

37 FOUNDATIONS 107 – Is Christianity a Copy of Older Myths?

Osiris, Mithras, and the “Dying-and-Rising God” Claim

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Have you ever heard of some myths about gods resurrecting from the dead that pre-date Christ? I had not heard of this in my childhood but as I got into my 20s and early 30s I began to hear more and more about this.

In trying to dig up the roots of where these ideas may have begun circulating I found a book published in 1999 by two British authors, Freke and Gandy, who make some pretty bold claims.

According to these authors, the Gospels are a Jewish reworking of much older pagan myths about a dying and resurrecting “godman” they call Osiris-Dionysus.

In their telling, Jesus never existed. Someone took a pagan story, gave the hero a Jewish name, and set him in Galilee.

The book became a bestseller in Britain.

Eight years later, an internet film called *Zeitgeist* took the same basic idea, added dramatic music, and pushed it out to a whole new audience. Clips of it still circulate today.

If you’ve spent any time in online comment sections, you’ve probably seen the short version.

Horus was born of a virgin. Mithras was born on December 25th. Osiris died and rose again. Jesus is just the latest copy.

According to this argument, Christianity is one more dying-and-rising god story with a Jewish flair.

Anyone can make claims – scholars and lay people alike – and social media now gives almost everyone on earth a voice. So let’s put our critical thinking skills to work and see whether these claims hold up under scrutiny.

Why It Sounds So Convincing

Many of these books are written or endorsed by scholars who may well be experts in their field. But everyone has a bias. The question is whether the bias controls the conclusion, or the evidence does.

These claims have real academic roots which make them sound convincing.

In 1890, a Scottish anthropologist named James George Frazer published *The Golden Bough*. In it, he grouped a number of ancient gods into one category – gods who died and came back to life, usually tied to the yearly cycle of planting and harvest.

For decades, respected scholars accepted that category. The idea started in universities long before it reached a more widespread audience through the internet.

Another reason the claims sound convincing is that very few of us can check them.

Most people have never read an Egyptian funeral text or looked at a Roman temple inscription. So we're left trusting whoever sounds most confident.

There's also a third reason, and it's more personal.

For anyone who already has reasons to keep God at a distance, this claim is convenient. I've written about confirmation bias previously: If Jesus is only a copy, there's no need to lower the drawbridge and look at Him closely.

So let's look closely.

Osiris: The God Who Stayed Down

Osiris is the centerpiece of the argument, so let's start there.

In the best-known version of the Egyptian story, Osiris is murdered by his brother Set. His body is cut into pieces and scattered. His wife Isis searches out the pieces and puts him back together.

Then what happens?

Osiris goes down to the underworld and becomes king of the dead.

That's where he stays.

Bart Ehrman is a well-known New Testament scholar at the University of North Carolina. He is also an agnostic, so he has no reason to defend Christianity. He examined these claims one by one.

His conclusion about Osiris was blunt: "Osiris does not – decidedly does not – return to life."

A god who rules over the dead is a very different thing from a man who walks away from death.

The Gospels claim Jesus came out of the grave in a real body. He ate fish in front of His friends (Luke 24:42-43). He invited Thomas to touch the wounds in His hands and side (John 20:27).

Osiris was put back together. Jesus got up and left.

Mithras: Born From a Rock, and Late to the Party

Mithras is the other favorite. The popular version says he was born of a virgin on December 25th, had twelve disciples, died, and rose again after three days.

The first problem is his birth.

The Roman Mithras cult left behind a lot of art, and its most common birth scene shows Mithras emerging fully grown out of solid stone.

Lee Strobel, a former legal editor at the *Chicago Tribune* who became a Christian after investigating Jesus as a journalist, took this up in *The Case for the Real Jesus*. After interviewing historian Edwin Yamauchi, he wrote: “Unless the rock is considered a virgin, this parallel with Jesus evaporates.”

The second problem is timing.

Manfred Clauss is one of the leading scholars of Mithraism. In *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, he dates the earliest clear evidence of the Roman cult to the late first century AD – around AD 80 to 90.

Paul’s letters were written in the AD 50s.

The Christian message was already being preached decades before we have clear evidence that the Roman cult existed.

To be fair, a Persian god named Mithra was worshiped centuries earlier, and the ancient writer Plutarch mentions pirates practicing “secret rites” of Mithras in the first century BC. However, Clauss found no clear evidence of a direct line between the older Persian god and the later Roman cult.

The third problem is the death and resurrection itself.

There’s no ancient story of Mithras dying. Yamauchi put it simply in his interview with Strobel: “We don’t know anything about the death of Mithras.”

In the most famous Mithras image, he is the one doing the killing. He’s slaying a bull.

If any borrowing happened at all, it may have gone the other direction. In the second century, the Christian writer Justin Martyr complained that followers of Mithras were imitating the Lord’s Supper.

What the Scholars Actually Concluded

In 1987, Jonathan Z. Smith of the University of Chicago wrote the entry on “Dying and Rising Gods” for the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, one of the standard reference works in the field.

He went back to the ancient sources and examined the gods one at a time.

His conclusion: “There is no unambiguous instance in the history of religions of a dying and rising deity.”

Some of those gods died and stayed dead. Others disappeared and returned in ways that looked nothing like a resurrection. Several of the “parallels” came from texts written long after Christianity began.

Not every scholar agrees with Smith completely.

In 2001, Tryggve Mettinger, a professor at Lund University in Sweden, published *The Riddle of Resurrection*. He argued that a few ancient Near Eastern gods really were believed to die and return, and he openly acknowledged that most scholars disagreed with him.

He's the strongest scholarly voice on the side of dying-and-rising gods.

Mettinger's final conclusion is the most telling part of his book: "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."

"*Prima facie*" means "at first look" or "on the face of it."

So the scholar most willing to grant that dying-and-rising gods existed still found nothing showing the Jesus story was built from them.

He also noticed the biggest difference. Those gods followed the seasons. They died and returned every year, like crops.

Jesus died once, on a specific weekend, in a specific city, under a specific Roman governor. That governor was Pontius Pilate – whose name we saw carved in stone back in Foundations 104.

Myths happen "once upon a time." The Gospels give you names, places, and dates you can check.

The Least Likely People to Borrow a Pagan Myth

The first followers of Jesus were Jews.

That matters more than most people realize.

Jews in the first century were known across the Roman world for refusing to blend their faith with pagan religion. Generations earlier, during the Maccabean revolt, many had died rather than sacrifice to Greek gods.

These were the people least interested in adopting an Egyptian or Persian god story.

Their hope of resurrection came from their own Scriptures (Daniel 12:2). Ehrman makes this same point. The earliest Christians were shaped by Jewish ideas, and the pagan mystery religions had very little to do with it.

Paul passes along the core of what those first believers taught:

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, LSB).

Notice the phrase "according to the Scriptures." Twice.

Paul points his readers back to the Hebrew Scriptures, and he never mentions Egypt or Persia.

Many scholars, including skeptical ones, date this short summary to within a few years of the crucifixion. That's far too early, and far too Jewish, for a slow drift from pagan legend.

Peter Saw This Coming

Near the end of his life, Peter wrote this:

“For we did not make known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, following cleverly devised myths, but being eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16, LSB).

The Greek word translated “myths” is *mythos*. It's where our English word comes from.

Peter knew exactly what a myth was. His world was full of them.

He drew a clear line between those stories and what he had seen with his own eyes, and he put his own name on the side of the eyewitnesses.

Check It for Yourself

Freke and Gandy asked their readers to question what they'd been taught.

That's good advice. It applies to their book too.

When Paul preached in Berea, the people there didn't just accept his words. They examined the Scriptures every day to see whether what he said was true (Acts 17:11).

Do the same with this claim. Do the same with me.

Look up Osiris and see where his story ends. Look at the dates for Mithras. Read what Smith and Mettinger actually concluded, and notice that one of the strongest answers to this objection comes from a scholar who isn't even a believer.

When you follow the sources, the parallels fall apart one by one.

What remains is a Jewish teacher, a Roman governor, an empty tomb, and a group of eyewitnesses who would rather die than call it a myth.

For Further Study

Jonathan Z. Smith, “Dying and Rising Gods,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (Macmillan, 1987). This is the article that changed how scholars think about the whole category.

Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Zondervan, 2007). See the chapter “Christianity's Beliefs about Jesus Were Copied from Pagan Religions,” his interview with historian Edwin Yamauchi.

Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, translated by Richard Gordon (Routledge, 2000). This is the standard introduction to what we actually know about Mithras.

Mary Jo Sharp, “Zeitgeist, the Movie – Christianity versus the Pagan Mystery Religions,” at maryjosharp.com. It’s an accessible, footnoted response from a Christian apologist who has studied the primary sources.

Be a Berean.

If you’re struggling:

- Christian Faith-Based Resources: <https://mentalhealthhotline.org/christian-faith-resources/> or call 1-866-903-3787 (24/7)
- The Hope Line: <http://thehopeline.com/> Chat with trained professionals for free 24/7.
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 (call or text)

You matter. You were made on purpose, one of a kind, by Someone who knows your name. If the questions feel heavy right now, you don’t have to work through them alone. Please stay.

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