The Pagan Connection: Did Christianity Borrow from the Mystery Religions?

Dr. Pat Zukeran examines the myths from mystery religions which are sometimes argued to be the source of our Gospel accounts of Jesus. He finds that any such connection is extremely weak and does not detract from the reliability of the gospel message.

One of the popular ideas being promoted today especially on the internet is the idea that the miracle stories of Jesus were borrowed from ancient pagan myths. Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy write in their book *The Laughing Jesus*, "Each mystery religion taught its own version of the myth of the dying and resurrecting Godman, who was known by different names in different places. In Egypt, where the mysteries began, he was Osiris. In Greece he became Dionysus, in Asia Minor he is known as Attis, in Syria he is Adonis, in Persia he is Mithras, in Alexandria he is Serapis, to name a few."{1}



Proponents of this idea point out that there are several parallels between these pagan myths and the story of Jesus Christ. Parallels including a virgin birth, a divine Son of God, the god dying for mankind, resurrection from the dead, and others are cited. Skeptics allege that Christianity did not present any unique teaching, but borrowed the majority of its tenets from the mystery religions.

Indeed, some of the alleged parallels appear to be quite striking. One example is the god Mithras. This myth teaches that Mithras was born of a virgin in a cave, that he was a traveling teacher with twelve disciples, promised his disciples eternal life, and sacrificed himself for the world.

The god Dionysius miraculously turns water into wine. The Egyptian god Osiris is killed and then resurrects from the dead.

This position was taught in the nineteenth century by the History of Religions School, but by the mid-twentieth century this view was shown to be false and it was abandoned even by those who believed Christianity was purely a natural religion.{2} Ron Nash wrote, "During a period of time running roughly from about 1890 to 1940, scholars often alleged that primitive Christianity had been heavily influenced by Platonism, Stoicism, the pagan religions, or other movements in the Hellenistic world. Largely as a result of a series of scholarly books and articles written in rebuttal, allegations of early Christianity's dependence on its Hellenistic environment began to appear much less frequently in the publications of Bible scholars and classical scholars. Today most Bible scholars regard the question as a dead issue."{3}

Despite the fact that many of the arguments were rejected, this theory has once again emerged through the popular writings of skeptics.

What makes Christianity unique among the world religions is that it is a historical faith based on the historical person of Christ who lived a miraculous life. In what follows, we will examine Christianity to see if it teaches a unique Savior or if it is simply a copy of these pagan myths.

Fallacies of the Theory

There are several flaws with the theory that Christianity isn't unique. New Testament scholars Ed Komoszewski, James Sawyer, and Dan Wallace point out several fallacies. The first is the *composite* fallacy. Proponents of this view lump together pagan religions as if they are one religion when making comparisons to Christianity. An attempt is made to show

strong parallels by combining features from various religions.{4} However, when the individual myths themselves are studied, the reader soon finds major differences and very little commonality.

A second fallacy is a fallacy of *terminology*. Christian terms are used to describe pagan beliefs, and then it is concluded that there are parallel origins and meanings. Although the terms used are the same, however, there are big differences between Christian and pagan practices and definitions.{5}

A third fallacy is the *chronological* fallacy. Supporters of the theory incorrectly assume that Christianity borrowed many of its ideas from the mystery religions, but the evidence reveals it was actually the other way around. There is no archaeological evidence that mystery religions were in Palestine in the first century A.D. Jews and early Christians loathed syncretism with other religions. They were uncompromisingly monotheistic while Greeks were polytheistic. Christians also strongly defended the uniqueness of Christ (Acts 4:12). Although Christians encountered pagan religions, they opposed any adopting of foreign beliefs.{6} Ron Nash stated, "The uncompromising monotheism and the exclusiveness that the early church preached and practiced make the possibility of any pagan inroads . . . unlikely if not impossible."{7}

Fourth is the *intentional* fallacy. Christianity has a linear view of history. History is moving in a purposeful direction. There is a purpose for mankind's existence; history is moving in a direction to fulfill God's plan for the ages. The mystery religions have a cyclical view of history. History continues in a never ending cycle or repetition often linked with the vegetation cycle.{8}

Christianity gains its source from Judaism, not Greek mythology. Jesus, Paul, and the apostles appeal to the Old Testament, and you find direct teachings and fulfillments in

the New Testament. Teachings such as one God, blood atonement for sin, salvation by grace, sinfulness of mankind, bodily resurrection, are sourced in Judaism and foreign to Greek mythology. The idea of resurrection was not taught in any Greek mythological work prior to the late second century A.D.{9}

Legends of the Mystery Religions

As noted above, critics of Christianity point to several parallels between Christianity and the myths of the mystery religions. However, a brief study of the legends reveals that there are few if any parallels to the life of Jesus Christ. Historians acknowledge that there are several variations to many of these myths and that they also evolved and changed under the influence of Roman culture and, later, Christianity. Historical research indicates that it was not until the third century A.D. that Christianity and the mystery religions came into real contact with one another.{10} A brief overview of some of the most popular myths reveals the lack of resemblance with Christianity.

In the matter of death and resurrection, major differences are seen between Christianity and pagan myths. First, none of the resurrections in these myths involve the God of the universe dying a voluntary death for His creation. Only Jesus died for sins; the death of other gods was due to hunting accidents, emasculation, and other calamities. The gods in these stories die by compulsion, not by choice, sometimes in bitterness and despair, never in self-giving love.{11}

Second, Jesus died once for all (Heb. 7:27, 9:25-28), while pagan gods repeat the death and rebirth cycle yearly with the seasons.

Third, Jesus' death was not a defeat but a triumph. The New Testament's mood of victory and joy (1 Cor. 15:50-57 and Col.

2:13-15) stands in contrast to the mood of pagan myths which is dark and sorrowful over the fate of their gods.

Finally, Jesus' death was an actual event in history. Christianity insists on and defends the historical credibility of the Gospel accounts while the pagan cults make no such attempt.{12}

A popular myth that some believe parallels the resurrection of Christ is the story of Osiris. The cult of the gods Osiris and his wife Isis originated in Egypt. According to the legend, Osiris' wicked brother Set murdered him and sank his coffin to the bottom of the Nile. Isis recovered the coffin and returned it to Egypt. However, Set discovered the body, cut it into fourteen pieces, and threw the pieces into the Nile. Isis collected thirteen of the body parts and bandaged the body, making the first mummy. Osiris was transformed and became the ruler of the underworld, and exists in a state of semi-consciousness.

This legend hardly parallels the resurrection of Christ. Osiris is not resurrected from death to life. Instead he is changed into another form and lives in the underworld in a zombie state. Christ rose physically from the grave, conquering sin and death. The body that was on the cross was raised in glory.

Resurrection Parallels

Two other popular myths compared to Christianity are those of Mithras and Attis.

There is a belief that the story of Mithras contains a death and resurrection. However, there is no teaching in early Mithraism of neither his death nor his resurrection. Ron Nash stated, "Mithraism had no concept of the death and resurrection of its god and no place for any concept of rebirth – at least during its early stages. . . . Moreover,

Mithraism was basically a military cult. Therefore, one must be skeptical about suggestions that it appealed to nonmilitary people like the early Christians."{13}

Moreover, Mithraism flowered after Christianity, not before, so Christianity could not have copied from it. The timing is incorrect to have influenced the development of first-century Christianity. It is most likely the reverse: Christianity influenced Mithraism. Edwin Yamauchi, one of the foremost scholars on ancient Persia and Mithraism states, "The earnest mithraea are dated to the early second century. There are a handful of inscriptions that date to the early second century, but the vast majority of texts are dated after A.D. 140. Most of what we have as evidence of Mithraism comes in the second, third, and fourth centuries AD. That's basically what's wrong with the theories about Mithraism influencing the beginnings of Christianity."{14}

The legend of Attis was popular in the Hellenistic world. According to this legend, Cybele, also known as the mother goddess, fell in love with a young Phrygian shepherd named Attis. However, he was unfaithful to her so she caused him to go mad. In his insanity, he castrated himself and died. Cybele mourned greatly (which caused death to enter into the world). She preserved Attis' dead body, allowing his hair to grow and little finger to move. In some versions, Attis returns to life in the form of an evergreen tree. However, there is no bodily resurrection to life. All versions teach that Attis remained dead. Any account of a resurrection of Attis does not appear till a hundred and fifty years after Christ.{15}

To sum up, the claim that Christianity adopted its resurrection account from the pagan mystery religions is false. There are very few parallels to the resurrection of Christ. The idea of a physical resurrection to glory is foreign to these religions, and the stories of dying a rising gods do not appear till well after Christianity.

Myths of a Virgin Birth

Let us now look-at the alleged parallels between virgin births in the mystery religions and the virgin birth of Christ. Parallels quickly break down when the facts are analyzed. In the pagan myths, the gods lust after women, take on human form, and enter into physical relationships. Also, the offspring that are produced are half human and half divine beings in contrast to Christ who is fully human and fully divine, the creator of the universe who existed from eternity past.

The alleged parallels to the virgin birth are found in the legends of Dionysus and Mithras. Dionysus is the god of wine. In this story, Zeus disguised as a man had relations with Semele and she became pregnant. In a jealous rage, Hera, Zeus' wife, attempted to burn Semele. Zeus rescued the fetus and sewed it into his thigh until the offspring, Dionysus, was born. The birth of Dionysus was the result of a sexual union of Zeus, in the form of a man, and Semele. This cannot be considered a virgin birth.

One of the popular cults of the later Roman Empire was the cult of Mithra which originated in Persia. Mithra was supposedly born when he emerged from a rock; he was carrying a knife and torch and wearing a Phrygian cap. He battled first with the sun and then with a primeval bull, thought to be the first act of creation. Mithra slew the bull, which then became the ground of life for the human race.{16} The birth of Mithra from a rock, born fully grown, hardly parallels the virgin birth of Christ.

New Testament scholar. Raymond Brown states that alleged virgin parallels "consistently involve a type of *hieros gamos* where a divine male, in human or other form, impregnates a woman, either through normal sexual intercourse or through some substitute form of penetration. They are not really similar to non-sexual virginal conception that is at the core

of the infancy narratives, a conception where there is no male deity or element to impregnate Mary."{17}

The Gospel of Luke teaches that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, and through the power of the Most High she became pregnant. Mary had no physical relationship with a man or a deity who became a man.

Our study of the mystery religions reveals very few parallels with Christianity. For this reason, the theory that Christianity copied its major tenets from the mystery religions should be rejected.

Notes

1. Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Laughing Jesus* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005), 55-56.
2. Ed Komoszewski, James Sawyer, and Daniel Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications: 2006), 221.
3. Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2007), 167.
4. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus,* 223-4.
5. Ibid., 224-6.
6. Ibid., 231-234.

7. Ronald Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks* (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 168.
8. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, 221.
9. Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin, MO.: College Press Publishing, 1997), 34.
10. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 129.
11. Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL :InterVarsity Press, 1984),53.
12. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 171-172.
13. Ibid., 144.
14. Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus,* 169.
15. Ibid., 177.

16. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 144.
17. Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 182.

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Paul and the Mystery Religions – Christianity Defended

Was early Christian teaching influenced by the mystery religions of the day? Don Closson presents a solid look at this question; concluding that Christian doctrine as taught by Paul and others was grounded in truth and was not influenced by these other religious concepts.

Introduction



A common criticism of Christianity found on college campuses today is that its core ideas or teachings were dependent upon Greek philosophy and religious ideas. It is not unusual for a student to hear from a professor that Christianity is nothing more than a strange combination of the Hebrew cult of Yahweh, notions adopted from the popular Greek mystery religions of the day, and a sprinkling of ideas from Greek philosophic thought. This criticism of traditional Christianity is not new. In fact, its heyday was in the late 1800s to the 1940s and coincides with what is now called the History of Religions movement. This group of theologians and historians accused Paul of adding Greek ideas to his Hebrew upbringing, and in the process, creating a new religion: one that neither Jesus nor His first disciples would recognize.

Was the origin of Christianity dependent on existing Greek philosophical and religious ideas? That question hinges upon how one is using the word “dependent.” Philosopher Ron Nash argues that dependency can be weak or strong and that the difference is a vital one. A strong dependency would mean that the idea of Jesus as a dying and rising savior-god would never have occurred to early believers if they had not become aware of them first in pagan thought. It would be admitting that Paul and the other new Christians came to believe that Christ was a resurrected God-man who made an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world because of pagan ideas. Proving a strong dependency of Christianity on Greek thought would be very damaging to those who hold a high view of Scripture.

A weak dependency means that the followers of Jesus used common religious terminology of the day in order to be understood by the Hebrew and Greek culture surrounding them. This poses no problem for a high view of Scripture. As Nash states, ” . . . the mere presence of parallels in thought and language does not prove any dependence in the strong sense.”{1} Nash and others argue that only a weak dependency can be shown to have existed between Greek religious thought and the Gospel of Christ.

In this article we will consider arguments against the strong dependency claims of the History of Religions movement and modern critics. Specifically, we will compare the theology of the apostle Paul with ideas found in the popular Greek mystery religions present during the early church period.

Although these ideas rarely surface in everyday discussions, Christians entering the academic world of our college campuses would benefit from time spent understanding this issue. In the hands of a professor hostile to Christianity, partial truths and exaggerated similarities between Christianity and the mystery religions can overwhelm an unaware teen. Being conscious of these arguments against Christian thought prepares us to give an answer to everyone who questions the

hope that we have in Christ.

Arguments Against a Strong Dependency on Mystery Religions Viewpoint

Previously we noted that the History of Religions movement claimed that Christian thought had a direct and strong dependency on the mystery religions. Although some scholars agreed with this view, many did not. A good example is the famous German historian Adolf von Harnack, who wrote:

> *We must reject the comparative mythology which finds a causal connection between everything and everything else. . . . By such methods one can turn Christ into a sun god in the twinkling of an eye, or one can bring up the legends attending the birth of every conceivable god, or one can catch all sorts of mythological doves to keep company with the baptismal dove . . . the wand of 'comparative religion' triumphantly eliminate(s) every spontaneous trait in any religion.{2}*

What were the basic traits of the mystery religions? The annual vegetation cycle was often at the center of these cults. Deep significance was given to the concepts of growth, death, decay and rebirth. The cult of Eleusis and its central deity, Demeter, goddess of the soil and farming, is one example. The mystery religions also had secret ceremonies and rites of initiation that separated its members from the outside world. Every mystery religion claimed to impart secret knowledge of the deity. This knowledge would be communicated in clandestine ceremonies often connected to an initiation rite. The focus of this knowledge was not on a set of revealed truths to be shared with the world, but on hidden higher knowledge to be kept within the circle of believers.

At the core of each religion was a myth in which the deity

returned to life after death, or else triumphed over his enemies. As one scholar explains, the myth "appealed primarily to the emotions and aimed at producing psychic and mystic effects by which the neophyte might experience the exaltation of a new life."{3} On the other hand, the mysteries were not concerned as much with correct doctrine or belief, but with the emotional state of the followers. The goal of the believers was a mystical experience that led them to believe that they had achieved union with their god.

The various religious movements found throughout the Roman Empire were not united in doctrine or practice, and they changed dramatically over time. Any impact that they may have had on Christianity must be evaluated by the time frame in which the religions encountered one another. When comparing religious systems, Philosopher Ronald Nash warns that caution is advised against using careless language. He states, "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."{4}

What if someone told you that the root of Paul's New Testament theology was in obscure Greek mystery religions, rather than his Jewish training and his encounter with Jesus Christ? That's exactly what the History of Religions movement argued at the end of the 19th century. Many scholars still teach that Paul's portrayal of Jesus as a dying and rising savior would never have occurred without the presence of the mystery religions. Next, we will continue to consider arguments against what might be called "the strong dependency view."

Weaknesses in the Strong Dependency View

The first argument against this view is the logical fallacy of *false cause*. This fallacy occurs when someone argues that just because two things exist side by side, that one must be the

cause of the other. As one theologian has written, the History of Religions School had the tendency "to convert parallels into influences and influences into sources."{5} Causal connection is much harder to prove than proximity. The mere fact that other religions may have had a god who died and then came back to life in some manner does not mean that this was the source of Christian ideas, even if it can be shown that the apostles knew of this other set of beliefs.

Some scholars, hostile to Christianity, tend to exaggerate, or invent, similarities between Christianity and the mystery religions. British scholar Edwyn Bevan writes:

> *Of course if one writes an imaginary description of the Orphic mysteries . . . filling in the large gaps in the picture left by our data from the Christian Eucharist, one produces something very impressive. On this plan, you first put in the Christian elements, and then are staggered to find them there.{6}*

An example might be the practice of the taurobolium in the cult of Cybele or Great Mother. This initiation rite, in which the blood of a sacrificed bull is allowed to pour over a neophyte, is claimed by some to be the source of baptism in Christianity. Arguments have been made that the language "blood of the lamb" (Rev. 7:14), and "blood of Jesus" (1 Peter 1:2) was borrowed from the language of the taurobolium and criobolium in which a ram was slaughtered. In fact, a better argument can be made that the cult borrowed its language from the Christian tradition.

The cult of Cybele did not use the taurobolium until the second century A.D.; the best available evidence for dating the practice places its origin about one hundred years after Paul wrote his epistles.{7} German scholar Gunter Wagner points out that there was no notion of death and resurrection in the cultic practice.

After noting the change in meaning that the taurobolium experienced over time, scholar Robert Duthoy writes:

> *It is obvious that this alteration in the taurobolium must have been due to Christianity, when we consider that by A.D. 300 it had become the great competitor of the heathen religions and was known to everyone.{8}*

More Weaknesses in the Strong Dependency View

A simple but powerful argument against the likelihood that Paul would have turned to pagan thought for his theology was his strict Jewish training. In Philippians 3:5 Paul boasts of being a Hebrew of Hebrews. He had studied under Gamaliel, the most celebrated teacher of the most orthodox of the Jewish parties, the Pharisees. And in Colossians he warns against the very syncretism he is being accused of proposing. According to Bruce Metzger:

> *[W]ith regard to Paul himself, scholars are coming once again to acknowledge that the Apostle's prevailing set of mind was rabbinically oriented, and that his newly found Christian faith ran in molds previously formed at the feet of Gamaliel.{9}*

We find no accusations in the New Testament of Paul incorporating pagan thought into his theology, nor does he defend himself against such claims.

The very nature of the mystery cults, with the conflicting pantheon of deities and mythical beings, makes it highly unlikely that the strict monotheism and the body of doctrines found in the New Testament would be their source. Although the mystery religions did move towards advancing a solar god above all the others, this change began after 100 A.D., too late to

impact the theology of the New Testament.

It should also be noted that early Christianity was an exclusivistic religion while the mystery cults were not. One could be initiated into the cult of Isis or Mithras without giving up his or her former beliefs. However, to be baptized into the church one had to forsake all other gods and saviors. This was a new development in the ancient world. Machen writes, "Amid the prevailing syncretism of the Greco-Roman world, the religion of Paul, with the religion of Israel, stands absolutely alone."{10}

Paul's religion was grounded in real events. The mystery religions were not. They were based upon dramas written to capture men's hearts and passions. Reformed scholar Herman Ridderbos writes:

> *Whereas Paul speaks of the death and resurrection of Christ and places it in the middle of history, as an event which took place before many witnesses . . . the myths of the cults in contrast cannot be dated; they appear in all sorts of variations, and do not give any clear conceptions. In short they display the timeless vagueness characteristic of real myths. Thus the myths of the cults . . . are nothing but depictions of annual events of nature in which nothing is to be found of the moral voluntary, redemptive substitutionary meaning, which for Paul is the content of Christ's death and resurrection.{11}*

Next we will conclude with further arguments against Paul's use of the mystery religions.

Conclusion

Muslim author Yousuf Saleem Chishti writes that the doctrines of the deity of Christ and the atonement are pagan teachings that come from the apostle Paul, not from Christ Himself.{12}

He states that, “The Christian doctrine of atonement was greatly coloured by the influence of the mystery religions, especially Mithraism, which had its own son of God and virgin Mother, and crucifixion and resurrection after expiating for the sins of mankind and finally his ascension to the seventh heaven.”{13} Were these doctrines something Paul made up or borrowed? What did Jesus teach regarding the atonement?

First, both Jesus and Paul taught that Christianity was the fulfillment of Judaism. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus said that He came to fulfill the law and the teaching of the Prophets, not to abolish them. In Colossians (2:16-17), Paul writes that the religious codes of the Old Testament were merely a foreshadowing of the things that were to come, and that the new reality is found in Christ. Both Christ and Paul taught the necessity of the blood atonement for sin. Jesus stated that, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). At the Last Supper He added, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Paul affirmed Christ’s teachings when he wrote, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Ephesians 1:7). Tying the doctrine back to the Old Testament, Paul wrote, “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The idea that Jesus was the Son of God, born of a virgin, dying on the cross, and being resurrected are hardly Paul’s ideas alone. They are found in the earliest Christian writings and held consistently wherever the faith spread. The parallels between Christianity and Mithraism claimed by Chishti are hard to evaluate or confirm. He gives us no references as evidence for the similarities.{14} Other scholars who have looked at the issue find that most of the similarities disappear on close inspection. Where they do occur, it can be argued that Mithraism borrowed ideas from Christianity rather than vice

versa. Bruce Metzger writes, “It must not be uncritically assumed that the Mysteries always influenced Christianity, for it is not only possible but probable that in certain cases, the influence moved in the opposite direction.”{15}

Those who find Christianity hard to accept have offered many reasons for not doing so. The claim that the doctrines of Christianity had a strong dependency on the mystery religions stands on shaky ground and should be investigated thoroughly before one rejects the good news of the New Testament writers.

Notes

1. Ronald Nash, *The Gospel And The Greeks*, (Probe Books: Dallas, TX, 1992), 18.

2. Ibid, 118.

3. Ibid, 124.

4. Ibid, 126.

5. Ibid, 193.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid, 154.

8. Ibid, 155.

9. Ibid, 196.

10. Ibid, 197.

11. Ibid. 198.

12. Normal Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, (Baker Books, 1999), 490.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid. 492.

15. Nash, 198.

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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: