Funeral Myths

I went to a friend's funeral yesterday where I heard a number of things to add to my running mental list of "funeral myths." With the ever-increasing degree of Bible Illiteracy, combined with the growing number of believers who are "cultural captives," more conformed to the culture than to Christ (please see my earlier blog "Are You a Pickle?"), it's not surprising that people would have unbiblical beliefs about death, heaven, and God.

Several songs were played at my friend's funeral. One is called "Borrowed Angels," which started like this:

> They shine a little brighter, they feel a little more
> They touch your life in ways no one has ever done before
> They love a little stronger, they live to give their best
> They make our lives so blest, so why do they go so soon?
> The ones with souls so beautiful
> I heard someone say—
>
> There must be Borrowed Angels, here in this life
> They come along, into this world, and make this world bright
> But they can't stay forever
> Cause they're heaven sent
> And sometimes, heaven needs them back again

No, people are not "borrowed angels." God created the angels before He created mankind. We are very different from angels; they were created to serve God and serve us, and we are created to be drawn into and enjoy the love, fellowship, joy and delight of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They made us in Their image (Genesis 1:26), which elevates us above angels. People and angels are two different kinds of creation, and one does not become the other.

Which brings me to another myth I heard yesterday: that

Valerie is now “our guardian angel.” While this may be a comforting thought to those gripped by loss, no she’s not. She’s enjoying unhindered, face-to-face worship of Jesus and fellowship with those who now live in heaven.

Do we have guardian angels? The Bible doesn’t give a definitive answer on that, although the Lord Jesus did say, “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:10). And Psalm 91:11 promises, “For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways” (from my article Angels: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly at Probe.org).

At yesterday’s funeral, people stood up to make comments about our friend. One distraught lady concluded her remarks with an angry, “God, You’d better take good care of her.” My heart went out to her, not just because of her grief but because she doesn’t know that God is good and doesn’t need to be cajoled, much less threatened, into caring for His beloved daughter. Sometimes people get angry with God for taking someone home earlier than they want, and the anger comes from a sense of betrayal—as if God doesn’t have the right to determine the length of a person’s life. Yet Psalm 139:16 says, “All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.” None of us lives a single day more, or less, than God had determined before He even created us. *A loving God is in control*—and that extends to the days of our birth and our death.

The man who conducted the funeral told a story about how they used to keep a little girl in their family in line by threatening that Valerie would get after her with her spanking switch. “Well now Valerie’s not here,” he told us, “so we tell the little girl, “Valerie’s got her spanking switch with her in heaven and when you get up there she’s gonna bust your butt.”

Uh, no.

Romans 8:1 says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Valerie’s not busting any butts in heaven, and part of the good news is that God isn’t either!

When my aunt died, someone tucked a deck of cards under her hands in her casket because Aunt Maggi loved to play cards and they were sure she was having a great time up in heaven playing pinochle with her brothers. When my mother died, several relatives comforted each other by laughing about how Mom had finally joined the great heavenly card party. This is another myth about heaven, that it’s a lot like our human activities on earth, only better. People who believe this myth usually have no concept of the greatness and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, or they wouldn’t be willing to settle for images of unending card games and fishing and bowling tournaments.

What funeral myths have *you* come across?

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/funeral_myths
on April 12, 2011.

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: