“Did the Jesus Stories Arise from Pagan Myths?”

In his book *The Jesus Mysteries* Tim Freke speculates that the New Testament stories originated as pagan myth. Clearly there are very close resemblances to stories of Greek Dionusis and Egyptian Osiris, and others such as nativity stories, 12 disciples, ministry, miracles and message, last supper, crucifixion, resurrection, and return to judge man.

Bishops in the 4th century selected and revised the books of the New Testament to be consistent with their agreed-upon orthodox doctrine. Some openly acknowledged the more than coincidental “Jesus” stories in pagan mythology. They explained this as the work of the devil trying to deceive the faithful by creating these myths years before the supposed birth of Jesus. This is far too much of a stretch for me to accept.

If Biblical stories originated from pre-existent myth, how can we Christians reconcile this with our faith?

Thanks for writing Probe Ministries. You raise some interesting issues that are still debated among scholars today. Although I am far from an expert in this area, the little bit of reading which I have done leads me to a conclusion roughly as follows.

First, it is true that some of the Mystery Religions and pagan stories arose prior to Christianity. What’s not always as clear, however, is the precise doctrinal content of these religions prior to Christianity. In other words, some of the doctrines which are very similar to Christianity did not arise until AFTER the origin and spread of the Christian church. Thus, while a particular Mystery Religion, etc., may have existed prior to Christianity, it may still have borrowed

Christian themes, symbols and doctrines after the origin of the Christian church. In those cases, the doctrinal borrowing was done by the Mystery Religions – not by Christianity.

Second, we have to ask, "Are these pagan stories history, or are they myths?" Although we may not always have all the evidence we would like, most scholars would readily acknowledge that there is no good reason for believing these stories to be anything other than myths. The Gospel stories, on the other hand, are firmly rooted in history. Additionally, when one looks very carefully at the alleged parallels between Christianity and pagan religions, what one typically finds is that the "parallels" are actually quite superficial. For instance, one might find myths related to the cycle of seedtime and harvest, in which a god dies and rises ANNUALLY in conjunction with the pattern of "death" and apparent "rebirth" in nature. This is, in a sense, a mythological expression of what happens in nature each year. But the Gospel writers don't speak of Christ's death in these terms. His death is not an annual event associated with seasonal changes, it was a once-for-all-time event in which God reconciled the world to Himself through the death of His Son as a substitutionary sacrifice for the world's sins! For reasons such as these (i.e., the non-historical qualities of the pagan stories and their superficial similarities to Christianity), I think it's somewhat of an unwarranted leap to conclude that early Christians stole their ideas from these pagan beliefs and practices.

Third, Christianity arose out of Judaism, which was thoroughly monotheistic at the time of Christ. But these theories have early Jewish Christians borrowing from pagan, polytheistic beliefs, rather than from Jewish, monotheistic ones. Frankly, I find this thesis extremely difficult to swallow if, as the critics say, Christianity arose by purely naturalistic processes (as opposed to a unique set of supernatural events).

Finally, suppose that there are some pagan accounts which seem

to resemble Christianity and which are earlier in time. Since most scholars agree that these accounts are mythological, not historical, what might we conclude from this evidence? Personally, I like what C.S. Lewis had to say. He said that these ancient myths, largely the products of poetic imagination, were essentially good dreams sent to the pagans by God foreshadowing the good things to come. What they had seen in these dreams ("through a glass darkly," as it were), God later did clearly and in history when He sent His Son to be our Savior. According to Lewis, the Gospel story about Jesus is "myth become fact." That is, the ancient myth has now become true history in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This idea, in my opinion, has genuine merit.

As for the idea that bishops in the 4th century selected and revised the books of the New Testament to be consistent with their agreed-upon orthodox doctrine, this is simply false. We have manuscript evidence for the New Testament as far back as the early second century. No such revision occurred. There were, of course, selection criteria. But these were hardly arbitrary. The doctrinal content of the books did have to conform to the "rule of faith." But this insured the purity of the church's doctrine – not its corruption. Thus, many false and spurious "gospels" of the second century and later were rejected. But this was because they were not written by apostles (or companions of apostles), they did not conform to the "rule of faith," they had numerous historical and theological inaccuracies, and the church recognized them as inferior products which lacked any sign of God's divine authorship and inspiration, etc.

Thus, biblical stories did not originate from pre-existent myths. They are firmly rooted in history, as even extra-biblical historical sources and archaeology repeatedly confirm.

Hope this sets your mind at ease a bit.

Shalom,

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