Gabriel's Vision: An Angelic Threat to the Resurrection?

An article in *TIME* magazine titled "Was Jesus' Resurrection a Sequel?" opened with the statement, "A 3-ft.-high tablet romantically dubbed 'Gabriel's Vision' could challenge the uniqueness of the idea of the Christian Resurrection."{1} What exactly is this tablet and does it have any significant impact on the teaching of the resurrection of Christ?

About a decade ago a stone tablet about three feet in height owned by a Swiss-Israeli antiques collector received the attention of historians. This tablet contained eighty-seven lines in Hebrew text written, not engraved, on the stone. Experts date the tablet to the late first century B.C. or a little later. The origin of the tablet is unknown. Some surmise that it came from the Transjordan region and other scholars think this may have been a part of the Dead Sea Scrolls collection.

The tablet contains an apocalyptic prediction of the end of the world spoken by a person named Gabriel. Other scholars believe the name refers to the angel Gabriel. There are several parts of the message that are missing or difficult to decipher.

The connection to the resurrection of Christ is found in line 80. Jewish scholar Israel Kohl, an expert in Talmudic and biblical languages at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, believes that the line begins with the words "In three days" and includes some form of the verb "to live."{2} He believes that this text refers to a first century Jewish rebel named Simon who was killed by the Romans in 4 B.C. Kohl believes the translation reads, "In three days, you shall live. I Gabriel command you."{3}

Time magazine writer David Van Biema writes that if Kohl's translation is correct, it would somehow undermine the historicity of resurrection. He states,

> *This, in turn, undermines one of the strongest literary arguments employed by Christians over centuries to support the historicity of the Resurrection (in which they believe on faith): the specificity and novelty of the idea that the Messiah would die on a Friday and rise on a Sunday. Who could make such stuff up? But, as Knohl told TIME, maybe the Christians had a model to work from. The idea of a "dying and rising messiah appears in some Jewish texts, but until now, everyone thought that was the impact of Christianity on Judaism," he says. "But for the first time, we have proof that it was the other way around. The concept was there before Jesus." If so, he goes on, "this should shake our basic view of Christianity. … What happens in the New Testament [could have been] adopted by Jesus and his followers based on an earlier messiah story."{4}*

Biema states that one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection was that it was a unique concept introduced by Christianity. The belief in the resurrection is based on "faith." The defense Christians gave for the resurrection is that it was not believed by the Jews and therefore could not have been made up by the Christians. This discovery would then undermine one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection of Christ.

What implications does this discovery have, and is it a devastating blow to the resurrection as Biema asserts? First, Kohl contends that the words of line 80 should be translated as, "In three days you shall live." But the exact words of that line are not known. Hebrew scholars remain uncertain regarding line 80 because in crucial places there are a lot of missing words. The Israeli scholar who first worked on the tablet is Ada Yardeni. Yardeni's translation of the text shows

indeed there are key words missing. The English translation reads, "…from before You, the three si[gn]s(?), three …[….](line 79). In three days …, I, Gabri'el …[?], (line 80).{5} Yardeni considers the words in line 80 to be indecipherable.{6}

Church history scholar Ben Witherington states that the verb Kohl translates as rise could also mean "there arose." So, instead of a resurrected messiah, the text refers to the appearing of a Messiah.{7} Since the words of line 80 are not clear, we cannot state conclusively the text is speaking of a messiah who dies and resurrects in three days.

Second, I do not find this discovery a threat to the resurrection. Even if Kohl's translation is correct, it does not affect the evidence for and the teaching on the resurrection. If Kohl's translation is correct, it would highlight the debate in Jewish belief regarding the Messiah. The popular notion was teaching of a Davidic Messiah who would overthrow the nation's enemies and establish the Davidic Kingdom. However, some Jewish schools although a minority, held to a belief in a suffering Messiah. If Kohl's translation is correct, this tablet would show this suffering Messiah would rise from the dead in three days.

This would not pose a major threat to Christianity. Many Christians have taught that the idea of a resurrected Messiah was never taught in Judaism. However, Christians have long taught that the Old Testament prophecies such as Isaiah 53 teach of a dying and resurrected Messiah. In fact, a few people are recorded being raised from the dead in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17, 2 Kings 13). Therefore, it should not be so surprising if there was a pre-Christian Jewish belief in a resurrected Messiah held by a minority of Jews.

Finally, Biema states that the "novelty" of the resurrection is one of the strongest literary arguments for the historicity of the resurrection. He also states that Christians' belief in

the resurrection is based on “faith.” I would disagree with Biema’s assertions. First, the historicity of the resurrection is not based on “faith” or belief without credible reasons. The belief in the resurrection is based on compelling historical evidence. Second, I do not believe the novelty of the resurrection is one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection. I rarely if ever have used it in an apologetic presentation. I believe the strongest arguments come from the historical evidence.

What are those evidences? First, the Gospels represent an accurate historical account of the life of Christ written in the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. The internal evidence, archaeology, manuscript evidence, quotes from the early Church Fathers, and ancient non-Christian historical works affirm the first century date and historical accuracy of the gospels (See my article on The Historical Reliability of the Gospels.)

In studying the resurrection, there are several facts agreed upon by historians of various persuasions. First, the tomb of Christ was known and was found empty. Second, there is the transformation of the Apostles from cowards to men who boldly proclaimed the resurrection of Christ in the face of their enemies. Third, the preaching of the Resurrection originates in Jerusalem, the most hostile place to preach such a message. Fourth, we have a massive Jewish societal transformation. Thousands of Jews abandon key tenets of Jewish faith and accept the teachings of Christ. Fifth, the origin of the church was built on the proclamation of the resurrection. Any explanation of the empty tomb must account for these facts, and the resurrection remains the most reasonable explanation. All other attempts have failed as alternative explanations (See my article Resurrection: Fact or Fiction.)

These remain the strongest arguments for the resurrection, not the novelty of a resurrected Messiah. Even if Kohl’s translation is proven to be correct, it does not affect any of these facts. There is still compelling evidence for the

resurrection of Christ. Kohl's translation would highlight the controversy among pre-Christian Jews regarding the two concepts of the coming Messiah. His translation would simply add the idea that the minority view regarding the suffering Messiah included a belief by some Jews in a Messiah who would die and resurrect three days later.

Notes

1. David Van Biema, "Was Jesus' Resurrection a Sequel?" *TIME,* 7 July 2008, www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1820685,00.html?xid=newsletter-weekly.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 1.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Ada Yardeni's translation, www.bib-arch.org/news/dssinstone_english.pdf 6. Gary Habermas, "'Gabriel's Vision' and the Resurrection of Jesus," July 2008, www.garyhabermas.com/articles/gabrielsvision1/gabrielsvision.htm.
7. Biema, 2.

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Exploring God's Relationship to Time

Written by David Pattillo and Michael Gleghorn

Introduction

Why does time flow the way it does? Can we alter time, or is

it beyond our grasp? Is time travel possible? Is God inside or outside of time? Does everyone experience time the same way we do? When faced with the question, What is time? we encounter one of the most fundamental human inquiries, as well as one of the most difficult philosophical questions. Every person seems to experience the flow of time every single day, yet when asked to define it, we are often at a loss for words. Thus, for the purpose of this article, we shall define time as a relation of events involving earlier than and later than.

Two views of time

When it comes to the philosophy of the nature of time, there are essentially two views: the *dynamic, tensed,* or *A Theory;* and the *static, tenseless,* or *B Theory*. It is traditionally said that on the *A Theory*, the present is ontologically privileged. That is to say, the present is the only thing that is really real; the past has happened and the future will happen. It is much easier to see what distinguishes the *A Theory* when it is compared with the *B Theory*, which holds that all moments are equally real. That is (according to the *B Theory*), from our perspective it is 2007, 1950 is in the past and 2050 is in the future. But for the people in 1950 (who also exist at *that* time), both 2007 and 2050 are in the future. Likewise, for the people in 2050 both 1950 and 2007 are in the past. The *B Theory* holds that it is ignorant to think of our moment of the world as the real moment, or the moment occupying some privileged position. According to the *B Theory*, any tensed idea, or sentence whose verb has tense (i.e., past/present/or future), would actually be more accurate if it were translated into a tenseless idea or sentence (i.e., one that has a tenseless verb and time stamp to say when something happened, rather than a tensed verb) since tensed ideas imply that the present moment of time is superior to, or more real than, all other moments. For instance, according to the *B Theory*, the tensed sentence, JFK was assassinated, would misconstrue reality as if the year

2007 (or any year after 1963) is more real or significant than the years 1907 or 1963, because it has a verb in the past tense. This theory holds that the sentence would be better put On November 22, 1963, at 12:30 P.M. CST JFK *is* assassinated.{2} This tenseless sentence is preferred on the *B Theory* because there is no moment that can claim to be the true present moment; rather, there are just equally real moments. Advocates of the *B Theory* say that reality is one long 4-dimensional block, and we are just experiencing one moment of that block, but all the moments are equally real or existent. The *A Theory*, on the other hand, would say that *tensed verbs* (verbs in the past/present/future tense) do reflect reality; there really is a past, present, and future, and they are always changing as time flows and the future becomes present and then past.

Which one of these views is correct has vast implications for the way we interpret reality. For example, it will have an effect on the way we understand God and His relation to the world. One might think that this would be the proper time to turn to Scripture to see whether it supports an *A* or *B Theory*. However, its important to recognize the fact that Scripture is not entirely clear with respect to this issue. Therefore, we will postpone looking at the Bible until our discussion of Gods relation to time. For the present, we need to discuss which of the two theories is superior and why.

A vs. B

The most powerful argument for the *A Theory* is its intuitiveness. That is, we experience the flow of time in just as real a way as any other experience in our lives. We very directly experience the present. To say that event e is occurring now is no different than saying that event e is occurring.{3} When we look forward to the future or regret the past, we are experiencing the *A Theory* because, if you think about it, on the *B Theory* there is no difference between past,

present, and future.{4} Lastly, when a kid says: I wish it were Christmas morning, or I wish I were already done with this test, he is expressing the *A Theory*. That is, he wishes that the present moment, say t_1, were replaced by some other moment, say t_2. This expresses the idea of *temporal becoming* (the idea that the present moment changes as we pass through time), which is an experience of the *A Theory*. As William Lane Craig puts it, We thereby presuppose the reality of temporal becoming, since our wish expresses our belief in a changing and objective present.{5} Thus the *A Theory* very comfortably coheres with what we experience in everyday life.

Now, the B theorist may ask, Why accept this experience as anything more than an illusion? To answer this we must briefly digress with a discussion of Alvin Plantingas *epistemology*, or theory of knowledge. When evaluating beliefs, many skeptics want to reject anything that is not certain. This was especially prominent in the philosophy of Ren Descartes, who rejected all his sense experience because it could have been wrong. After all, when you think about it, we could be in the *Matrix*.{6} It could be that everything you think is real is just electrical impulses interpreted by your brain. Or it could be that the world was created five minutes ago, and you were created with all the memories you currently have. Or maybe you are the only mind in the universe, and everyone else is just a robot, cleverly designed to give the appearance of having a human mind. And the list of possibilities goes on and on. None of these can be disproven, but should we conclude that we really dont know whether anyone else actually exists? Plantinga doesnt think so. He has developed a theory that labels these and other similar beliefs as *properly basic beliefs*.

Think about it this way. If you are reading this online, the belief that there is a computer in front of you is properly basic; that is, it is a foundational belief formed in correct circumstances. Therefore, you are warranted in believing it

until presented with some *defeater* of your belief. In this case, a *defeater* would have to be some good reason to believe that your senses are deceiving you. In other words, according to Plantinga, common sense beliefs about sensory experience, memory, the existence of other minds or other similar beliefs should be regarded as innocent until proven guilty (i.e., judged reliable until proven otherwise). Likewise, our experience of real temporal passing and an objective past, present, and future warrants belief in the *A Theory* until a strong counterargument is offeredstrong enough to cause us to doubt this experience.

Another major argument for the *A Theory* is what is known as the *ineliminability of tense*.{7} Simply put, this is the idea that tensed statements imply tensed facts which further imply a tensed reality. B theorists have made numerous attempts to show that tensed sentences can be translated into tenseless sentences that do not imply a tensed reality. However, all these attempts have failed. Craig illustrates:

> *This point is underlined by the ineptness of some of the supposed tenseless translations of tensed sentences. Take, for example, the tensed sentence It is now 4:30. We can imagine situations in which a persons life would depend on his holding such a belief. But the tenseless counterpart of this sentence is either It is 4:30 at 4:30, which is a mere tautology, or It is 4:30 simultaneous with this utterance, which is useless unless we also know that This utterance is occurring now, which is a tensed belief. In both cases the tenseless versions are insufficient to motivate timely action because they do not inform us whether or not it actually is 4:30.{8}*

If tensed sentences lose some meaning when translated into tenseless sentences, then there is some important meaning in tense, namely, that reality is reflected by tense. Therefore, if tenseless sentences cannot capture the facts expressed by

tensed sentences, then there must be tensed facts. And thus we have a strong argument for temporal reality.

Next we turn our attention to some problems with the *B Theory* of time. While there are numerous problems, we will discuss just two of them.{9} First, the *B Theory* of time greatly misconstrues some biblical ideas, one example being the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*. For the B theorist, the universe beginning to exist simply means that it has a starting point, just like a yard stick has a first inch.{10} The problem is that on this view There is in the actual world no state of affairs of God existing alone without the space-time universe. God never really brings the universe into being; as a whole it co-exists timelessly with Him.{11} So while the universe depends on God, the idea of *creation ex nihilo* is severely stripped of meaning since the universe always timelessly exists with God. That is, in some sense, God and space-time seem to be equally necessary in their existence.

The other major biblical problem is that evil is never really vanquished.{12} On the static theory of time [*B Theory*], evil is never really vanquished from the world: It exists just as sturdily as ever at its various locations in space-time, even if those locations are all earlier than some point in cosmic time (for example, Judgment Day).{13}

Furthermore, events like the crucifixion are never past or done away with. They simply remain timelessly forever, which seems hard to reconcile with Christs victory over death.

A second argument against the *B Theory* has to do with the impossibility of the existence of *actual infinites*. It has now been almost universally agreed upon by mathematicians and philosophers that an actually infinite number of things cannot be actualized in the space-time universe. The idea of *actual infinites* creates many paradoxes. For instance, what is infinity minus infinity? Well mathematically one gets

contradictory answers. For example, one could say that the answer is infinity. But the answer could also be 4, or 0, or any other number you want. This led the great mathematician David Hilbert to say, The infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature, nor provides a legitimate basis for rational thought…the role that remains for the infinite to play is solely that of an idea.{14}

Thus, what we have in the space-time universe are not *actual infinites*, but *potential infinites*. For example, you can start counting 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and continue this process for a potentially infinite time (i.e., you can keep going as long as you want). But you will never reach a moment when you can stand up and exclaim, Im done! Ive counted to infinity! In the same way a line three inches in length can be divided in half, and then in half again, and then in half again, ad infinitum. But it can never actually be divided an infinite number of times. For this reason, in addition to compelling scientific and theological evidence, essentially all philosophers and scientists have now come to believe that time is finite in the past.

However, the future is different. We know that the future is not finite but infinite. We know this both philosophically and biblically by the promise of *everlasting* or *eternal* life. Therefore, most scholars have concluded that the future, like numbers, is potentially infinite. We can keep adding years forever, but we will never reach an end. But this is inconsistent with the *B Theory*. Since every moment of time in fact exists at once, and the future has no end, there is an actually infinite number of years in the future. But since we know that there are no actualized infinites in the real world, we can safely conclude that the *B Theory* is wrong in its description of the future.

So we have seen two strong arguments for the *A Theory*, from our experience of temporal reality and the ineliminability of tense in language, and two ways that the *B Theory* seems

clearly implausible, from *creation ex nihilo* and the impossibility of *actual infinites*. Other attempts have been made to revive the *B Theory*, but suffice it to say that they have been answered thoroughly.{15}

Gods Relation to Time

We now turn to how an infinite God relates to our passage of time. There are some things of which we are certain. First, time began a finite time ago. We know this from the Bible,{16} philosophy,{17} and science.{18} Second, we know God neither began to exist, nor will He ever cease to exist.{19} We can further conclude that God existed before time.{20} This is best exemplified in Jude 25: …To the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, *before all time* and now and forever. Amen.{21}

Since we know that God existed before time,{22} we can conclude that without the universe, God existed timelessly.{23}

We then must ask ourselves, how does God relate to the universe since it began? Here again we find two common positions. One is that God is timeless. By this it is meant that God, while the creator and sustainer of the world, was not affected by the creation of the world and remains constant outside the universe, just as He was before the act of creation. The other common position is that God is *temporal*. That does not mean that God is limited by time, but rather that He is intimately related to temporal things. He thus has a past, present, and future, just like other temporal things. Since there is no beginning or end to His existence, this position is also sometimes called *omnitemporality*.

There are two main arguments in favor of Gods *omnitemporality*. First, there is the argument from Gods relation to the universe. When God brought the universe into being, He stood in new relationships that He did not have before. Once the universe exists, He now is the sustainer of and is co-existent

with the universe.{24} He could have remained timeless, but since He created the universe He went through an *extrinsic change*.{25} If God undergoes this change, then surely He must be temporal. That is, we can speak of a past, present and future for God. In the past He had one relation and in the present He has another relation. This provides a way to associate God with time, and that is all the omnitemporal view of God requires.

The second major argument for Gods *omnitemporality* comes from His omnisciencespecifically, His knowledge of tensed facts.{26} That is, as the present is constantly changing, true sentences are constantly changing. For instance, there are tenseless truths that are always true such as: The World Trade Centers *are* attacked on September 11, 2001. However, on September 10, 2001, the sentence The World Trade Centers will be attacked tomorrow was true, but this statement is not true on September 11th. What is true on September 11th is the statement, The World Trade Centers are being attacked today. Finally, any time since then, the true statement has been, The World Trade Centers were attacked on September 11th. All of these statements can be true or false depending on when they are made. That is because the verbs relate the sentence to the present. Thus, a God who knows only tenseless truths (as the *tenseless view* of God proposes) would seem to be very ignorant indeed, for there are seemingly limitless things He would not know. However, if God does possess knowledge of the truth of tensed sentences, this would seem to make Him temporal. As Dr. Craig puts it, any being which does know tensed facts cannot be timeless, for his knowledge must be in constant flux, as the tensed facts known by him change.{27} Thus we have a second powerful argument for God being temporal .

On the other hand, the major argument for Gods timelessness is what is known as the *incompleteness of temporal life*.{28} This is the idea that temporal life is so limited that a perfect God would not experience it. Certainly the fleetingness of our

own lives has led to many existential questions of the meaning of life given that it will all end relatively shortly. Surely God would not be limited in this way. Well, this is a plausible argument and does carry some weight, but I am not sure how much. For one thing, because of Gods complete omniscience and ability to experience whatever He wants, the past is never really lost to God, which makes temporality far less of a limitation. Secondly, since He never ends, and we His children never cease to be in company with Him (assuming we have received His free gift of eternal life), there really is no need for Him to try to grasp onto fleeting moments as we so often do. So, while this argument seems plausible, it does not seem to me to be remotely powerful enough to call into question the powerful arguments we have for the *omnitemporality* of God.

Thus, it seems we have good reason to think that God is timeless without creation and temporal since creation.{29} But it is important to remember that He did not have to create. Rather, His free decision to create a temporal world also constitutes a free decision on His part to exist temporally.{30} Many would now ask how it makes sense for God to exist timelessly and then temporally. It seems plausible to say that time is a relation of events. That is, Gods existence without creation was just simple, unchanging Trinitarian perfection, and it does not make sense to talk about before and after when there was no change. However, at the moment of the creation, we now have an event, and we can start relating events by temporal distance from the creation. Thus we conclude that God existed timelessly, and then created time and space, giving us the first mark of time, and time has been flowing ever since.

So then, we have seen that there is a real past, present, and future. God, though timeless, created, thus giving us temporal relations. We can speak of past, present, and future for God since He is intimately related to temporal things and has

temporal knowledge. Since the first event, we now have a flow of time that will never end as we live on into eternity with or without God.

Notes

1. I owe a great credit to both Dr. William Lane Craig for most of the ideas of this paper, and to Michael Gleghorn for help in developing these ideas.
2. I have picked up Dr. William Lane Craig's use of italics to symbolize a tenseless verb.
3. William Lane Craig. *Time and Eternity, Exploring God's Relationship to Time.* (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois) 133.
4. Ibid., 136.
5. Ibid., 140.
6. Reference to the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which a complex computer program used unconscious humans to power, and thus perpetuate itself. Human brains were meanwhile tied to an imaginary world, the matrix.
7. Ibid., 115.
8. Ibid., 118.
9. Ibid., 188-215 for a more comprehensive list of the problems.
10. Ibid., 210.
11. Ibid., 213.
12. Ibid., 214.
13. Ibid.
14. *Philosophy of Mathematics*, ed. with an Intro. by Paul Benacerraf and Hilary Putnam (Prentice-Hall, 1964) p. 151.
15. Ibid., 143-188.
16. Gen 1:1; Ps 90:2; Jn 1:1-3; I Cor 2:7; Jude 25.
17. This is supported by arguments and illustrations about the impossibility of the existence of actual infinites (e.g. Hilbert's hotel, etc.). Also, it has been noted that if time never began, we could never reach our current moment. You cannot count up to infinity by adding one number at a time. If the past was infinite, and we only complete one year at a

time, we would never reach 2007.
18. This is supported by the second law of thermodynamics, as well as by arguments for the Big Bang (e.g., the red shift of light from distant galaxies and the cosmic microwave background radiation). For more information see *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* by William Lane Craig.
19. name=”text19″>That God is the beginningless cause of the universe is the conclusion of the Kalam Cosmological argument. Also see Gen 1:1, Ps 90:2, Is 41:4, Is 57:15, John 1:1-3, II Tim 1:9, Rev 4:8.
20. name=”text20″>I Cor 2:7, Jn 17:24, Jude 25. See also the conclusions from the Kalam Cosmological argument.
21. name=”text21″>The Bible, New American Standard Version (Zondervan, Grand Rapids) 2000, emphasis added.
22. name=”text22″>I say before here to mean God’s existing without time, even though it is actually impossible to speak of before time since before is a temporal relation.
23. Some, like Newton, have proposed that God existed in His own infinite past separate from the creation of physical time. However, I feel that this fails to cohere with the biblical and philosophical evidence.
24. William Lane Craig. *Time and Eternity*, Exploring God’s Relationship to Time. (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois) 87.
25. Ibid., 87. When a being goes through an extrinsic change, the change does not effect the being’s nature. The idea of an extrinsic change is the idea of a change apart from you. For instance, I can be behind you in line and then cut in front of you. You never changed, but you went through extrinsic relational changes in that you were related to me by the in front of relation and now you are related to me by the behind relation.
26. Ibid., 98.
27. Ibid., 99.
28. Ibid., 67.
29. Ibid., 241.
30. Ibid., 87.

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Did Christianity Borrow From Pagan Religions? – Early Christianity and Other Religions

The Da Vinci Code and related contemporary non-fiction books make the claim that Christianity was a hodge podge of beliefs taken from other pagan religious traditions. Dr. Daniel Morais and Dr. Michael Gleghorn take a long hard look at this claim and determine that it has very little basis in fact. They demonstrate that the theory that early Christianity was borrowed from other religions does not stand up to rigorous examination.

The Da Vinci Code Deception

In Dan Brown's bestselling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, Leigh Teabing, the fictional royal historian, makes the following claim: "Nothing in Christianity is original. The pre-Christian god Mithras—called the Son of God and the Light of the World—was born on December 25, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then resurrected in three days."{1} Is there any truth to all this?{2}

The Da Vinci Code claims that Christianity is not rooted in a unique, historical Jesus who claimed to be the Son of God, was born of a virgin, died, and was resurrected in three days. Instead, it says that early Christians borrowed these ideas from pagan mystery cults like Mithraism, and attributed these

characteristics to the historical Jesus who never really said or did any of these things. Did Christianity borrow its history and theology from Mithraism or any other mystery religion?

From about 1890-1940, critical Bible scholars suggested that early Christianity may have borrowed some of its ideas from pagan mystery religions. However, after a barrage of criticism this theory has been largely abandoned in the field of religious studies. Despite its current lack of acceptance by experts, however, this theory continues to be set forth in popular books like *The Da Vinci Code* and other publications.{3}

What is Mithraism, and what are the mystery cults? The mystery religions were called such because of their use of secret ceremonies and beliefs that were thought to bring their participants salvation.{4} Ceremonies were usually held in secluded places, at night, away from the public eye.{5} Different parts of the Mediterranean spawned their own mystery religions. Greece had the cults of Dionysus and Demeter as well as the Orphic mystery cults. Out of Phrygia in Asia Minor came the Cybele and Attis cults. The cult of Isis and Osiris arose in Egypt. Syria and Palestine had the cult of Adonis, while Mithraism originated in Persia, or modern day Iran.{6}

Dr. Ronald Nash wrote, "One frequently encounters scholars who first use Christian terminology to describe pagan beliefs and practices and then marvel at the awesome parallels they think they have discovered."{7} However, the theory that Christianity borrowed its beliefs from paganism has now been discarded in large part because it seems likely that if any borrowing of beliefs occurred it would almost certainly have been the other way around. One could be a participant in the mystery cults of Isis or Mithras without giving up his or her previous beliefs, but not so with Christianity. With its roots in Judaism, Christianity, even in its earliest form, was an extremely exclusivist religion with deep disregard for all

that was pagan.{8}

The Myth of Mithras

Mithraism was probably the most significant of the mystery religions. Mithras was the twin brother of the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda. Mithras was born when he emerged from a rock. He battled with the sun and then with the primeval bull. When Mithras slew the bull, this became the first act of creation as it created the ground of life for humanity. Like Zoroastrianism, Mithraism believed that the world was a battleground between good and evil and mankind must pick sides. Mithras was the mediator who would assist humans in their struggles with darkness. If man passed his tests, he would eventually be reunited with the good god, but if he failed he would be thrown into a realm of eternal punishment. The Romans associated good and evil with light and darkness, and because of this fact, Mithras became known as the Sun God—not the Son of God.{9}

The Mithraic religion was constantly changing and adapting itself to the culture. This being the case, the most likely explanation for the myths about Mithras' miraculous birth and his becoming a "savior god" were in all likelihood borrowed from Christianity.{10} Though the cult started long before Christianity in Iran, there's no evidence of its presence in the Roman Empire during the first century when the original New Testament documents were being written. So this pagan cult could not have influenced the original New Testament manuscripts. But could later copies of the New Testament have been tainted with Mithraism?

Our oldest intact fragments of the New Testament are virtually identical with the Bible we have today and it seems clear that though we don't possess any of the original writings, what we do have are quite accurate representations of the originals. Sir Frederick Kenyon wrote, "The interval, then, between the

dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written now has been removed."{11}

In conclusion, Mithras was the Sun God, not the Son of God, and given the exclusivist nature of Christianity and the fact that Mithraism and Christianity did not overlap during the first century, any similarities between the two religions were most likely due to a later Christian influence on Mithraism and not the other way around.

The Da Vinci Code Dissected

In the novel *The Da Vinci Code*, the Holy Grail expert, Leigh Teabing, claims that the pre-Christian god Mithras was also called the Son of God and the Light of the World. He then goes on to say that Mithras also died, was buried in a rock tomb, and rose again in three days. Brown also claims a parallel with Krishna mythology, according to which the newborn Krishna was, like Jesus, also given gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.{12} Is there any truth to these pagan/Christian parallels?

As noted earlier, the Romans came to understand the pagan god Mithras as the Sun God (not the Son of God).{13} If Mithras was understood to be the Sun God, it wouldn't be a wild idea to call him "The Light of the World." However, that specific title does not appear to have been given him in the ancient Roman world.{14} Also, experts in the Mithraic religion like Franz Cumont and Richard Gordon both assert that there was no death, burial, or resurrection of Mithras.{15} Dan Brown's source for this misinformation about Mithras being called the "Light of the World" and the "Son of God," as well as his alleged death and resurrection, has eluded many of his critics. It's not certain where he got this information,

though it's possible that his source may have been a discredited nineteenth-century historian who also provided no documentation or support for these claims.{16}

It seems that Dan Brown may have also used this same historian for his allegation that at Krishna's birth, he was presented with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There is no story in Krishna mythology to support this claim.{17} The Bhagavad-Gita does not mention Krishna's childhood, and the other sources that do were written hundreds of years after the Christian Bible.

Even if all these Mithras/Christ similarities were true, since these two religions hadn't yet overlapped in Rome during the time when the New Testament was being written, Mithraism couldn't have influenced Christian theology. One Mithras expert asserts that "no Mithraic monument can be dated earlier than the end of the first century A.D., and even the more extensive investigation at Pompeii, buried beneath the ashes of Vesuvius in A.D. 79, have not so far produced a single image of the god."{18}

Most critical Bible scholars no longer believe that Christianity borrowed its core beliefs from the pagan mystery religions like Mithraism. Due to the lack of good evidence this theory has been largely abandoned.{19}

Sunday or Son Day

Early Christianity and the Bible have been relentlessly attacked on many different levels in the fast-paced thriller *The Da Vinci Code*. In the novel, Langdon claims that "Christianity's weekly holy day was stolen from the pagans. Christianity honored the Jewish Sabbath of Saturday, but Constantine shifted it to coincide with the pagan's veneration day of the sun."{20}

More than two hundred years before Constantine, some of the

earliest Christian writings, which later became part of the New Testament, made it clear that there was a Sabbath on Saturday and a separate "Lord's Day" on Sunday. The reason Christians had a separate "Lord's Day" in addition to the Sabbath was because early Christians wanted to celebrate on Sunday, the day that Jesus had risen from the dead.{21}

There are many references in the New Testament, written hundreds of years before Constantine, that illustrate the difference between Sunday and the Sabbath day. Shortly after Christ's death, in Acts 20:7 Luke writes about "the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, . . ." This quote from Luke makes it clear that Christians during the first century were already worshiping together on the first day of the week which was Sunday. The apostle Paul refers to making a collection for an offering on Sunday in 1 Corinthians 16:2. And the last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation, makes reference to Sunday being called the "Lord's Day" in order to distinguish it from the Sabbath (Rev. 1:10).

There are also early Christian writings outside the New Testament that confirm that Christians celebrated the "Lord's Day" on Sunday. The church father Justin Martyr wrote, "And on the day called Sunday there is a gathering together to one place of all those who live in cities or in the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits."{22} Justin Martyr lived during the second century, and had died long before Constantine was born.

The Sabbath has always been Saturday. That has never changed. But Christians usually attend church services on Sunday because that's the day of Christ's resurrection. In other words, Christians didn't "move" the Sabbath to Sunday. They simply chose to gather for corporate worship on Sunday.

Finally, with regard to the claim that Sunday was tied to the worship of a pagan god, it's important to note that *all* the

days of the week—whether Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, or Sunday—were tied to the worship of one pagan god or another.{23}

Christmithras

Previously we mentioned that the pagan god Mithras was not called the "Son of God" or the "Light of the World". He also never died and rose again in three days. But was he born on December 25? According to the myth of Mithras, his birthday was in fact celebrated on December 25. According to this myth, Mithras sprang up full-grown from a rock, carrying a knife and a torch. Shepherds watched his miraculous birth and greeted him with their first fruits, their flocks and their harvests. The cult of Mithras spread throughout the Roman Empire during the second century. In A.D. 274, the Roman emperor Aurelian declared December 25 the Birthday of Sol Invictus (the Unconquerable Sun).{24}

The Bible never indicates when Jesus was born, and no one today knows with certainty the day of his birth. Since the most likely time for taxation was in the fall or spring, some biblical scholars have suggested that he may have been born then rather than in the winter.{25} Prior to the fourth century, the Eastern Church celebrated Epiphany (which included the birth of Christ) in January. In the fourth century, the Church in Rome also began celebrating Christ's birth, and the practice quickly spread throughout Christendom. Eventually, December 25 "became the officially recognized date for Christmas."{26}

But why did the church choose to celebrate Christ's birth on the same day as the pagan Feast of the Unconquerable Sun? One scholar explains it this way: