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Jesus' Death and Resurrection: Copied from Other Ancient Deities?

Zeitgeist claims that Christianity copied the death and resurrection of Jesus from the ancient deities Horus, Osiris, Attis, Adonis and Mithras. But are these mythological accounts really similar to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Furthermore, are they before or after Jesus' death and resurrection?

Around 22 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostle Paul wrote the following account to believers in the city of Corinth.

For I passed on to you Corinthians first of all the message I had myself received —that Christ died for our sins, as the scriptures said he would; that he was buried and rose again on the third day, again as the scriptures foretold. He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve, and subsequently he was seen simultaneously by over five hundred Christians, of whom the majority are still alive, though some have since died.¹

Paul is writing here that more than five hundred eyewitnesses had seen Jesus alive at one time. And he says that most were still alive at that time.

However, *Zeitgeist* says Jesus' death and resurrection was copied from earlier pagan religions.

Although some pagan religions have accounts of dying and rising gods, they are quite different than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The question we must ask is: do these accounts predate Christianity? Let's take a closer look.

Dr. Norman Geisler answers the question.

The first real parallel of a dying and rising god does not appear until A.D. 150, more than a hundred years after the origin of Christianity. So if there was any influence of one on the other, it was the influence of the historical event of the New Testament [resurrection] on mythology, not the reverse.²

Leading scholars of ancient religions tell us that "the ancient Egyptian cult of Osiris is the *only* account of a god who survived death that predates Christianity." Yet Geisler notes the vast distinction between Osiris' and Jesus' resurrection.

The only known account of a god surviving death that predates Christianity is the Egyptian cult god Osiris. In this myth, Osiris is cut into fourteen pieces, scattered around Egypt, then reassembled and brought back to life by the goddess Isis. However, Osiris does not actually come back to physical life but becomes a member of a shadowy underworld...This is far different than Jesus' resurrection account.³

But what about Mithras, the Roman god who supposedly was the son of god who was born of a virgin, died for sins and rose again? Author Yousuf Saleem Chishti writes,

The Christian doctrine of atonement was greatly coloured by the influence of the mystery religions, especially Mithraism, which had its own son of God and virgin Mother, and crucifixion and resurrection after expiating for the sins of mankind and finally his ascension to the 7th heaven.⁴

Zeitgeist cites this as solid evidence that Christianity is truly a “copycat religion.”

However, no early account of Mithra speaks of his death or resurrection. Only after Christ did these elements appear. Professor Ronald Nash notes,

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.⁵

Many scholars believe Mithraism, as well as some other ancient religions, actually copied elements of Christianity. Regarding Mithraism, Nash explains,

Mithraism flowered after Christianity, not before, so Christianity could not have copied from Mithraism. The timing is all wrong to have influenced the development of first-century Christianity.⁶

The same is true for Attis, Adonis, Horus, Osiris and other deities. Noted scholar A. T. Fear reveals that the Greek god Attis didn't resemble Jesus at all originally. Any similarities between Jesus and Attis that came after Christ “seem to have been provoked by a need to respond to the challenge of Christianity.”⁷

Professor T. N. D. Mettinger of Lund University, a non-Christian, says that almost all scholars agree; there were no dying and rising gods before Christ.

The consensus among modern scholars — nearly universal — is that there were no dying and rising gods that preceded Christianity. They all post-dated the first century.⁸

Consider the Source

So how can *Zeitgeist* and the New Atheists argue that Christianity is a “copycat religion”?

Very easily: They begin with the conclusion they want to prove, and then cherry-pick sources who support their point of view. *Zeitgeist* leans heavily on the skeptical works of Acharya S. and a 19th century Egyptologist, Gerald Massey.

What is conspicuously absent from *Zeitgeist* are the views of leading scholars who disagree with them. In fact, the sources cited are not really experts at all.

Professor of New Testament, Dr. Ben Witherington notes,

Not a single one of these authors and sources are experts in the Bible, Biblical history, the Ancient Near East, Egyptology, or any of the cognate fields....they are not reliable sources of information about the origins of Christianity, Judaism, or much of anything else of relevance to this discussion.⁹

When all the evidence is examined, almost all leading scholars believe the case for Jesus’ existence is truly compelling. Although he is an atheist, historian Michael Grant speaks for most of them.

To sum up, modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory. It has again and again been answered and annihilated by first-rank scholars.¹⁰

Historian Paul Johnson concurs.

I doubt if there is any serious scholar alive now who would deny Jesus’ historical existence. Indeed, He is much better authenticated than many secular figures of antiquity whose existence no one has ever presumed to question.¹¹

Perhaps the non-Christian historian H. G. Wells put it the best regarding Jesus Christ's existence:

*Here was a man. This part of the tale could not have been invented.*¹²

But what about Jesus' resurrection? Could that story have been invented? Certainly there isn't a shred of evidence that any ancient god of mythology ever existed, let alone died and came back to life. But what about Jesus Christ?

In a *New York Times* article, Peter Steinfels cites the startling events that occurred three days after Jesus' death:

*Shortly after Jesus was executed, his followers were suddenly galvanized from a baffled and cowering group into people whose message about a living Jesus and a coming kingdom, preached at the risk of their lives, eventually changed an empire. Something happened ... But exactly what?*¹³

Steinfels asks the right question: What did happen? Whatever happened shortly after Jesus' death was something that changed our world.

If Jesus did rise from the dead then he alone would have the answers to what life is about and what is facing us after we die. On the other hand, if the resurrection account of Jesus is not true, then Christianity would be founded upon a lie.

Theologian R. C. Sproul puts it this way:

*The claim of resurrection is vital to Christianity. If Christ has been raised from the dead by God, then He has the credentials and certification that no other religious leader possesses.*¹⁴

All other religious leaders are dead, but, according to Christianity, Christ is alive.

Many believe that Jesus' resurrection was simply a mythical account. Several skeptics who regarded Jesus' resurrection as mythical decided to investigate the evidence. Read their startling conclusions in "[Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?](#)"

Endnotes