

Did Jesus Come from Pagan Religions?

By Greg Hanson

A popular and growing belief is that the Christian Jesus is just a copycat of pagan religious figures. This is the claim that the early Christians merely “borrowed” from the pagan religions of the day. Essentially, Christianity absorbed these other figures, mixed them together, and created the person named Jesus.

In recent years, promoting this view has become big business. It has climbed the best-sellers list (*The Pagan Christ*) and has hit the big screen (*The DaVinci Code*). And on the surface, it sounds plausible. But is it true?

This view of Jesus emerged in the late 1800s, and was propelled by a book by Kersey Graves entitled, *The World’s Sixteen Crucified Saviors* (1875). This book claimed that Jesus was not a real person but was instead a compilation of stories of other “deities or god-men saviors who had been crucified, and descended to and ascended from the underworld.”

However, Graves’ research was unreliable. For example, number 16 on his list was Mohammed. But Islam does not teach that Mohammed died and rose again. Besides, Mohammed came centuries after Jesus. So it is obvious that Christian beliefs about Jesus did not come from Mohammed.

Among scholars, both Christian and atheist, *The World’s Sixteen Crucified Saviors* has been almost universally rejected, and Graves has been dismissed as a conspiracy theorist. Even the secular website Infidels.org warns, “Readers should be extremely cautious in trusting anything in this book.” However, the belief the book promoted persists to this day, and it has given rise to what is known as the Jesus Myth Hypothesis.

The most common comparison between Jesus and pagan religions involves the Persian sun god Mithras. Mithras, who was popular in the Roman Empire particularly among the military, supposedly had a virgin birth on December 25. That is what advocates of the Jesus Myth Hypothesis will argue. But actually, the Mithras cult claims that he emerged fully grown from a rock. That was his “virgin birth.”

Furthermore, while the Mithras cult did exist before the time of Jesus, many of the beliefs about Mithras were not developed until at least half way through the second century after Jesus. So it would really be Mithras borrowing from Jesus, not the other way around.

As for the December 25 birthday, Christianity does not claim to know the date of Jesus’ birth. In fact, throughout the centuries his birth has been celebrated on a variety of dates including May 20 and March 28. Even today in Armenia, his birth is celebrated on January 6. The Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates his birth on January 7. December 25 is an arbitrary date and is not relevant to doctrinal beliefs about Jesus.

Another pagan icon, Attis, was killed in a hunting accident. One of the people assigned to protect him threw a spear at a wild boar and hit Attis accidentally. So Attis was impaled by a spear; Jesus was impaled by nails. According to the Jesus Myth Hypothesis, this story of Attis is supposed to be a parallel to the crucifixion story. But that conclusion is a stretch.

The pagan god Osiris allegedly had a resurrection. But his actual story is that after he died he came to life in the Underworld. He rules there over the dead, not the living. Osiris is reminiscent of an Egyptian mummy, and his story is nothing like the resurrection of Jesus.

Without knowing the facts, the Jesus Myth Hypothesis sounds plausible. But with a little investigation, it becomes apparent that there is very little support for it.

There are, however, some valid comparisons that can be made between paganism and Christianity. For example, baptism was a pre-Christian concept which was practiced as a pagan religious ritual. Jesus took this practice that was already in existence and infused it with new meaning, identifying it with his own death and resurrection.

Easter was once a pagan holiday and a pagan term. So how did it become a Christian holiday? Well, the pagan holiday happened to coincide with the Jewish Passover, which was also the weekend of Jesus’ death and resurrection. So today, this pagan holiday has been infused with new meaning and is now a commemoration of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. It is no longer the same pagan celebration; it’s a thoroughly Christian celebration.

Some people suggest that Christians worship on Sunday because it was a day set aside to worship the sun-god. But in reality, Christians worship on that day because it was on a Sunday that Jesus rose from the dead. This switch from Saturday to Sunday worship occurred fairly quickly after the Resurrection.

As James Garlow, an expert on church history, explains, “The issue is less about the church ‘borrowing’ pagan concepts and more about authentic Christianity’s magnificent capacity to adapt and adopt without losing the core of its Christocentric message.”

Plus, remember that every significant detail about Jesus was foretold centuries earlier. Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies, some dating back 1000 years before his birth. Christianity emerged from Judaism, not paganism.

The claim that Jesus is a merging of pagan beliefs is false. Whether or not a person accepts the Christian view of Jesus, it is clear that he did *not* come from pagan religions.

This article is adapted from the ebook, “Who Is Jesus? Discovering the Man, the Message and the Mission”. The complete ebook (PDF) is available at www.GregHanson.ca. Greg Hanson is a pastor, church planter, and freelance author who seeks to promote the truth and wisdom of the Bible in understandable and practical terms. For reprint information visit GregHanson.ca. Content is © Greg Hanson, 2010. All rights reserved. Used with permission.