

Zeitgeist: The Movie

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Definition: *Zeitgeist* (German for “spirit of the age”) is an online documentary that attempts to link together three claims: The 9/11 terrorist attacks were orchestrated by the U.S. government; a group of international bankers are attempting to dominate world events; and Christianity is a fraud that borrowed from ancient pagan religions. Each claim is addressed separately in the 3-part film. The charge that Christianity is plagiarized from pagan myths will be addressed here. The film’s underlying claim that Jesus never existed will be addressed in an upcoming Profile.

Production: Written and produced by Peter Joseph, the two-hour film received the Best Feature Documentary award in 2007, the year of its release, at the Artivist Film Festival in Hollywood, Ca. “Z Day” or “Zeitgeist Awareness Day” was hailed as a worldwide film promotional day on March 15, 2008 that resulted in 718 public and over 1100 public events championing the film.¹

Unique Terms: **Astrotheology** refers to the claim that Christianity and other religions are founded upon astronomy.

BACKGROUND

The charge that Christianity parallels or “copycats” ancient mystery religions is not new. Often associated with the Religionsgeschichtliche, or “History of Religions School,” the movement gained some prominence early in the 20th century through the influence of German New Testament scholar Wilhelm Bousset and German classicist and historian Richard Reitzenstein, and others. Opposition at the time included such distinguished German scholars as Adolf von Harnack and Carl Clemen.²

The mystery religions of the Hellenistic age are so named because of their use of secret knowledge or ceremonies to attain certain benefits or “salvation” for members.³ Though the charge of parallelism appeared in academic writings from roughly 1890 to 1930 or 1940, most 20th century scholars, including German scholarship, subsequently dismissed the claim.⁴

New life has been breathed into the copycat theory recently due to ventures like the *Zeitgeist* film and the advent of the internet with information that is not fact-checked or filtered academically.⁵ The discovery and translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Egyptian Gnostic writings, plus a postmodern interest in “a spirituality uncoupled from history”⁶ have contributed to the renewed interest.⁷

The Mediterranean world gave birth to the mystery religions: in Egypt, the cults of Isis and Osiris; in Greece, Dionysus and Demeter; in Phrygia of Asia Minor, Cybele and Attis; in Syria and Palestine, Adonis; and in Persia (Iran), Mithras.⁸ The cults remained distinct in the first century, though different forms sprung up within each cult after 100 CE. By the 4th century, the religions borrowed from one another, becoming eclectic and syncretistic.⁹

Piecemeal texts and allegorical language make knitting together the myth of a pagan deity a challenge. For example, the only surviving, complete version of the Osiris-Isis-Horus myth was produced by the Greek writer and historian Plutarch in the 2nd century, years after the time of Christ. In his account “Isis and Osiris,” Plutarch noted the allegorical language used in recounting the stories of Egyptian gods and cautioned his reader that, “...you must not think that any of these tales actually happened in the manner in which they are related.”¹⁰ Versions of the myths exist. Some accounts say Isis, the mother of Horus, became pregnant by a flash of lightning, others say she took the form of a falcon and hovered over the wooden phallus of her dead husband.¹¹

Sources cited in the film fall into two camps: 1) authors and lay scholars that date to the late 19th and early 20th centuries and whose conclusions have been largely dismissed by scholars¹² and 2) more recent writers whose academic credentials are not relevant to the fields of ancient texts and their interpretations, or are completely lacking altogether.¹³

The film draws from the writing of Acharya S, a pen name used at times by Dorothy M. Murdock, the author of *The Christ Conspiracy: The Greatest Story Every Sold* (2004), a work asserting that Jesus is an invention of 2nd century Jews.¹⁴ Murdock served as a primary consultant for the film.¹⁵

Modern sources: Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, particularly their book *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the "Original Jesus" a Pagan God?* (2001); atheist John G. Jackson, author of *Christianity Before Christ* (1985); Earl Doherty's *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ?* (1999); and John Marco Allegro, the author of *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, a work claiming that the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms influenced early Christianity; and others.¹⁶

Earlier sources: The largest portion of citations in the film come from late 19th and early 20th centuries writers, including: Gerald Massey, an amateur Egyptologist, author of *The Historical Jesus and the Mythical Christ*, 1886; Thomas Doane, *Bible Myths and Their Parallels in Other Religions*, 1882; and James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1890.¹⁷

CLAIMS

Zeitgeist views all religion and Christianity specifically as an elaborate conspiracy theory. The film's criticisms are based for the most part on a belief system known as mythicism. A mythicist is defined as "an adherent of the view that apparently supernatural persons or events have their origin in human imagination especially as revealed in myth."¹⁸ Thus, the film proclaims, all historical claims about Jesus were fabricated out of earlier, reoccurring myth stories found in many or all religions. The narratives of ancient pagan religions, as told by mythicists, generally include a dying and rising god, or "Godman." Frequently, parallels to the myths of Horus (or Osiris), Attis, Dionysus, Mithra, or Krishna of India, are claimed.

The copycat theorist contends that Jesus and the pagan "Godman" share these main story points:¹⁹

- The father is God; the mother is a virgin girl.
- He is hailed as Savior, God made flesh and Son of God.
- Born in a cave or humble cowshed on December 25, in front of shepherds.
- He is surrounded by 12 disciples.
- Followers can be born again through the rites of baptism.
- He miraculously turns water into wine at a marriage ceremony.
- He dies at Easter time as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, sometimes through crucifixion.
- Rises on the third day and ascends to Heaven in glory.
- By symbolically sharing in the suffering and death of the Godman, initiates of the mysteries believed they would also share in his spiritual resurrection and know eternal life.

Zeitgeist relates the story of Horus this way:

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 baptized by Typhon, Horus was crucified, buried for 3 days, and thus, resurrected.²⁰

Viewers are assured this is claimed for other deities, including Attis: born December 25 to the virgin Nana, crucified, and resurrected after 3 days; Dionysus, born December 25 of a virgin, performed miracles, called "God's Only Begotten Son." Similar claims are made for Mithras.²¹ Each religion's theology is tied to astrology, according to *Zeitgeist*. The film links the Three Wise Men at Christ's birth to the stars of Orion's Belt and connects the zodiac to the biblical use of the number 12, and other claims. *Zeitgeist* then concludes: "Christianity, along with all other theistic belief systems, is the fraud of the age."²²

Assessment

Perhaps no more scathing rebuttal could be made than that by New Testament Scholar Bart D. Ehrman—himself "an agnostic with atheist leanings"²³—in regards to *Zeitgeist*'s claim to scholarship and evidence. He said of Freke and Gandy's work, "Real historians of antiquity are scandalized by such assertions...[Freke and Gandy] cite no sources from the ancient world that can be checked... They have not even cited the available evidence. And for good reason. No such evidence exists."²⁴

Of Acharya S's work *The Christ Conspiracy*, Ehrman said, "The book is filled with so many factual errors and outlandish assertions that it is hard to believe that the author is serious. If she is serious, it is hard to believe that she has ever encountered anything resembling historical scholarship."²⁵ The weight of scholarship goes against mythicists' claims. Evidence for the copycat theory is absent completely, mishandled, or misconstrued.²⁶ When it comes to a god that died and rose again, scholars concur that no pagan religion prior to Christianity believed in such.²⁷

As for Horus, there is no textual or historical evidence that supports the following claims: born in a manger; star in the east; Wise Men; child teacher at age 12; baptized at age 30 by Anup; 12 disciples; walked on water; titles such as Holy Child, Son of Man, Good Shepherd, Lamb of God, Word made flesh, Word of Truth; crucified between two thieves; buried for 3 days and resurrected.²⁸ The "resurrection" of Osiris—often cited as a pagan parallel of Christ—is misconstrued. After Osiris's dismembered body was "reassembled" by Isis, he became the powerful ruler of the underworld, a dead god ruling over the dead.²⁹ As Ehrman stated in an interview with the *Fortean Times* regarding a connection between Christianity and the mystery religions:

This is an old argument, even though it shows up every 10 years or so. This current craze that Christianity was a mystery religion like these other mystery religions—the people who are saying this are almost always people who know nothing about the mystery religions; they've read a few popular books, but they're not scholars of mystery religions. The reality is, we know very little about mystery religions—the whole point of mystery religions is that they're secret! So I think it's crazy to build on ignorance in order to make a claim like this.³⁰

Parallelism then stands on faulty and fallacious arguments. Only if the following approach is used can Christianity be seen to borrow from pagan religions:

Terminology Fallacy: Horus is said to have a virgin birth, but he was born to Isis after Osiris is murdered and dismembered. Isis reassembles Osiris, but substitutes wood for the missing phallus.³¹ Impregnation by a husband, dead or alive, defies the definition of "virgin birth" and falls far short of its Christian meaning. Though a virgin birth is claimed for Attis, he was conceived when a pomegranate fell into his mother's lap from a tree sprouted from Zeus's seed.³² Regarding resurrection: Attis's "resurrection" is limited to the preservation of his body, growth of his hair, and movement in his little finger.³³ Regarding crucifixion: Krishna was shot by an arrow; Attis died from self-inflicted wounds; and in some accounts, Horus died from a scorpion sting.³⁴ "One frequently encounters scholars who first use Christian terminology to describe pagan beliefs and practices and then marvel at the awesome parallels they think they have discovered. One can go a long way towards 'proving' early Christian syncretism by describing some mystery belief or practice in Christian terminology."³⁵

Chronological Fallacy: No archaeological evidence exists to show that the mystery religions were influential in first-century Palestine, in a monotheistic Jewish culture that abhorred syncretism.³⁶ Fully developed mystery religions did not exist before the rise of Christianity.³⁷ Christians did appropriate the pagan date of December 25 to honor Christ's birth, but did not widely do so until the 4th century.³⁸ Sources that post-date Christianity, such as those attesting Dionysus's or Krishna's returning to life, give evidence that the mystery religions borrowed from Christianity, rather than the other way around.³⁹

Dependency Fallacy: Incorporating pagan philosophical or religious terminology does not mean the words carry the same meaning nor does it show dependence.⁴⁰ Paul, on Mars Hill, used language common to the culture to challenge other belief systems and make the Gospel understandable.⁴¹

Composition Fallacy: Albert Schweitzer, noted liberal scholar of the early 20th century, said the mythicists mistakenly "lump" together all pagan religions into one: "Almost all the popular writings fall into this kind of inaccuracy. They manufacture out of the various fragments of information a kind of universal Mystery-religion *which never actually existed*, least of all in Paul's day."⁴²

Intentional Fallacy: The vegetative cycle, a repeating view of life, is prominent in the mystery religions. Christianity sees history as linear and purposeful, moving toward a goal determined by God.

Other things to note:

- *Zeitgeist* misuses Scripture when it insists that the biblical use of the number 12 is a reference to the 12 constellations of the Zodiac and claims there were: 12 *Old Testament prophets* (there were many more); 12 *judges* (but counts Abimelech, a king; Gideon, and other delivers not identified by the Hebrew word *shoftim*); 12 *kings of Israel* (the United Monarchy had 3; there were more than 12 for the Divided Kingdom); 12 *disciples*, ignoring the biblical relation to the 12 tribes of Israel.⁴³

- Baptism was not practiced in ancient times, but was a Jewish practice. There is no reference to baptism by Anup in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*.⁴⁴
- *Zeitgeist* claims that the Three Kings were the three brightest stars in the constellation Orion's Belt. The biblical account does not say "three" kings. This is a later tradition assumed from the three gifts brought to the baby Jesus. The designation of "Three Kings" to the stars of Orion's Belt is a modern term, not applied in ancient times.⁴⁵

The film's claim that other "virgin mothers" had names beginning with M is forced. It links three different languages and three different scripts: the Hebrew name Miriam; Greek name Myrrha; and the Indian name Maya.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Christ's death is unique and unlike the death of any pagan god. Pagan gods died from compulsion, angst, or human conflict. Christ died for the sins of humankind. No pagan deity died for someone else's sin. Christ's death was not a defeat; it was a victory that secured salvation for those who put their faith in Him.⁴⁶ First century Judaism had no part with paganism and early Christians were warned to guard themselves from idols (1 John 5:21). Paul was moved and disturbed by idol worship and urged believers to remain uncompromising. Paul insisted that the Gospel rests upon a historical, bodily resurrection of Christ and appealed to the testimony of living witnesses as evidence (1 Corinthians 15:3-18). Unlike the vague and erratic lives of pagan gods, Christ was blameless and the manuscripts accounting his life are dependable.

The *Zeitgeist* movie falls far short of presenting a clear and coherent case to support its claims. Furthermore, it presents very little, if any, primary source evidence to document its theories concerning the origins of Christianity. Scholarship from many camps—historical, ancient studies, Christian and non-Christian—takes issue with its methods, treatment of evidence and conclusions. For these reasons virtually no serious scholar in any relevant field endorses its positions.

Notes

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- http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Isis_and_Osiris*/A.html accessed February 28, 2015 [5:11 in part 1 of 5] [also Plutarch: allegorical meaning: 5:54 in part 4 of 5]
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- Ibid.*
- Ibid.*
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- Ibid.*, 26.
- Ibid.*, 21.
- Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 11.
- Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 230.
- Holding, "Pagan Christs, Egyptian Front: Horus, Osiris," 223-24; Brown, "The *Zeitgeist* Heist," 314.
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- Ehrman, interview with David V. Barrett, "The Gospel According to Bart", *Fortean Times* (221), 2007
- Foreman, "Challenging the *Zeitgeist* Movie," 178; Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 137-38; and Holding, "Pagan Christs, Egyptian Front: Horus, Osiris," 223.
- Brown, "The *Zeitgeist* Heist," 298.
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