There is no hysteria, no careful working for effect, and no attempt at collusion. ... One sensed again that understatement which we have been taught to think is more ‘British’ than Oriental. There is an almost childlike candor and simplicity, and the total effect is tremendous.” (The Ring of Truth, p.77, emphasis added).

Blaklock concludes: “There is only one ready explanation. Four men, under the dire compulsion of a truth which made them free, *wrote of what they saw*, or of what immediate and reliable eyewitnesses reported to them. It is as Rousseau said, men who could invent such a story would be greater and more astonishing than its central figure.” (ibid, p.77, emphasis added).

Why do you think the Apostles told the crowd about Jesus, “as ye yourselves also Know:” (Acts 2:22) that “...this thing was *not* done in a corner.” (Acts 26:26)? These things were actual history not myth and people knew it, they saw it for *themselves*. Or they can ask eyewitnesses and confirm it with other people as God says, “that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” (Matthew 18:16; Deut 19:15).

Why do you think God allowed his Apostles to be persecuted for their faith and were put to death? To show the world that the Apostles knew and believed in the absolute fact of the death burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ-that it actually happened, and were willing to put their lives down on the line for it! Would you die for a myth?