

Methodological Problems with the Jesus Myth Hypothesis

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Précis:

While many Christians have seen the options for the identity of Jesus as the ‘trilemma’ of Lord, liar or lunatic, there is an increasing trend to see the story as legend. This is not the Bultmannian view of seeing mythic aspects within the Gospels, but rather seeing the Gospels as completely mythological. The existence of a historical Jesus is denied and pagan parallels are presented as the sources for the Gospels. This Jesus myth hypothesis is flawed at its basic methodological foundation. These errors include misuse of both biblical and pagan texts, forced parallelism, and an artificial combination of myths.

Although largely ignored in academic circles, the Jesus myth hypothesis has grown in visibility on the popular level. There are two basic aspects to the Jesus myth hypothesis: (1) that Jesus never existed, and (2) that the Jesus story as we have it is based on pagan myths. Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, in explaining their own support for the Jesus myth hypothesis, ask this question: “Why should we consider the stories of Osiris, Dionysus, Adonis, Attis, Mithras and other Pagan Mystery saviours as fables, yet come across essentially the same story told in a Jewish context and believe it to be the biography of a carpenter from Bethlehem?”¹

Claims that the story of Jesus was a Jewish transformation of pagan myths are found from a number of sources. Popular religion writer and former professor of Greek, Tom Harpur, made this claim in his best-selling book, *The Pagan Christ*: “The truth is that the Gospels are indeed the old manuscripts of the dramatized rituals of the incarnation and resurrection of the sun god Osiris/Horus, rituals that were first Egyptian, later Gnostic and Hellenic, then Hebrew, and finally adopted ignorantly by the Christian movement and transferred to the arena of history.”² Robert Price, member of the controversial

Jesus Seminar, states:

The Mystery cultists became God-fearers on the margin of the Jesus martyr cult, just as the Jesus martyr cultists had once been positioned at the border of Judaism. Then the Mystery cultists joined, reasoning that they weren't losing an old savior, they were only adding a new one. Jesus Adonis, Jesus Dionysus was the result.³

Dan Brown, in his extraordinarily popular *Da Vinci Code*, does not deny the existence of Jesus but does affirm that the Gospels are based on pagan myths. Brown puts these words into the mouth of his character Leigh Teabing:

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. By the way, December 25 is also the birthday of Osiris, Adonis, and Dionysus. The newborn Krishna was presented with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Even Christianity's weekly holy day was stolen from the pagans.⁴

While such statements are filled with error, they have had a deep impact upon many modern readers.

Although such claims are abundant among modern authors, the Jesus myth hypothesis is not a new innovation. Bruno Bauer (1809-1882) was the first major scholar to actually deny the existence of Jesus.⁵ He was followed by Albert Kalthoff (1850-1906) who also embraced this extreme skepticism toward the historical Jesus.⁶ Friedrich Wilhelm Ghillany (1807-1876) did not deny the existence of Jesus but did see pagan origins to Christianity.⁷ Rudolf Seydel (1835-1892) saw Buddhist roots to the Gospel story.⁸ On a popular level, people such as Gerald Massey (1828-1907)⁹ and Alvin Boyd Kuhn (1880-1963)¹⁰ also argued for the non-existence of the historical Jesus and the pagan origins of Christianity.

It is easy enough to disprove the details of such claims about

the historicity of Jesus or the supposed pagan origins, but the role for Christian apologists goes deeper.¹¹ Beyond demonstrating the alleged parallels with pagan myths to be false, it is also important to reveal the basic errors of the Jesus myth theory on a methodological level. This paper will highlight some of the major methodological errors of the Jesus myth theory.

Inappropriate Disqualification of Sources

Proponents of the Jesus myth theory are able to boldly claim that there is no evidence for the historical Jesus. That claim may leave some traditional Christians confused as there seems to be ample evidence for the historical Jesus. What Jesus myth theorists really mean is that after they have disqualified most of the sources, there is no longer any evidence for the historical Jesus. For them: the Roman sources are mere hearsay and refer more to Christians than to Christ; Josephus has been tampered with by Christians and is no longer reliable; the Gospels are documents of faith and have nothing to do with history; Paul writes only about the heavenly and glorified Christ and never about the historical Jesus. If one accepts these claims, the first century evidence for the historical Jesus is sparse indeed.

The problem with this is that it is unfair to rule out all opposing sources before even beginning the conversation. Each source must be evaluated on its own merits. The Roman sources will not be dealt with here as they are the weakest evidence.¹² The rest of the evidence is far from deserving of disqualification. It is true that the *Testamonium Flavianum* does show evidence of Christian tampering. However, most scholars claim that it is possible to determine the original pre-Christian version of the passage. Even Robert Price's colleague in the Jesus Seminar, John Dominic Crossan, has this to say about this passage once the Christian interpolations are removed: "That is how Jesus and early Christianity looked to a very prudent, diplomatic, and cosmopolitan Roman Jew in the early last decade of the first century: miracles and teachings, Jews and Greeks, our 'men of highest standing' and Pilate, crucifixion and continuation."¹³ Regarding the Gospels, it is true that there is a strong Christian bias to them. Yet, it is

impossible to separate any writing, ancient or modern, from a religious, philosophical, political, or social bias. While at one time the Gospels were seen as a non-historical or non-biographical form of religious instruction, times have changed. Mark Roberts explains: “The Gospels are distinctive in some ways, including their theological emphases and their focus on the death of Jesus, but they fit the general category of Hellenistic biography.”¹⁴ In addition, the claim that Paul never mentions the historical Jesus is highly exaggerated. It is true that Paul does not spend much time passing on details of Jesus’ earthly ministry, but neither does Paul spend much time sharing biographical details of his own life.¹⁵ Yet, even a perusal of 1 Corinthians will demonstrate that Paul was aware of details of Jesus’ teaching and events of his ministry.¹⁶ In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is so confident in the reality of the earthly Jesus that he encourages his readers to go and interview the eyewitnesses. Albert Schweitzer, who was not the most conservative scholar, had this to say about the evidence for the historical Jesus:

It is not that the sources are in themselves bad. When we have once made up our minds that we have not the materials for a complete Life of Jesus, but only for a picture of His public ministry, it must be admitted that there are few characters of antiquity about whom we possess so much indubitably historical information, of whom we have so many authentic discourses. The position is much more favourable, for instance, than in the case of Socrates; for he is pictured to us by literary men who exercised their creative ability upon the portrait. Jesus stands much more immediately before us, because He was depicted by simple Christians without literary gift.¹⁷

This is not the place to go into detail regarding the reliability of the historical evidence, other than to say that it is inappropriate for Jesus myth theorists to disqualify all of the evidence out of hand.

Inappropriate Ignorance of Chronological Diversity among Ancient Texts

Jesus myth theorists have been known to make blanket statements about what ancient religions, such as Egyptian mythology, believed and what ancient Christianity believed. With a large amount of material on both sides, it is not surprising that some areas of overlap are discovered. Yet, to get to this point, such theorists must treat both ancient mythology and Christianity with disrespect. Such authors do not discuss what first century worshippers of Egyptian gods or mystery religions believed and then compare that with what first century Christians believed.

For example, in describing what Egyptian mythology consisted of, ancient pyramid texts (24th century BC), records of the reign of Akhenaten (14th century BC), the Book of the Dead (11-7th century BC), Greek historians such as Herodotus (5th century BC), and Greek philosophers such as Plutarch (2nd century AD) are taken and mixed all together as if it was uniform body of material. In fact, there was great diversity within Egyptian mythology, and it greatly evolved over time. For example, the afterlife began as something only for the Pharaoh, gradually became available to the wider aristocracy as long as they could afford the proper funerary rites, and eventually became available to the average Egyptian if they lived a good life. This diversity is not taken seriously when Jesus myth theorists make their claim for pagan origins for Christianity.

The same mistakes are made when describing Christian beliefs. Instead of relying on the New Testament documents, a wide range of texts from diverse theological positions and time periods are artificially mixed together. It is popular to take Gnostic texts, most of which are from the late second century and into the fourth and using them as if they had the same value for describing early Christian beliefs as the first century canonical writings.¹⁸ For example, some authors have noted that the ox and ass of the infancy narrative have parallels in pagan infancy narratives. The only problem is that the ox and ass are never mentioned in Matthew, Luke or any other first century text. This image, found in popular Christmas carols, actually comes from

the eighth century *Pseudo-Matthew* or *Infancy Gospel of Matthew*. The same could be said about the connection regarding Christmas on December 25. It is true that the Christians likely first celebrated Christmas on December 25 because it was already a pagan festival (it is easier to Christianize a pagan festival than to ban a popular pagan festival). However, this says nothing about pagan origins for the Bible as we have no evidence of Christians celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25 before the fourth century. We should not be surprised that over time Christians began to adopt themes and images of the surrounding pagan culture, but that is not evidence for pagan influence on the original belief system. Just as Jesus myth theorists misuse pagan texts, they misuse Christian texts and traditions by artificially blending naturally diverse sources.

The Peril of Parallelomania

When one begins to read the writings of Jesus myth theorists, one is amazed by the numbers of parallels that are presented. Some readers are convinced by the sheer weight of the parallels even before looking at primary texts for confirmation. This is one of the primary tools of the Jesus myth theorists, not to rely on the quality of any one particular parallel but to rely on the quantity of parallels they have found, no matter how minor each might be. By doing this, they fall into the trap of something that Samuel Sandmel called ‘parallelomania.’ In an influential article, Sandmel argued that many scholars end up finding parallels wherever they look because that is what they are looking for. Sandmel defines parallelomania as “that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable and predetermined direction.”¹⁹ Sandmel goes on to share these wise words: “It would seem to me . . . in dealing with similarities we can sometimes discover exact parallels, some with and some devoid of significance; seeming parallels which are so only imperfectly; and statements which can only be called parallels by taking them out of context.”²⁰

It is in this final category that many of the supposed parallels

of the Jesus myth theory are found. For example, it is often claimed that the gods Mithras and Horus experienced a virgin birth just as the New Testament claims for Jesus. That would seem to be an impressive parallel until one looks at the actual myth. Mithras emerged from a rock and Horus was the result of postmortem sexual intercourse between his parents Osiris and Isis. Neither case can be considered a true example of a virgin birth. It is claimed that Horus experienced a similar crucifixion and resurrection as Jesus. The actual myth says that Horus was left in a swamp as a child, died from a scorpion sting, and was immediately brought back to life after his mother prayed to another god. Mithras is said to have twelve disciples as Jesus had. There are no accounts of this in the Mithraic myths but cultic art does depict the twelve signs of the Zodiac surrounding Mithras to indicate the importance of astrology within the movement. One of the worst examples is the frequent claim of Mithras as a dying and rising god.²¹ It is understandable why Jesus myth theorists would want this with the December 25 connection and the fact that Mithraism was contemporary with early Christianity and was an important rival. The only problem is that Mithras never dies in the myth. It is a primeval bull that Mithras kills who is raised back to life. Unless one goes to the actual myths or at least good scholarship, they would never know that they were victims of parallelomania.

Another aspect of parallelomania is a lack of understanding of common cultural images. The fact is that societies across the world have embraced similar images and symbols. Light and darkness, fertility and drought, famine and feast are common images and need not require derivation or connection from one culture to another. When we read about a flood in Genesis and the Epic of Gilgamesh, we suspect a connection because of the common appearance of water, ark, animals, and birds seeking for dry land. However, the appearance of shepherds or fisherman in two different religious systems is not enough to claim more than the presence of universal symbols.

Misunderstanding of Cultic Identification

One of the challenges for Jesus myth theorists is the fact that there is no one god or hero that is a complete parallel. Mithras is an

intermediary between the supreme god and humanity, but he is not a dying and rising god. Horus has a miraculous birth, but the people find no hope in his resuscitation. Osiris provides hope for an afterlife, but he does not have a miraculous birth. Dionysus is persecuted and betrayed, but he does not experience death. In order to find a pagan parallel to Jesus, one must combine different aspects of all these gods into a composite god.

To be fair, there is ancient precedent to this. As one reads ancient texts, it is evident that different cultures identified their gods with the gods of their neighbors. Sometimes that identification is complete as is the case with the Greco-Roman pantheon. For example, the Greek Zeus is the same as the Roman Jupiter, and the Greek Hermes is the same as the Roman Mercury. Most often, however, this identification is not so complete.

In the ancient world, as in our own, there were challenges for different cultures to co-exist. One of the ways to build bridges was to find similarities among their religions. Both cultures might have a thunder god, and so by identifying the two gods there was an opportunity for greater cooperation between the two cultures. That did not mean that the one culture adopted the entire mythology or religion of the other culture, only that it was now acceptable to use their names interchangeably. An example of this is the calling of the gods of the Mithraic mysteries by Greek names. Franz Cumont (a respected Belgian archaeologist and historian) explains: "A pious mystic could, without renouncing his faith, dedicate a votive inscription to the Capitoline triad,—Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva; he merely invested these divine names with a different meaning from their ordinary inscription."²²

Jesus myth theorists often note the identification of the Egyptian Osiris and the Greek Dionysus. This is an example of cultural identification being used for political purposes.²³ There were a few things that these gods had in common which was useful in building bridges between the cultures. But the Greeks did not bring the entire story of Osiris into their understanding of Dionysus, and the Egyptians did not bring the entire story of Dionysus into their understanding of Osiris. The ancients would not recognize the artificial identification of various gods that many Jesus theorists have presented to their readers.

Conclusion

The Jesus myth theory has been popular for hundreds of years and will continue to be attractive to a certain segment of society. The new atheism has already begun to latch onto this theory.²⁴ It is important that Christians not ignore this trend, even if they see it as nonsense from a scholarly perspective. It is important for the church to both point out the problems in the details and in the methodology of the Jesus myth theory. The best evidence continues to point toward the existence of the historical Jesus and the uniqueness of the Christian Gospel.

Notes

1. Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the Original Jesus a Pagan God?* (London: Element, 2003), 11-12.
2. Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2004), 80.
3. Robert M. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2000), 93. Price also strongly questions the existence of the historical Jesus and places him in the same category of other legendary figures. See *Deconstructing Jesus*, 261.
4. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Anchor, 2003), 252.
5. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Mineola: Dover, 2005), 137-60. Schweitzer, who is sometimes cited approvingly by Jesus myth theorists, is quite critical of such extreme views.
6. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 313-18.
7. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 167.
8. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 290-91.
9. Gerald Massey, *The Historical Jesus and the Mythical Christ* (Edmonds: Holmes Publishing, 1990). Massey was a self-educated layperson.
10. Alvin Boyd Kuhn, *A Rebirth for Christianity* (Wheaton: Quest, 2005). Kuhn's Ph.D. was in the area of Theosophy, and he writes from that religious perspective.
11. Stanley Porter and I dealt in detail with the form of the Jesus myth theory as formulated by Tom Harpur in Stanley E. Porter and Stephen J. Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ: An Evangelical Response to the Cosmic Christ Idea* (Toronto: Clements, 2006). Although focused on Tom Harpur's *Pagan Christ*, much of the work is useful in dealing with other forms of the Jesus myth theory.
12. That is not to say that they are without value. See Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking*, 129-39.

13. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 374.
14. Mark D. Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 85. Roberts sees Luke-Acts as fitting within the genre of Hellenistic history, 86.
15. Paul seems to hold back on biographical details of both Jesus and his own life until they are required for particularly difficult arguments.
16. Stephen J. Bedard, "Paul and the Historical Jesus: A Case Study in First Corinthians," in *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 7:9-22.
17. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 6.
18. A helpful resource for sorting through these issues is Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth Behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006).
19. Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 81, No. 1 (Mar., 1962), 1.
20. Sandmel, "Parallelomania," 7.
21. For example, see Freke and Gandy, *Jesus Mysteries*, 31 and Harpur, *Pagan Christ*, 37.
22. Franz Cumont, *Mysteries of Mithra* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 175-76.
23. One of the best examples of identification of gods being used for political purposes is that of Sarapis who was created by the government in Egypt in an attempt to unify a nation of various cultures. See Francoise Dunand and Christine Zivie-Coche, *Gods and Men in Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2004), 218-21.
24. Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007), 109-22.