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MINISTRIES

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Answering Atheists Series: Was Yeshua Copied From Pagan Myths?

Atheists and counter-missionaries on the Internet often claim that the story of Yeshua, or Jesus, as outlined in the gospels, was not original, but actually copied from pagan myths. It is argued that the gospel narratives about Yeshua’s life and teachings are mythological in origin and not actual historical accounts. While the idea is outright rejected among scholars, some people on the Internet even take this view so far to say that Yeshua didn’t exist as a real historical figure.

For information on why we can trust the gospel accounts as historically reliable, we invite you to watch our teachings, [Why Yeshua is the Messiah](#) and [Josephus and the New Testament](#).

In this teaching, we are specifically going to focus on the claim that Yeshua was copied from pagan myths. Is there any validity to this claim?

It is our contention that those who make this claim have not thoroughly examined the evidence. When you look at the primary sources of these myths that are often appealed to by skeptics and counter-missionaries, there is nothing really comparable to the story of Yeshua. And if there *are* similarities, there is nothing to suggest any sort of causal connection.

We will prove this with specific examples later in this teaching, but right now let’s take a look at the actual argument being made by the skeptics. This quote is from *the Companion Guide to Zeitgeist: Part I*. As you can see from the title, this was a companion guide to the movie “Zeitgeist,” which is a popular documentary that argues that the story of Yeshua is based on earlier pagan myths.

Acharya writes:

“Indeed, it is my contention and that of others deemed “Jesus mythicists” that the creators of the gospel tale picked various themes and motifs from the pre-Christian religions and myths, including and especially the Egyptian, and wove them together, using also the Jewish scriptures, to produce a unique version of the “mythos and ritual.” In other words, the creators of the Christ myth did not simply take an already formed story, scratch out the name Osiris or Horus and replace it with Jesus. They chose their motifs carefully, out of the most popular religious

symbols, myths and rituals, making sure they fit to some degree with the Jewish "messianic scriptures" as they are termed, and created a new story that hundreds of millions since have been led to believe really and truly took place in history [...] In other words, we are convinced that "Jesus Christ" is a fictional character created out of older myths, rituals and symbols."

-Acharya S, The Companion to Zeitgeist: Part 1 (Seattle, WA: Steller House Publishing, 2009), p. 8

In summary, "Jesus Mythicists" reject the historicity of Yeshua and claim that His story is based on earlier pagan myths. Jesus Mythicists make this claim based on supposed parallels between the gospel accounts about Yeshua's life and the stories about Horus (hor-ez), Osiris (Oh-sigh-ris), Mithras (Mi-thras), and other pagan myths.

It's worth noting that, while these types of views are popular on the Internet, they are unanimously rejected among professional scholars. Christian and non-Christian scholars alike chalk these claims up to mere, baseless conspiracy theories.

Here are some quotes from scholars in the relevant fields of historical study:

*"There is, as far as I am aware, **no prima facie evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct, drawing on the myths and rites of the dying and rising gods of the surrounding world.** While studied with profit against the background of Jewish resurrection belief, the faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus retains its unique character in the history of religions."*

-T.N.D. Mettinger, The Riddle of the Resurrection: "Dying and Rising Gods" in the Ancient Near East (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2001), p. 221

*"Allegations of an early Christian dependence on Mithraism have been rejected on many grounds. **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."*

-Ronald Nash, Mystery Religions of the Near East as quoted in "Mithraism." Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics. 1999

"Now I am normally a cordial and collegial chap, but to be honest, I have little time or patience to invest in debunking the wild fantasies of 'Jesus mythicists,' as they are known. That is because, to be frank, those of us who work in the academic profession of religion and history simply have a hard time taking them seriously [...] The Jesus mythicists are a group of enthusiastic atheists who through websites and self-published books try to prove the equivalent of a flat earth. I serve on the editorial board for the Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus, where we have an editorial team of people from all faiths and none, celebrated experts in their fields; and I can tell you that the Jesus mythicist nonsense would never get a foot in the door of a peer-reviewed journal committed to the academic study of the historical Jesus."

-Michael Bird, Yes, Jesus existed...but relax, you can still be an atheist if you want to, www.ridley.edu.au, 07/01/15

Before we get into some specific examples, a general critique of the methodology employed by Jesus

Mythicists is that their arguments are simply *post hoc*. That is to say, even if there are indeed similarities between the story of Yeshua and pagan myths, that does not therefore prove that the story of Yeshua was based on these pagan myths. So even if there are similarities, it does not prove that one came from the other.

However, as we look at some of these specific examples, we can see that even these supposed parallels are spurious.

Let's begin with the Egyptian god, Horus. This quote is from the documentary, *Zeitgeist*, in which it is asserted that Yeshua's story is based on the Horus myth:

“Broadly speaking, the story of Horus is as follows: Horus was born on December 25th of the virgin Isis-Meri. His birth was accompanied by a star in the east, which in turn, three kings followed to locate and adorn the new-born savior. At the age of 12, he was a prodigal child teacher, and at the age of 30 he was baptized by a figure known as Anup and thus began his ministry. Horus had 12 disciples he traveled about with, performing miracles such as healing the sick and walking on water. Horus was known by many gestural names such as The Truth, The Light, God's Anointed Son, The Good Shepherd, The Lamb of God, and many others. After being betrayed by Typhon, Horus was crucified, buried for 3 days, and thus, resurrected.”

-Peter Joseph, Zeitgeist

Now if we just accept these claims as fact without verifying them, it would be pretty reasonable to conclude that the story of Yeshua had perhaps originated from the story of Horus. The problem is that none of these claims about Horus are true at all. Let's go through them one by one.

1) Horus was born of the virgin Isis on December 25th

This is false. First, according to all of the major texts for the story of Horus, we know that the mother of Horus—Isis—was not a virgin, but was married to Horus's father, Osiris. One legend even states that Horus was conceived when Isis had sex with the dead body of Osiris.

In “Life and Culture in the Ancient Near East,” we read the following:

Seth managed to get hold of Osiris's body again and cut it up into fourteen parts, which she scattered all over Egypt. Then Isis went out to search for Osiris a second time and buried each part where she found it (hence the many tombs of Osiris that exist in Egypt). The only part that she did not find was the god's penis, for Seth had thrown it into the river, where it had been eaten by a fish; Isis therefore fashioned a substitute penis to put in its place. She had also had sexual intercourse with Osiris after his death, which resulted in the conception and birth of his posthumous son, Harpocrates, Horus-the-child. Osiris became king of the netherworld, and Horus proceeded to fight with Seth...

- Life and Culture in the Ancient Near East, Averbeck, Chavalas, Weisberg (eds). (CDL, 2003), 2:1702

As we can clearly see, Horus's birth story is nowhere near comparable to the story of the virgin birth in the Bible.

Regarding the claim of a December 25th birthdate, this cannot be confirmed. One source claims that he was born around November and another source says he was born around the winter solstice, but no evidence exists for any particular date. In either case, it doesn't matter, because even though December 25th later became the traditional date that many Christians celebrate the birth of Yeshua, the Bible does not make any specific claims of a particular birthdate for Yeshua.

2) Horus's birth was accompanied by a star in the east, which in turn, three kings followed to locate and adorn the baby Horus.

There is no evidence in the ancient sources about Horus to back up anything about a star in the east or three kings coming to adorn the baby Horus. This is completely fabricated out of thin air. Moreover, the gospels never state the actual number of magi that visited Yeshua after His birth.

3) At the age of 12, Horus was a prodigal child teacher

Again, there is not a single shred of primary evidence to support this claim.

4) Horus was baptized by a figure known as Anup and thus began his ministry

Not a single scholar affirms the existence of Anup the Baptizer in Egyptian mythology. There is no evidence of this character in any primary source.

Evidently this character is the invention of a 19th century English poet and amateur Egyptologist by the name of Gerald Massey. But Massey had no formal education in the area of Egyptology and has been widely rejected by scholars.

Many of these alleged parallels between Horus and Yeshua find their origin in the writings of Gerald Massey, who is often cited by Jesus Mythicists to support their claims.

In their book, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, Dr. Stanley E. Porter and Dr. Stephen J. Bedard offer a good summary of Massey's views:

"His conclusions rely on exaggerations and forced parallels that too often used later interpretations of the Gospels, rather than the primary texts themselves. To make matters worse, Massey cites numerous parallels without any indication of the original references in the Egyptian texts. Massey also begins the practice of describing Egyptian myths with biblical language in an attempt to find a causal link"

- Dr. Stanley E. Porter and Dr. Stephen J. Bedard, Unmasking the Pagan Christ, p. 30

5) Horus had 12 disciples

This is false. According to Egyptologist Claude Traunecker in the book "The Gods of Egypt," the sources indicate that Horus had four demigods that followed him, 16 human followers, and an unnumbered group of blacksmiths who accompanied Horus into some of his battles, but never do these followers add up to twelve.

6) Horus performed miracles and walked on water.

While it's true that Horus did perform miracles, that's not unusual for a deity. But there is nothing indicating that he walked on water.

7) Horus was known by many gestural names such as The Truth, The Light, God's Anointed Son, The Good Shepherd, The Lamb of God, and many others.

Again, there is simply no evidence to support the claim that Horus was known by any of these titles.

8) After being betrayed by Typhon (Tigh-fon), Horus was crucified, buried for 3 days, and thus, resurrected

When we look at the actual account of the death of Horus, there is nothing even close to resembling what is claimed by Jesus Mythicists. The authoritative story about the death of Horus is found in the Metternich Stele, which is from the 4th century B.C. The story reads:

"A scorpion hath smitten (i.e., stung) him [Horus], and the reptile Aun-ab hath wounded him. Then Isis placed her nose in his mouth so that she might know whether he who was in his coffin breathed, and she examined the wound of the heir of the god, and she found that there was poison in it. She threw her arms round him, and then quickly she leaped about him like fish when they are laid upon the hot coals, [saying]: "Horus is bitten, O Ra. Thy son is bitten, [O Osiris]."

-E. A. Wallis Budge, Legends of the Egyptian Gods: Hieroglyphic Texts and Translations, p. 183-85

As we can see, a scorpion stung Horus and he died from the poison. He wasn't crucified. There is nothing in this story even close to resembling the death of Yeshua.

What about a parallel to the resurrection? Again, let's turn to the actual sources and see if we can find anything:

"[And Thoth said:] Wake up, Horus! Thy protection is established. Make thou happy the heart of thy mother Isis. The words of Horus shall bind up hearts, he shall cause to be at peace him who is in affliction. Let your hearts be happy O ye who dwell in the heavens (Nut). Horus, he who hath avenged (or protected) his father shall cause the poison to retreat. Verily that which is in the mouth of Ra shall go round about (i.e., circulate), and the tongue of the Great God shall repulse [opposition]. The boat [of Ra] standeth still, and travelleth not onwards. The Disk is in the [same] place where it was yesterday to heal Horus for his mother Isis."

-E. A. Wallis Budge, Legends of the Egyptian Gods: Hieroglyphic Texts and Translations, p. 187

As we can see, the only similarities between this story and the gospel narratives is that both Horus and Yeshua die and return to life. That's it.

There's nothing in this story about Horus being dead for three days. Horus coming back to life was not planned in advance by God for a divine purpose of bringing salvation to man. Rather, Thoth healed Horus in response to his mother Isis's prayers.

To suggest that the death and resurrection of Yeshua was copied from this story would be a stretch to say the least.

What about the Greek god, Attis? Another claim from the documentary, *Zeitgeist*, is that Yeshua's story was based on myths about this god:

“Attis, of Phrygia, born of the virgin Nana on December 25th, crucified, placed in a tomb and after 3 days, was resurrected.”

-Peter Joseph, Zeitgeist

These claims, once again, are false. There's no historical source associating Attis with December 25th in any way, and it doesn't matter anyway, since the Bible never claims that Yeshua was born on December 25th.

There's nothing in the historical sources indicating that Attis was born of a virgin.

J.P. Holding summarizes Attis's birth myth in his book, *Shattering the Christ Myth*:

“As the story goes, Zeus (as Jupiter) saw Mt. Agdus, which looked like the goddess Rhea, and in a moment of excitement dropped some of his seed on the mountain, and from this arose a wild and androgynous creature named Agdistis (ahg-dis-tis). The gods do not like the obnoxious Agdistis, so Dionysus sneaks up and puts wine in Agdistis' water to put him to sleep. While he is asleep, Dionysus ties a rope around Agdistis' genitals, ties the other end of the rope to a tree, frightens him awake, and in the panic causes him to castrate himself. From the resulting blood, a tree springs up, and much later, Nana happens by, picks some of the fruit, and puts it in her lap, and then it disappears—upon which, she finds herself pregnant with Attis.”

-J.P. Holding, Shattering the Christ Myth: Did Jesus Not Exist?, p. 229

How this myth has any connection whatsoever to with the Virgin Birth of Yeshua is a complete mystery. You have to do some serious mental gymnastics to find a parallel here.

As for Attis's death, there is nothing about him being crucified or placed in a tomb and certainly nothing indicating a resurrection.

In the book, *Cybele and Attis: The Myth and the Cult*, M. J. Vermaseren details the various legends concerning the death of Attis. One story says that Attis emasculates himself under a pine tree and dies. Then Agdistis asks Zeus to bring Attis back to life, but rather than fully restore Attis to life, Zeus merely keeps his body from decay, allows his hair to continue growing, and makes his little finger move continuously. [p. 91]

Another legend again has Attis emasculating himself, but instead of Zeus keeping Attis in a perpetual vegetable state with an ever-moving little finger, his blood causes flowers to grow out of the ground and then Attis turns into a pine tree. [p. 92]

There are other versions of the story, but they are all dated well after the time of Christianity and perhaps were influenced by the gospel accounts. So any similarities that there might be between later legends of Attis and the gospel accounts would be a case of the story of Yeshua influencing the later pagan myths, and not the other way around. In the book, “The Christian Mystery and the Pagan Mysteries,” Hugo Rahner notes:

“As modern scholars have become more objective in this field, they have turned with increasing interest to another aspect, namely the possible influence of Christianity on the Greek mysteries.”
[p. 176]

Thus, there is no evidence that the story of Yeshua was influenced by the Attis myths.

What about the Hindu deity, Krishna? Here are more baseless claims made in the *Zeitgeist* documentary:

“Krishna, of India, born of the virgin Devaki with a star in the east signaling his coming, performed miracles with his disciples, and upon his death was resurrected.”

-Peter Joseph, Zeitgeist

These claims are total distortions of the evidence. First, according to the book, *Krishna in History, Thought and Culture*, by Dr. Lavanya Vemsani, it is said that Krishna’s mother had seven sons before Krishna, who was the eighth son [p 49]. So obviously Krishna’s mother was not a virgin.

The story of Krishna’s death can be found in *Mahabharata*. According to Encyclopedia Britannica:

Mahabharata, (Sanskrit: “Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty”) one of the two Sanskrit epic poems of ancient India (the other being the Ramayana). The Mahabharata is an important source of information on the development of Hinduism from 400 BCE and 200 CE and is regarded by Hindus as both a test about dharma (Hindu moral law) and a history (itihasa, literally “that’s what happened”).

So what does *Mahabharata* say about Krishna’s death?

“Having restrained all his senses, speech, and mind, Krishna laid himself down in high yoga. A fierce hunter of the name of jara then came there, desirous of deer. The hunter, mistaking Keshava, who was stretched on the earth in high Yoga, for a deer, pierced him at the heel with a shaft and quickly came to that spot for capturing prey. Coming up, Jara beheld a man dressed in yellow robes, rapt in Yoga and endued with many arms. Regarding himself as an offended and filled with fear, he touched the feet of Keshava. The high-souled one comforted him and then ascended upwards, filling the entire welkin with splendor.”

As we can see, there is no indication that Krishna was crucified. A hunter shot him. There’s no indication that he was resurrected either. All the text says is that he ascended into the heavens.

It’s possible that Krishna was reincarnated, but that is not the same as the biblical concept of resurrection. Reincarnation is a soul inhabiting a new body conceived in a womb. Biblical resurrection is the same body being back restored to life.

Thus, the claims of a parallel between the story of Yeshua and Krishna are simply false.

What about the Greek god, Dionysus (Dion-I-ses)? The *Zeitgeist* documentary claims:

Dionysus of Greece, born of a virgin on December 25th, was a traveling teacher who performed miracles such as turning water into wine, he was referred to as the “King of Kings,” “God’s

Only Begotten Son,” “The Alpha and Omega,” and many others, and upon his death, he was resurrected.

-Peter Joseph, Zeitgeist

All of these claims are false. Again, there is no reference anywhere to a December 25th birthday, and as we've mentioned before, even if there were, it would not matter since the Bible doesn't claim that Yeshua was born on that date.

Dionysus was not born of a virgin. According to the ancient Hymn to Dionysus in the Homeric Hymns, Dionysus was conceived from the union of Zeus and Semele (Sem-eh-lee):

“I am loud-crying Dionysus whom Cadmus' daughter Semele bare of union with Zeus.”

-Hymn to Dionysus, 1, 55 (The Homeric Hymns and Homerica with an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White)

Some sources say that Dionysus traveled the world spreading civilization, but this is not at all comparable to Yeshua travelling around Israel speaking about the Kingdom of God.

There is a story of Dionysus turning water into wine, but the account comes from a source dated much later than the first century, in *Achilles Tatius*. Thus, if there were any causal connection, the pagans would have received it from the gospel accounts.

There's no evidence that Dionysus was referred to as “King of Kings,” “Alpha and Omega,” or any of the other titles that are applied to Yeshua in the Scriptures.

Regarding the claim that Dionysus was resurrected, the closest thing we have that might resemble the resurrection of Yeshua is a legend recorded by 1st century BC historian Diodorus Siculus in Vol. 3.62 of his work. It is said that titans kidnapped Dionysus and boiled him. When Zeus found out, he killed the titans and brought Dionysus back to life.

We can clearly see that there is no parallel whatsoever between this legend and the story of Yeshua's resurrection.

What about Mithra? The *Zeitgeist* documentary claims:

Mithra, of Persia, born of a virgin on December 25th, he had 12 disciples and performed miracles, and upon his death was buried for 3 days and thus resurrected, he was also referred to as “The Truth,” “The Light,” and many others. Interestingly, the sacred day of worship of Mithra was Sunday.

-Peter Joseph, Zeitgeist

It's worth noting that we know very little about the mystical religion of Mithras. The members of this mystery cult didn't leave any writings behind, so we don't know exactly what they believed.

Professor Mary Jo Sharp explains:

“There are no substantive accounts of Mithras’s story, but rather a pieced-together story from inscriptions, depictions, and surviving Mithraea (man-made caverns of worship) [...] The reality is we know very little about the mystery of Mithras or its doctrines because of the secrecy of the cult initiates.”

-Mary Jo Sharp, “Does the Story of Jesus Mimic Pagan Mystery Stories?” Come Let Us Reason: New Essays in Christian Apologetics (B&H Academic, 2012), p. 286

So, what about the claims that Yeshua was copied from Mithra? First, there’s no evidence that Mithra was born of a virgin. According to scholars, he was born out of a rock.

In his book, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, Professor of Ancient History, Manfred Clauss, explains:

“The sequence of images from the mythical account of Mithras’ life and exploits begins, so far as we can make out, with the god’s birth. The literary sources here are few but unmistakable: Mithras was known as the rock-born god.”

-Manfred Clauss, The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries, p. 62

What about the claim that Mithra was born on December 25th? Again, the evidence for this claim is severely lacking.

Dr. Roger Beck explains:

*“In truth, the only evidence for it is the celebration of the birthday of Invictus on that date in Calendar of Philocalus. Invictus is of course Sol Invictus, Aurelian’s sun god. **It does not follow that a different, earlier, and unofficial sun god, Sol invictus Mithras, was necessary or even probably, born on that day too.**”*

-Dr. Roger Beck, Merkelbach’s Mithras, p. 299

As we’ve already mentioned with the others, even if this were true, it wouldn’t matter since the Bible doesn’t claim that Yeshua was born on December 25th, so there’s no parallel to the gospel accounts of Yeshua’s birth.

Regarding the claim that Mithra performed miracles, even if the evidence supports this claim, it doesn’t matter. Almost every false god performed miracles. This type of thing is way too general to form any kind of parallel to the story of Yeshua.

Regarding the claim that Mithra had 12 disciples, this is false. In the Persian/Iranian version of the Mithras myth, he had a companion named Varuna. In the Roman version, he had two companions named Cautes (Cau-tes) and Cautopatres (Cau-to-pa-tres).

Some people often appeal to an image of Mithra known as *The Bull-Slaying and the Stars* where he is surrounded by 12 figures:



However, these figures are not “disciples,” but are the signs of the zodiac.

In reference to this image, Dr. David Ulansey writes in his book, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*:

“It has always been clear that astral symbolism in general played an important role in Mithraism, for, as Cumont himself say, ‘the signs of the zodiac, the symbols of the planets, the emblems of the elements, appear time after time on the bas-reliefs, mosaics, and paintings of their subterranean temples.’ The various types of explicit astral imagery in Mithraic monuments can be summarized as follows. The zodiac is often portrayed in connection with the tauroctony, sometimes in the form of an arch above the scene, and sometimes in a complete circle around the tauroctony.”

-Dr. David Ulansey, The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World, p. 16

Regarding the claim that Mithra was buried for three days and resurrected, there is simply no evidence in any version of the myth to back up the claim that Mithra ever died or was resurrected. Likewise, there is no evidence anywhere that Mithra was referred to as “The Truth,” “The Light,” or the other titles applied to Yeshua in the gospels. These claims are completely fabricated.

Regarding the claim that Mithra’s holy day was Sunday, this is true. But Christians didn’t begin teaching a Sunday Sabbath until around the second century. While we believe Yeshua rose from the dead on a the close of a Sabbath, as we discuss in other teachings, even if Yeshua did rise on a Sunday, the Bible never states that Sunday was a holy day for followers of Yeshua. This was a later practice that was adopted after the time of the New Testament. Therefore, there is no parallel to Mithra.

In conclusion, the position that Yeshua was copied from earlier pagan myths is utterly baseless. There is no evidence for most of the claims and most of the supposed parallels are spurious. The few stories that do resemble the story of Yeshua come from later legends dated after the writing of the gospels and thus,

if anything, are evidence of pagan myths copying the story of Yeshua, not the other way around.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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