

Good question... *was Jesus Christ just a CopyCat Savior Myth?*

By Glenn Miller

This is one of those questions that amaze me that it is STILL raised...so I decided to write it all up. Often I get an email that reads like this:

The reason for this letter is that I am wondering if you could answer a question I have. In one of your html pages the subject of Mithras is touched upon lightly and a link is given for further information. The link goes nowhere though, and I am really interested in finding out more about Mithras and other Dying-God mythologies. The reason is because I often enter correspondences and dialogues with atheists. Recently one such atheist raised his question, and I am still waiting to respond to him, because of my unfamiliarity with the subject. His letter went like this:

How can a historic personage (such as Jesus) have a recorded life (according to the New Testament in the Bible) almost identical to various other mythos out there including but not limited to:

1. *Mithras (Roman Mithraism)*
2. *Horus (Egyptian God of Light)*

*Both of these religions came *before* Christianity and are clearly labeled as myths yet the 'stories' of their lives are, in many ways, identical to the 'life' of Jesus the Christ.*

Now, before you say that I am jumping logic or that you have never ever heard of what I am talking about . . my question is this:

***IF* the information that I have just stated above is TRUE**

***THEN* would it not bear strong evidence to the face that Jesus the Christ was and is not a historic personage?**

Just answer that directly.

I would appreciate any help or information you could offer on the subject. Thank you

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Notice the general allegation--

There are material, significant, and pervasive similarities between the Jesus Christ of the New Testament and other Dying God-figures (and/or Savior-figures), and that these

similarities are best explained by the hypothesis that the figure of Jesus is materially derived from (or heavily influenced by) these other Dying God/Savior-figures..

Sometimes the allegation is worded strongly--Jesus was NOT a real person, but a legend; sometimes it is worded less strongly--Jesus was real, but was fused with these derivative mythic elements such that THEY became the core teachings about Jesus.

Now, before we try to analyze this notion, we need to gather some established criteria (from scholars) on **how to detect and establish that 'borrowing' (especially "content/material" borrowing) has occurred.**

Fortunately, there are a number of established criteria for this (so we don't have to 'make up' or 'create' our own), drawing largely from the work of scholars working in the area of Semitic influence on the Greek/Western world (e.g., Walter Burkert, Charles Pengrass, M. L. West), so let's start with some of their work:

"Since the discovery of the Akkadian epics and of Gilgamesh in particular, there has been **no shortage of associations between motifs in these and in the Homeric epics**, especially the Odyssey. **These motifs can be highlighted and used to surprise, but hardly to prove anything: Approximately the same motifs and themes will be found everywhere.** Instead of individual motifs, therefore, **we must focus on more complex structures, where sheer coincidence is less likely: a system** of deities and a basic cosmological idea, the narrative **structure** of a **whole scene**, decrees of the gods about mankind, or a very special configuration of attack and defense. **Once the historical link, the fact of transmission, has been established**, then further connections, including linguistic borrowings, become more likely, even if these alone do not suffice to carry the burden of proof." [[OT:ORNEI:88](#); his examples often contain elements that are 'holdovers'--elements that appear in the borrower that only made sense in the original source...they are *unexpected* and *without purpose in the new usage*, since they have been removed from their original context.]

"I can anticipate at least two possible lines of criticism that may be employed against my work. One would be that, in stressing similarities and parallels, I have ignored the great *differences* between Greek and Near Eastern literatures...my answer will be that of course Greek literature has its own character, its own traditions and conventions, and the contrast that might be drawn between it and any of the oriental literatures might far outnumber the common features. If anyone wants to write another book and point them out, I should have no objection...But even if it were ten times the size of mine (600+ pages!), it would not diminish the significance of the likenesses, because they are **too numerous** and **too striking to be put down to chance**. You cannot argue against the fact that it is raining by pointing out that much of the sky is blue." [[HI:EFHWAE:viii](#)]

"Difficult and hazardous are words which describe the study of Mesopotamian influence in Greek myths, and an appropriate method is essential. To establish influence, or at least the likelihood of influence, there are two main steps. **First it is necessary to establish the historical possibility of influence, and then the parallels between the myths of the areas must fulfill a sufficiently rigorous set of relevant criteria.**" [[HI:GMM:5](#)]

"The second step of the method is **to demonstrate the existence of parallels of the correct nature** between the Mesopotamian and Greek literary material. **Parallels must have qualities which conform to a suitable set of criteria in order to indicate influence** or its likelihood." [[HI:GMM:5](#)]

"It is **all too easy to run eagerly after superficial parallels which cannot really be sustained under a closer scrutiny**. Accordingly, the parallels must have **similar ideas underlying them** and, second, **any suggestion of influence requires that the parallels be numerous, complex and detailed, with a similar conceptual usage** and, ideally, that they should point to a specific myth or group of related myths in Mesopotamia. Finally, **the parallels and their similar underlying ideas** must involve **central features in the material** to be compared. **Only then, it would seem, may any claim stronger than one of mere coincidence be worthy of serious consideration**" [[HI:GMM:7](#)]

What kinds of examples do these authors offer us?

- *West* gives the example of Semitic idiom expressed in the Greek narrative text--**totally unexplainable apart from** borrowing [[HI:EFHWAE](#)]
- *Burkert* gives the example of the single-mention Tethys (as wife of Oceanus, in Homer), as a translation of Tiamat (as wife of Apsu, in Enuma Elish)--Tethys never occurs in all of mythology anywhere else; it is best/only explained as **a narrative 'holdover' from borrowed narrative structure** [[OT:ORNEI:92ff](#)]
- *Penglass* gives the examples of **condensed summaries of large mythic complexes** (implying reader familiarity) and of **combinations of motif/underlying ideas** applied in new contexts flawlessly, in Hesiod and Homer [[HI:GMM:237ff](#)]
- *Puhvel* gives the parallel scenes of Typhon in the sea (Nonnos) and Ullikummi (Hittite myth), in which **numerous** visual details and spatial arrangements are described in similar terms, in similar narrative context, and in similar sequence [[WR:CM:29](#); 'numerous, complex, detailed']

Now, if we extract some principles from these scholars, we would end up with:

1. Similarity of general motifs is not enough to "prove anything"; we must have "complex structures" (e.g., 'system of deities', 'narrative structure').
2. Ideally, we would need to establish the historical link first, before looking for borrowings.
3. Differences between structures/stories/complexes do not disprove influence, as long as the parallels are 'too numerous' and 'too striking'.
4. Parallels must be 'striking' (i.e., unexpected, 'odd', difficult to account for).
5. Some/many parallels/parallel motifs are superficial (i.e., identical on the surface), and 'prove nothing'.
6. Parallels that can be used to support the possibility of influence need to be numerous.
7. Parallels that can be used to support the possibility of influence need to be complex (i.e., with multiple parts and interrelationships).
8. Parallels that can be used to support the possibility of influence need to be detailed.
9. The details in alleged parallels must have the same "conceptual usage" reflected in them (e.g., they must be used with the same meaning).
10. The parallels must have the same 'ideas underlying them'.
11. The similar ideas in alleged parallels must be 'central features' in the material--and not just isolated or peripheral elements.
12. Details which are completely unexpected (to the point of being unexplainable apart from borrowing) are strong evidence for borrowing

13. Details which are almost irrelevant to the new context, but which have function in the old context are strong evidence for borrowing

Now, let me also point out here that the amount and texture of the evidence has to be **very strong**, for even in cases that do NOT look superficial, there still may be considerable doubt about the actual fact of direct influence or borrowing. Take this case from [\[HI:CMY6:13f\]](#):

"For example, there are obvious parallels between the Greek creation and succession myths and myths of Near Eastern cultures. The myth of the castration of Uranus by Cronus is better understood if we compare it with the Hittite myth of Kumarbi, in which Anu, the sky-god, is castrated by Kumarbi, who rises against him. Kumarbi swallows Anu's genitals, spits them out when he cannot contain them, and is finally replaced by the storm-god. The structure of this tale is paralleled by the myth of Uranus, castrated by Cronus, who, in his turn, cannot hold what he has swallowed (in this case, his children) and is eventually replaced by the sky-god Zeus. Some details in the two tales, of course, are different, but the basic functions (kingship, revolt, castration, swallowing, regurgitation, replacement by a new king) are the same and occur in the same sequence. Thus the basic structure is the same and a better understanding of the origin and purpose of the Greek myth, as narrated by Hesiod, is achieved by comparison with the older myth from Near Eastern culture. Whether direct influence can be proved (**and scholars do not agree on this point**), the structural similarities do at least show how Greek myths are to be studied in conjunction with those of other cultures." [emphasis mine]

The point I want to make here is that even with this 'numerous, complex, and detailed' structure, scholars are **STILL NOT** sure that borrowing happened! So, our evidence for borrowing will have to be at least stronger than this example.

So, to apply these to our case here, we would need to show that:

- The similarities between Jesus (as portrayed in the NT--**not** by the *later* post-apostolic Church Fathers) and the other relevant Savior-gods are very numerous, very 'striking', non-superficial, complex, within similar conceptual or narrative structures, detailed, have the same underlying ideas, be difficult to account for *apart from* borrowing, and be 'core' or 'central' to the story/image/motif enough to suspect borrowing;
- That we can come up with a historically plausible explanation of **HOW** the borrowing occurred;

What this means, of course, is that it is not simply enough to point to some vague similarities and yell "copy cat!"--one must, in light of the scholars' criteria documented above, be prepared somehow to defend his/her alleged parallels from the charge of being 'superficial' and to show that they are 'striking' (a rather subjective term, of course). In the scholarly world, noted above, the burden of argument was on the 'proponent' of borrowing. Each of the scholars above realize that there is a certain amount of subjectivity in how much one 'weights' the pieces, and our case is no different. The reader has to decide whether the parallels advanced by the CopyCatist are numerous, detailed, striking, complex, central, etc., etc. Even in such a monumental work as that by West, he can point out: "I am well aware that some of the parallels are more compelling than others. Readers must decide for themselves what weight they attach to each." [\[HI:EFHWAE:viii\]](#))

Now, we need to be really clear about the time frame we are talking about here. The issue that I am trying to address **deals only with the New Testament literature**, specifically the gospels and post-Revelation epistles. I am not at all interested in 'defending' the wide array of *post-apostolic* 'interpretations' and 'syncretistic methods' of any later Christian folk--including the Church Fathers. It is the Jesus of the gospels and epistles, and the claims made and images used of Him and His work on our behalf **in them** that concerns me here. This means that Christian material and events after around 65ad is of little concern to me (except as it bears on questions of NT authorship perhaps), and **does not count as evidence** for New Testament authors' "borrowing" of mythic/pagan elements in their creation of the foundational documents of the church--because of the time frames involved. For example, the fact that the New Testament **nowhere** assigns a specific date (year, month, date, or day of week) to the birthday of Jesus, means that any allegations that the post-apostolic church later 'borrowed' a birthday from a rival figure (e.g. Mithras, Sol Invictus) is irrelevant to the original objection above. [We will, of course, have to discuss the *sociological* aspects of that possibility below.]

So, let's examine each of these in turn:.

The similarities between Jesus (as portrayed in the NT) and the other relevant Savior-gods are very numerous, very 'striking', non-superficial, complex, within similar conceptual or narrative structures, detailed, have the same underlying ideas, and be 'core' or 'central' to the story/image/motif enough to suspect borrowing;

This issue is somehow seen as the 'strength' of the position(!), for the normal reader can sometimes be amazed at alleged similarities (note the words "almost identical" in the email question above).

However, there are several considerations that must be examined BEFORE we get into the alleged similarities:

Consideration: There is a surprising tendency of scholars of all persuasions to adopt Christian terminology in describing non-Christian religions, rituals, myths, etc. (e.g. "baptism", the "Last Supper"). [Joseph Campbell is sometimes a good example of this.] Sometimes this is done to establish some conceptual link for the reader, but often it borders on misleading the reader. Too often a writer uses such terminology imprecisely in describing a non-Christian element and then expresses shock in finding such similarities between the religions.

Nash points this out:

"One frequently encounters scholars who first use Christian terminology to describe pagan beliefs and practices, and then marvel at the striking parallels they think they have discovered. One can go a long way toward "proving" early Christian dependence on the mysteries by describing some mystery belief or practice in Christian terminology...Exaggerations and oversimplifications abound in this kind of literature. One encounters overblown claims about alleged likenesses between baptism and the Lord's Supper and similar "sacraments" in certain mystery cults...The mere fact that Christianity

has a sacred meal and a washing of the body is supposed to prove that it borrowed these ceremonies from similar meals and washings in the pagan cults. By themselves, of course, **such outward similarities prove nothing**. After all, religious ceremonies can assume only a limited number of forms, and they will naturally relate to important or common aspects of human life. The **more important question is the meaning of the pagan practices**."
[<http://www.summit.org/Resources/NT&PaganRel.htm>]

Nash is **demonstrating one of the criteria we noted above--that the details must have the same underlying idea, for it to count as a parallel**. [He uses the phrase "outward" similarities, in a similar usage to how Penglase uses "superficial".] A ritual dip in water, for example, is NOT a baptism if its purpose in the dogma of a particular religion is different. According the scholarly criteria, the lack of parallel *in the underlying idea* or 'conceptual usage' destroys this as piece of evidence for borrowing.

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A good example of this might be the rite of the *Taurobolium* (from the cult of the Worship of the Great Mother or Cybele/Attis). In it a priest stood in a pit under a plank floor containing a bull and a lamb (the two are always connected in the inscriptions). The bull was slaughtered and the blood of the animal fell upon the priest below. The priest comes up 'consecrated' to the priesthood, and is hailed as 'reborn' (*renatus*). In one late text (fourth century), he is said to have been 'reborn eternally'.

Predictably, some writers have used the phrase "washed in the blood of the Lamb" or "sprinkled with the blood of Jesus" to describe this ceremony, and earlier commentators have seen this as perhaps the basis for Paul's teaching in Romans 6 (union with Christ), images of 'spiritual childgrowth', the new birth, and even resurrection. Although there are perhaps those who still hold to this, **this has largely been abandoned** :

"Still others suggest that Paul's conception is related to ideas of union with a dying and rising god that was popular in Hellenistic 'mystery religions.' These 'mystery religions,' a group of religions very popular in the Hellenistic world, featured secret initiations and promised their adherents 'salvation,' often by participation in a cultic act that was held to bring the initiate into union with a god. Under the impulse of the history-of-religions movement early in this century, many scholars attributed various doctrines of Paul to dependence on these religions. **But direct dependence of Paul on these religions is now widely discounted**. More popular is the view that Paul's Hellenistic churches interpreted their experience of Christ in the light of these religions and that **Paul's teaching** demonstrates point of contact with, and **corrections of, this existing tradition**...The mystical and repeated 'dying and rising' of a mystery religion adherent with a nature god like

Osiris or Attis has **little to do with Paul's focus** on the Christian's participation in the historical events of Christ's life." [[NICNT](#), 'Romans', p362n54]

"Ancient Near Eastern religions had long had traditions of dying-and-rising gods, general vegetation deities renewed annually in the spring. Some ancient sources, especially early Christian interpretations of these religions, suggest that initiates into various mystery cults "died and rose with" the deity. **Scholars early in the twentieth century naturally saw in this tradition the background for Paul's language here.** Although the evidence is still disputed, **it is not certain that the mysteries saw a once-for-all dying-and-rising in baptism, as in Paul, until after Christianity became a widespread religious force** in the Roman Empire that some other religious groups imitated. More important, **the early Christian view of resurrection is certainly derived from the Jewish doctrine rather than from the seasonal revivification of Greek cults.**" [[BBC](#), at Rom 6]

"On the basis of this evidence **it can be firmly concluded that a direct influence from any mystery cult or from the Isis cult in particular, on Paul or on the theology of Rom 6:3–4, is most unlikely**" [[WBC](#), Romans, 6.3f]

"The **older history of religions school** sought to find the derivation of the notion 'new birth' in the mystery religions of the Hellenistic world, where initiates passed from death into life by being brought into a mysterious intimacy with the deity. But **in the light of the scarcity of early 'new birth' terminology** such as *anagennao* in the mystery religions, **recent scholarship has sought an origin of the concept elsewhere...**A more likely origin has been found in the OT and Judaism" [[NT:DictLNT](#), s.v. 'new birth']

"Some scholars have seen the background for such terminology (e.g. childhood and growth) in the mystery religions, with their notion of spiritual progression through various cultic rituals. Though some aspects of these texts can be understood in this context, **the notion of stages of faith was already present in some of the most distinctive teaching of Jesus, and ordinary family relationships provide a more plausible background here.**" [NT:DictLN , s.v. 'sonship, child, children']

"Some scholars have suggested that it was taken over from Greek mystery religions, in which initiation was conceived in terms of death and resurrection. From considerations of the late date of the records of these rites and differences of interpretation, particularly as to whether initiates in such cults clearly identified with a deity in death and resurrection or were offered immortality through such ritual experience, **the suggestion is highly unlikely** [[NT:DictPL](#),s.v., "dying and rising"]

“Some have suggested that Paul was influenced by the Greek mystery religions in his concept of dying and rising with Christ. **But this hypothesis is unnecessary and unlikely:** Baptism is a very Jewish phenomenon, and **there is little doubt that it came to Christians directly or indirectly from John the Baptist.** For John baptism was very much associated with the advent of the eschatological day of the Lord, and this eschatological dimension continues in Christian baptism. But for Christians like Paul the decisive eschatological events are the death and resurrection of Jesus; it is thus intelligible that baptism as the rite of initiation into the saved eschatological community should come to be associated with Jesus’ saving death and resurrection. There is therefore no need to invoke the mystery religions to explain Paul’s baptismal teaching. It is, however, possible that the Jesus-traditions that speak of taking up the cross and sharing in the sufferings of Jesus were influential.” [PFJFC:155f]

Now, the main reason this position has generally been abandoned (as noted above) is that it is **altogether unnecessary, and less 'useful' as an explanatory construct:** the elements in the gospels and epistles all **make more sense as having developed out of mainstream Judaism** and have much more 'numerous, complex, and striking parallels' to **Old Testament/Tanaach themes and passages.** Apart from issues of *chronology* and questions of *motivation for borrowing* (separate problems from that of detecting forceful parallels), the **Jewish background furnishes us with a system of underlying ideas** needed to make sense of the imagery.

Don Howell explains the general rationale for the diminishing of this 'borrowing' position [*BibSac*, V150, #599, Jul 93, p310]:

"At the turn of the 20th century a new approach to Paul was forged by the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, “**the History of Religions School.**” Spawned in Germany, this approach built on the Tübingen dichotomy between Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity, and **found the origins of the more developed Pauline Christology in the mystery religions and pagan cults of the Greek world.** The mystery religions of Greece (Eleusian), Egypt (Isis and Osiris), Syria (Adonis), Asia Minor (Cybele), and Rome (Mithras) were researched and mined for parallels with Pauline theology. A dying-rising redeemer god, the exalted *kurios*, sacramental redemption, initiation into mystic participation in the deity, gnosis, and pneumatic experience were mystery-religion concepts claimed to have conditioned Paul’s thinking.

"Two pioneers in this field were Bousset and Reitzenstein. Bousset argued that the Jesus of the primitive Palestinian church was the eschatological Son of Man, largely derived from Daniel 7:13–14. But in the Greek-speaking Christian communities like Antioch, Jesus was transformed, under the influence of the Hellenistic mystery cults, into the acclaimed *kurios*. “Behind the personal piety of Paul and his

theology there stands as a real power and a living reality the cultic veneration of the *kurios* in the community.” With consummate skill Bousset explored the Hermetic literature, Philo, Gnostic documents, and the cults of Isis, Osiris, and Orphis and discovered “parallels” with Paul’s Christ-mysticism (“in Christ”), doctrine of the Holy Spirit, Christ-Adam theology, cross and sacrament, and the dying-rising Redeemer. Reitzenstein, a philologist and authority on Eastern Gnosticism, researched the second-and third-century Hermetic literature and concluded that Gnostic terminology was the source of Paul’s Christology. Neill, in an extended survey of the History of Religions approach, credits the Harvard scholar Kirsopp Lake with popularizing in America the arguments of German scholars such as Bousset and Reitzenstein .

"The influence of the various *religionsgeschichtliche* models has greatly diminished in recent decades with the discovery of the Qumran scrolls and wider research in the Jewish materials of the intertestamental (Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha) and New Testament (rabbinical traditions) periods. It is no longer feasible to separate Hellenistic and Jewish influences into two hermetically sealed compartments. Paul’s Jewishness is in the process of being rediscovered. But a more fundamental issue is the entire logic of the comparative religionist methodology which presupposes the apostle to have been an inclusivistic, impressionable absorber of alien ideas rather than the proclaimer of a pure gospel of faith and repentance. As Hunter comments,

They did not stop to consider that their knowledge of these mysteries was really very scanty, that all this amazing transmogrification of the Gospel must have taken place within twenty years, that, if Paul derived his message from his environment, he did what no other missionary has ever done--borrowed his gospel from the people among whom he worked.

And, C.E. Arnold, in his article on *Syncretism* in [\[NT:DictLNT\]](#) summarized the current state of scholarship in this way:

"To what extent did the Hellenistic/Roman syncretism influence the development of early Christianity? H. Gunkel and other adherents of the History-of-Religions School argued that it was a major factor. Gunkel, in fact, concluded that, “Christianity is a syncretistic religion” (Gunkel, 95). He argued that the NT was strongly influenced by many foreign religions, but that these beliefs entered Christianity in the first instance through Judaism, which itself was very strongly syncretistic. R. Bultmann spoke of syncretism more often in connection with Hellenistic Christianity, which he sharply distinguished from Jewish Christianity. He noted, “on the whole, one could be tempted to term Hellenistic Christianity a syncretistic structure” (Bultmann, 1.164). For Bultmann the Jewish apocalyptic kerygma of Jesus was combined with

the gnostic myth of redemption as Christianity spread to the Gentile world. Like Gunkel, however, he saw Hellenistic Judaism as “in the grip of syncretism” (Bultmann, 1.171) and therefore as the purveyor of these concepts to Christianity.

"The subsequent course of scholarship has effectively dismantled many of the conclusions drawn by the History-of-Religions School. Various studies have demonstrated that there was not one coherent gnostic redeemer myth nor was there a common mystery-religion theology. We have already touched on the fact that Judaism was not the syncretistic religion that some scholars once thought that it was. Now most scholars are reluctant to assume that Gnosticism even existed during the genesis and early development of Christianity.

"The majority of scholars are reaffirming the essential Jewishness of the early Christian movement. The background of various Christian rites, ideas and terms is being illustrated out of the OT and Judaism, in contrast to the previous generation that pointed to gnostic texts and the mystery religions. The background of the Christian practice of baptism, for instance, is now seldom traced to the mystery initiation sacraments of Attis, Adonis or Osiris but to the OT initiation rite of circumcision and the Jewish water purification rituals.

"Gunkel, Bultmann and others clearly undervalued the formative influence of the OT and Judaism for early Christianity. Neither were they sufficiently open to the possibility that the NT writers could use **religious language shared by** adherents of other religions **without adopting the full meaning of that language**, as it was understood in other religious contexts. In other words, Christian writers could use the term *mystery* (e.g., Rev 10:7; Ign. Magn. 9.1; Diogn. 4.6) **without implying that Christianity is a mystery religion like the cults of Cybele or Mithras.** John could use the image of light (1 Jn 1:5, 7; 2:8, 9, 10) without dependence on a gnostic light-darkness dualism. **Both of these terms have long histories of usage in the OT that provide us with the essential conceptual framework** for understanding their NT usage. Yet at the same time they are terms that would communicate in a Gentile world, albeit now with a different set of connotations.

"There is also evidence that **the apostles and leaders in the early Christian movement made explicit and earnest attempts to resist the syncretistic impulses of the age.** For example, when Paul preached in Lystra (Acts 14:8–20), he was faced with an opportunity to make a syncretistic innovation to the gospel. Luke records that after Paul healed a crippled man the people of the city mistook him for Hermes (the messenger of Zeus) and Barnabas for Zeus. Rather than allowing any form of identification with their gods (even the identification of “the living God” with Zeus), Paul takes the bold step of telling them to “turn from these worthless things” to the one God, the Creator (Acts 14:15). **Earliest Christianity appears to have made**

stringent effort to resist the larger cultural trend toward the identification of deities and directed people to the God of Israel, who had now revealed himself in the Lord Jesus Christ.

To illustrate this from one of the alleged examples of borrowing, "*washed in the blood of the Lamb*" makes perfect sense **being seen against the background of OT usage:**

"Making robes white with blood is clearly a ritual rather than visual image: sacrificial blood purified utensils for worship in the Old Testament (see comment on Heb 9:21–22), and white was the color of robes required for worship in the New Testament period. [[BBC](#), in.loc.]

Likewise, the same goes for "*sprinkled with the blood of Jesus*", which could refer back to **either of two** OT passages/themes [although the Numbers 19 passage does not have any blood *actually in* the water of purification]:

"Such an understanding helps explain why obedience precedes rather than follows the “sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” The latter phrase gives concreteness and vividness to Peter’s brief glance at Christian conversion. **“sprinkling with the blood,” recalls the Jewish sacrificial system,** particularly as seen from a distance or in retrospect by the early Christians. The apparent **origin of the (sprinkling) terminology is the ceremony described in Numbers 19** in which ashes from the burning of a red heifer are mixed with water and sprinkled for purification on those who have defiled themselves by contact with a corpse (the phrase “water of sprinkling,” occurs repeatedly in Num 19:9, 13, 20, 21 LXX). In *Barn.* 8, this passage in its entirety is applied to Christ’s redemptive death, its imagery of sprinkling being associated with Jesus’ blood rather than with water and ashes (*Barn.* 5.1; 8.3; in the NT cf. Heb 9:13–14).

"More significantly, Hebrews uses the same language (where the LXX did not) in connection with the institution of the Mosaic covenant: Moses built an altar at the foot of Sinai, and when he had sacrificed cattle he threw half of the blood against the altar; the other half he put in bowls, and read aloud to the people out of the scroll of the covenant the Lord's commands. When they promised to obey all that the Lord commanded, Moses took the bowls and threw the remaining blood at the people, saying (in the words of Heb 9:20), “This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you” (cf. Exod 24:3–8; Heb 9:18–21). In Hebrews, the blood of the covenant poured out by Moses corresponds to the “blood of sprinkling” shed by Jesus, the “mediator of the new covenant” (Heb 12:24; cf. 10:29). The participants in this new covenant are invited to “draw near with a true heart in the full confidence of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse a guilty

conscience and having the body washed in pure water” (10:22). Peter lacks the direct reference to Christian baptism (although cf. 3:20), **but the close connection between obedience and sprinkling suggests that Exod 24:3–8 is as determinative for his imagery** as for that of Hebrews. Without speaking explicitly of a “new covenant” or the “blood of the covenant” (which may in his circles have been reserved for the Eucharist, cf. Mark 14:24; 1 Cor 11:25), Peter relies on language that had perhaps become already fixed among Christians as a way of alluding to the same typology. To “obey” was to accept the gospel and become part of a new community under a new covenant; to be sprinkled with Jesus’ blood was to be cleansed from one’s former way of living and released from spiritual slavery by the power of his death (cf. 1:18). Peter’s choice of images confirms the impression that he writes to communities of Gentiles as if they were a strange new kind of Jew.

The First Covenant was **inaugurated** with this ceremony (cf. also Heb 9.18ff):

Then He said to Moses, “Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel, and you shall worship at a distance. 2 “Moses alone, however, shall come near to the Lord, but they shall not come near, nor shall the people come up with him.” 3 Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, “All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do!” 4 And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. 5 And he sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the Lord. 6 And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. 7 Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” 8 So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” [Ex 23.1-7]

As the New Covenant--from the New Moses of Deut 18-- was **inaugurated** with Christ's blood (but not physically literal):

And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood. [Lk 22.20]

(By the way, these biblical events are **covenant inauguration events**--**NOT acts of individual** dedication, consecration, or ordination. The underlying ideas/structures of **these** events would be **more 'parallel'** to the sacrifices performed *when Cybele was first 'adopted' by the Romans in 204 bc*, than to the multiple, individual ordinations of priests and high priests. Even the passage in 1 Peter 1.2 is **not individual** in nature: "In the Old Testament and Judaism, God's people were **corporately** "chosen," or "predestined," because God "foreknew" them; Peter applies the same language to believers in Jesus. Obedience and the sprinkling of blood also established the first covenant (Ex 24:7–8)." [[BBC](#), at 1 Pet 1.2]...the *underlying* ideas needed to establish non-superficial parallels, in this case, reveal **major structural differences** between the events in the bible and the *taurobolia* of Roman times)

Now, unless one is going to argue that the OT passage is somehow dependent on some at-best-first-century-AD taurobolic experience (perhaps on the basis of both having the 'striking parallels' of sacrificial bulls and sprinkling of blood...sarcastic smile), it should be obvious why modern, mainstream scholarship has abandoned such notions. Any alleged parallels between the Jesus story and the Attis/Cybele/Taurobolic experiences are **dwarfed by** a host of 'numerous, complex, and detailed' parallels *with OT/Judaism*.

If one considers carefully the details of the **history** of the ritual (see [mostlybull.html](#)), the *taurobolic* ceremony (of Cybele/Attis--NOT the one by Mithra) in the Roman period was:

- A substitutionary **castration**, in which the priest was 'vicariously' castrated in the castration of the bull
- A regular sacrifice, which could be performed for the benefit of the Emperor and Empire
- A 'rebirth' to virtue/purity and 'good luck' for twenty years (even the 4th century phrase 'to eternity' doesn't mean the same thing as in Christianity--see the [article](#))
- A dedication/consecration of a priest to the (existing) service/religion of the Goddess Cybele
- A (possible) re-enactment of an old hunter-goddess myth (the capture and killing of the bull by a goddess with a hunting spear)

Apart from the **general, "non-striking", and ubiquitous motifs** of sacrifice, consecration, (possible) rebirth, blood sprinkling, and substitution, there just aren't any 'numerous, complex, and detailed' correspondences with the NT documents. Even the closest candidate--sprinkling with blood--was too general a practice in the ancient world to be 'striking' [e.g., in several orgiastic cults the priests/priestesses would whip or cut themselves with knives, and sprinkle their blood *on the idols of the god/goddess*].

And the next closest candidate--'rebirth'--is neither a technical term of the Mysteries, nor is it close enough in meaning to NT usage to consider it parallel:

"Though Philo borrows not a little from the Mysteries, he does not use this verb ('rebirth'). On the other hand, **Josephus uses it in a general sense, with no evident dependence on the Mysteries.** *Bell.*, 4, 484... Thus at the time of the NT (rebirth) was not common, **but it was used generally and not merely in the Mysteries, like the Latin *renasci*.** This is confirmed by the use of the substantive (in Philo)... Philo employs this for the Stoic doctrine of the rejuvenation of the world ... (*Aet. Mund.*). Elsewhere he has the term *paliggenesiva* for the same thing, e.g., *Aet. Mund.*, 9...The mere mention of ('rebirth') **does not prove any dependence on the Mysteries**; this applies equally to 1 Pt. 1:3, 23...There is a profound gulf between the religion of the Mysteries, in which man is deified by magical rites, and this religion of faith...As the OT and Jewish elements are very much alive in this religion, so the origin of the thought of regeneration is to be sought in Judaism. It is true that the Jews did not describe themselves or others as regenerate. Yet they hoped for a new life for the world and themselves, and they did not speak of this merely as resurrection or new creation, but also thought in terms of *paliggenesiva* and *palin genesthai* when speaking Greek. [[TDNT](#), s.v. "anagennao"]

"*Anagennan* is found in the NT only here and in v 23, and not at all in the LXX (except for one doubtful variant in Sir, Prol. 28). It is the equivalent of *gennan anothēn* in John 3:3, 7 and may have been derived from a slightly different form of that very saying of Jesus (cf., e.g., Justin Martyr, Justin, *Apol.* 1.61.3. "For the Christ also said, Unless you are born again, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"; **cf. also Matt 18:3**--"*He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3 And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*)...

Certainly the Gospel tradition, is a nearer and more plausible source for Peter's terminology than, e.g., the pagan mystery religions (as proposed by R. Perdelwitz; in refutation, cf. F. Böhssl, *TDNT* 1:673–75, and Selwyn, 305–11). *Anagennao* is found in only one (fourth century A.D.) text bearing on mystery religions: Sallustius, *De Deis* 4 (ed. A. D. Nock [1926] 8, 24). [[WBC](#), 1 Peter 1.3]

"In 376, a follower declared himself 'reborn for eternity' and two inscription from Turin are consecrated *viribus aeterni*, that is to say to the 'force' (vital, sexual) of the 'eternal', in commemoration of a *taurobolium*. In fact, we know that this bloody 'baptism' was held to regenerate for twenty years the man or woman who descended into the pit. The Latin *aeternus* indeed **implies durability rather than transcendental eternity in the Christian sense.**" [[HI:TCRE:52](#)]

Sorry for all the detail (but there's more, obviously, in the history piece at mostlybull.html), and we *will* get into the Attis/resurrection thing again later, but I wanted to document **the fact that**, and show **why** the "Mystery Religions" version of the CopyCat thesis--**relative to New Testament**

formation (*not* the writings of the post-apostolic church!)-- has been generally abandoned in the scholarly arena of New Testament studies. Before **Qumran** and before **the rise in our understanding of "less-official" Judaism** as found in the Pseudepigrapha, it was a little more believable, but after the last fifty years, it is difficult to maintain the position easily.

.....

Another very common alleged similarity is **the virgin birth**. Other religious figures, especially warrior gods (and actually some heroic human figures such as Alexander the Great) over time became associated with some form of miraculous birth, *occasionally* connected with virginity. It is all too easy to simply accept this on face value without investigating further. In Raymond Brown's research on the Birth Narratives of Jesus [BM:522-523], he evaluates these non-Christian "examples" of virgin births and his conclusions bear repeating here:

"Among the parallels offered for the virginal conception of Jesus have been the conceptions of figures in *world religions* (the Buddha, Krishna, and the son of Zoroaster), in *Greco-Roman mythology* (Perseus, Romulus), in *Egyptian and Classical History* (the Pharaohs, Alexander, Augustus), and among famous *philosophers or religious thinkers* (Plato, Apollonius of Tyana), to name only a few.

"Are any of these divinely engendered births really parallel to the non-sexual virginal conception of Jesus described in the NT, where Mary is not impregnated by a male deity or element, but the child is begotten through the creative power of the Holy Spirit? These "parallels" consistently involve a type of *hieros gamos* (note: "holy seed" or "divine semen") where a divine male, in human or other form, impregnates a woman, either through normal sexual intercourse or through some substitute form of penetration. **In short, there is no clear example of virginal conception in world or pagan religions that plausibly could have given first-century Jewish Christians the idea of the virginal conception of Jesus.**"

And the history-of-religions scholar David Adams Leeming (writing in EOR, s.v. "Virgin Birth") begins his article by pointing out that all 'virgin births' are NOT necessarily such:

"A virgin is someone who has not experienced sexual intercourse, and a virgin birth, or parthenogenesis (Gr., *parthenos*, "virgin"; *genesis*, "birth"), is one in which a virgin gives birth. **According to this definition, the story of the birth of Jesus is a virgin birth story whereas the birth of the Buddha and of Orphic Dionysos are not.** Technically what is at issue is the loss or the preservation of virginity during the process of conception. The Virgin Mary was simply "found with child of the Holy Ghost" before she was married and before she had "known" a man. So, too, did the preexistent Buddha enter the womb of his mother, but since she was already a married woman, there is no reason to suppose she was a virgin at the time. In the Ophic story of Dionysos, Zeus came to Persephone in the form of a serpent and impregnated her, so that the maiden's virginity was technically lost."

What these scholars are talking about is **the textual data in the account**. In other words, **does the relevant sacred text describe or imply in any way, a means of impregnation or conception?** Leemings comment that Mary was "simply 'found with child'" documents the **textual data** from that miraculous conception story--the text simply *omits* any comment, description, or implication about the method/manner of her becoming pregnant--the *sexual* element is simply missing altogether. If other accounts suggest or give **details of this process**--even if not the 'normal' type of intercourse (e.g. a snake, a piece of fruit)--then, according to these scholars, it is not a 'virgin conception' (by comparison). Ancient gods and goddess were typically very sexually 'explicit' and sexually 'active' (!), and this element is **completely absent** from the biblical narratives and material, especially the story of the virginal conception of Jesus.

This **issue of agency/means** is a *distinguishing trait* of the gospel accounts, compared with other stories of divine-engendered births:

"In our discussion of the genre of the birth Narratives we noted that any comparison of Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 to **pagan divine birth stories** leads to the conclusion that **the Gospel stories cannot be explained simply on the basis of such comparisons**. This is **particularly the case in regard to the matter of the virginal conception, for what we find in Matthew and Luke is not the story of some sort of sacred marriage (hieros gamos) or a divine being descending to earth and, in the guise of a man, mating with a human woman, but rather the story of a miraculous conception without aid of any man, divine or other wise**. The Gospel story is rather about how Mary conceived **without any form of intercourse** through the agency of the Holy Spirit. **As such this story is without precedent either in Jewish or pagan literature, even including the OT.**" [[NT:DictJG](#), s.v. "Birth of Jesus"]

In fact, it is quite different from the many stories of miracle births in the ancient world:

"Ancient biographers sometimes praised the miraculous births of their subjects (especially prominent in the Old Testament), but there are **no close parallels to the virgin birth**. Greeks told stories of gods impregnating women, but the text indicates that **Mary's conception was not sexual; nor does the Old Testament (or Jewish tradition) ascribe sexual characteristics to God**. Many miraculous birth stories in the ancient world (including Jewish accounts, e.g., 1 Enoch 106) are heavily embroidered with mythical imagery (e.g., babies filling houses with light), in contrast with the straightforward narrative style of this passage (cf. similarly Ex 2:1–10). [[BBC](#), Matt 1.18]

Let's take a quick look at the gospel narratives, to see this clearly...Remember the background and sequence of these events:

"Marriages were arranged for individuals by parents, and **contracts were negotiated**. After this was accomplished, **the individuals were considered married and were called husband and wife**. They **did not, however, begin to live together**. **Instead, the woman continued to live with her parents and the man with his for one year**. The **waiting period was to demonstrate the faithfulness of the pledge of purity given** concerning the bride. If she was found to be with child in this period, she obviously was not pure, but had been involved in an unfaithful sexual relationship. Therefore the marriage could be annulled. If, however, the one-year waiting period demonstrated the purity of the bride, the husband would then go to the house of the bride's parents and in a grand processional march lead his bride back to his home. **There they would begin to live together as husband and wife and consummate their marriage physically**. Matthew's story should be read with this background in mind.

"Mary and Joseph were in the one-year waiting period when Mary was found to be with child. They had never had sexual intercourse and Mary herself had been faithful (vv. 20, 23). While little is said about Joseph, one can imagine how his heart must have broken. He genuinely loved Mary, and yet the word came that she was pregnant. His love for her was demonstrated by his actions. He chose not to create a public scandal by exposing her condition to the judges at the city gate. Such an act could have resulted in Mary's death by stoning (Deut. 22:23-24). Instead he decided to divorce her quietly.

"Then in a dream (cf. Matt. 2:13, 19, 22), an angel told Joseph that Mary's condition was not caused by a man, but through the Holy Spirit (1:20; cf. v. 18). The Child Mary carried in her womb was a unique Child, for He would be a Son whom Joseph should name Jesus for He would save His people from their sins. These words must have brought to Joseph's mind the promises of God to provide salvation through the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-37). The unnamed angel also told Joseph that this was in keeping with God's eternal plan, for the Prophet Isaiah had declared 700 years before that the virgin will be with Child (Matt. 1:23; Isa. 7:14). While Old Testament scholars dispute whether the Hebrew *almah* should be rendered "young woman" or "virgin," God clearly intended it here to mean virgin (as implied by the Gr. word *parthenos*). Mary's miraculous conception fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy, and her Son would truly be Immanuel . . . God with us. In light of this declaration **Joseph was not to be afraid to take Mary into his home** (Matt. 1:20). **There would be misunderstanding in the community and much gossip at the well**, but Joseph knew the true story of Mary's pregnancy and God's will for his life.

"As soon as Joseph awakened from this dream, he obeyed. **He violated all custom by immediately taking Mary into his home rather than waiting till the one-year time period of betrothal had passed**. Joseph was probably thinking of what would be best for Mary in her condition. He brought her home and began to care and provide for her. But there

was no sexual relationship between them until after the birth of this Child, Jesus. [Bible Knowledge Commentary, at Matt 1.18ff]

The most detailed text we have about this event is Luke 1.35:

"And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon (*epileusetai*) you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow (*episkiasei*) you"

The "**Holy Spirit coming upon you**" is not to be conceived as some kind of spiritual 'intercourse'--this is a stock, generic phrase from OT literature.

It means empowerment, being set apart for a special task, and the such like. Look at some of the examples:

The Lord therefore said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. 17 "Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put Him upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you shall not bear it all alone. [Num 11.16]

And when the sons of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. 10 And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel. [Jud 3.9]

Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him. [Jud 6.34]

Then Samson went down to Timnah with his father and mother, and came as far as the vineyards of Timnah; and behold, a young lion came roaring toward him. 6 And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily, so that he tore him as one tears a kid though he had nothing in his hand; [Jud 14.5]

Then the Spirit of the Lord will come upon you mightily, and you shall prophesy with them and be changed into another man. [1 Sam 10.6]

Then the Spirit came upon Amasai, who was the chief of the thirty, and he said, "We are yours, O David, And with you, O son of Jesse! Peace, peace to you, And peace to him who helps you; Indeed, your God helps you!" Then David received them and made them captains of the band. [1 Chr 12.18]

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. [Is 42.1]

And it will come about after this That I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and daughters will prophesy, Your old men will dream dreams, Your young men will see visions. 29 “And even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days. [Joel 2.28ff]

[and of course, all the prophets spoke in the name of the Lord, as the "Spirit came upon them"]

One of the more interesting uses occurs in Isaiah 32.15, which might be echoed in the Virgin conception and in the cases of 'barren conceptions'--the image of miraculous/spectacular fertility:

*Until the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high,
And the wilderness becomes a fertile field
And the fertile field is considered as a forest. [Is 32.15]*

This is part of the reason why the NT scholars I cite here are so confident (even for 'cautious' scholars) that pagan sexual elements are NOT in the New Testament texts.

The angel had paid a visit to her home, and "*gone into/unto/to her*" (same Greek phrase as Joseph 'going into Pilate' to ask for the body of Jesus in Mk 15.23; the angel 'going into/unto' Cornelius in Acts 10.3; and the accusation of Peter 'going into/unto' Gentiles and eating with them in Acts 11.3). The angel announced the good news of God's promise to Israel and Mary asks 'how'? The verse in 1.35 actually doesn't answer the question at all, but it **does avoid saying** some things (even 'coily'):

"There is not the slightest evidence that either of the verbs involved has ever been used in relation to sexual activity or even more broadly in connection with the conception of a child (cf. Fitzmyer, TS 34 [1973] 569; not *eperchesthai* but *epibainein* would be needed to express the notion of coming upon [mounting] sexually [e.g., PhiloDeSom 1.200]). [[WBC](#), in.loc.]

Instead, the verbs express more general notions of God's providence and faithfulness to His promises:

“[T]o come upon,” is Septuagintal idiom but is used in connection with the Spirit only at **Isa 32:15** where the MT has (*“will be poured*

out”). Acts 1:8 “when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” Since Luke nowhere else refers to the coming of the Spirit in these terms, he is probably drawing attention to the Greek text of Isa 32:15 in both cases: this is the eschatological coming of the Spirit that will **cause the wilderness to become a fruitful field.** ...“will overshadow,” like “will come upon,” has probably been influenced by the LXX text of **Exod 40:35**, perhaps via the transfiguration account (Luke 9:34): Mary's experience is to be compared to the dramatic way in which Gods glory and the cloud marking his presence came down upon the completed tabernacle" [[WBC](#), in.loc.]

"The word for "overshadow" (episkiazo) carries the sense of the holy, powerful presence of God, as in the description of the cloud that "covered" (Heb. *sakan*; NIV, "settled upon") the tabernacle when the tent was filled with the glory of God (Exod 40:35; cf. Ps 91:4). The word is used in all three accounts of the Transfiguration to describe the overshadowing of the cloud (Matt 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34). [EBCNT, in. loc.]

So, one needs to be VERY careful and detailed in examining alleged parallels between figures widely separated in space and time. [And remember, we are focused only on the formation of the New Testament documents (and the content-traditions behind them)--NOT what the post-apostolic community will do with them!]

Consideration: We need also remember that our question deals **only** with the issue of the New Testament content--not the Councils, not the hymns, not the Fathers, not the sects, not the Apocrypha. **We are concerned with the Jesus of the gospels and of the message of the post-ascension early Church.** Items and elements 'borrowed' from non-Christian religions **after the first century AD.** simply cannot be used to argue for borrowing in the years 33-70 a.d., when the NT was composed.

Pushback: "Well wait a minute, bud...didn't the late church start 'stealing ideas' from paganism--like Sol Invictus' December 25th birthday for Jesus? And if later Christians did that, **why in the world** would we believe the first ones wouldn't steal ideas, too?!"

This is a different type of argument, dealing with **motivation/psychology** ('what might have happened') instead of **history** ('what the evidence indicates'), and so our approach may have to be a bit different. But before we get into this, let's examine the oft-stated belief about the stealing of December 25th...

First, let's note that **it is not at all certain that this theft actually occurred--** the data is mixed:

"In regard to the day of Jesus' birth, **as early as Hippolytus (A.D. 165–235) it was said to be December 25, a date also set by John Chrysostom (A.D. 345–407)** whose arguments prevailed in the Eastern Church. There is nothing improbable about a mid-winter birth. Luke

2:8 tells us that the shepherds' flocks were kept outside when Jesus was born. This detail might favor a date between March and November when such animals would normally be outside. But the Mishnah (m. *ṣ̄eṣal*. 7.4) suggests that sheep around Bethlehem might also be outside during the winter months (Hoehner). Therefore, though there is no certainty, it appears that Jesus was born somewhere between 4–6 B.C., perhaps in mid-winter. **Both the traditional Western date for Christmas (Dec. 25) and the date observed by the Armenian Church (Jan. 6) are equally possible. The biblical and extra-biblical historical evidence is simply not specific enough to point decisively to either traditional date.** The celebration of the nativity is attested in Rome as early as A.D. 336 and this celebration also involved recognizing January 6 as Epiphany, the day the Magi visited Jesus." [\[NT:DictJG](#), s.v. 'birth of jesus']

"The exact day of Jesus birth' is unknown. The Gnostic Basilidians in Egypt (**late second century**) commemorated Jesus' baptism on **January 6**, and by the early fourth century many Christians in the East were celebrating **both his nativity** and baptism **then...In 274 Emperor Aurelian** decreed December 25 as the celebration of the 'Unconquerable Sun," the first day in which there was a noticeable increase in light after the winter solstice. The earliest mention of a Feast of the Nativity is found in a document composed in 336. Some feel Constantine (who died in 337) may have selected this day for Christmas because of a deep-seated respect for the popular pagan solstice festival. Others argue that the date was chosen **as a replacement for it**, that it, to honor the 'Sun of Righteousness.' Firmly established in the West within a few decades, another century passed before the Eastern church adopted December 25...The only holdout was the Armenian church, which still observes the nativity on January 6." [\[TK:104f\]](#)

"Aurelian celebrated the *dies natalis Solis Invicti* ("birthday of Sol Invictus") on December 25. **Whether this festival was celebrated earlier than the third century is unknown. Nor is it certain that December 25 was the birthday of Mithras** as well as of Sol Invictus. This has not prevented many scholars from assuming that Mithraic influence upon Christianity was involved in the adoption of this date for Christmas...Roger Beckwith concludes that 'a date in the depths of winter (January-February) is therefore one of the two possibilities; and it may be that Clement, and through him Hippolytus, were in possession of a genuine historical tradition to this effect, which in the course of time had been mistakenly narrowed down to a particular day.'...Clement of Alexandria (circa 200) in his *Stromateis* (1.146) noted that Gnostic Basilidians in Egypt celebrated Jesus' baptism either on January 10 or January 6. By the early fourth century Christians in the East were celebrating Jesus' birth on January 6..." [\[OT:PAB:520f\]](#)

Later church tradition remembered it as a 'competitive strategy': "The reason, then, why the fathers of the church moved the January 6th celebration to December 25th was this, they say: it was the custom of

the pagans to celebrate on this same December 25th the birthday of the Sun, and they lit lights then to exalt the day, and invited and admitted the Christians to these rites. When, therefore, the teachers of the Church saw that Christians inclined to this custom, figuring out a strategy, they set the celebration of the true Sunrise on this day, and ordered Epiphany to be celebrated on January 6th; and this usage they maintain to the present day along with the lighting of lights." (12th century bishop, cited in [HI:CP68C:155])

"The equinoxes and solstices **must have been** especially sacred. This was verified for the spring equinox of **172**, the day when the Mithraeum 'of the Seven Spheres', at Ostia, was opened to a new community. The vernal equinox marked the anniversary of the sacrifice that had revived the world. **Perhaps** at the winter solstice (25 December) they celebrated the birth of Mithras emerging from the rock..." ([HI:TCRE:234](#), emphasis mine...and I might ask the question here as to how many solar deities did NOT celebrate the Winter Solstice as a 'rebirth'?! All the ones I know of did (e.g. [HI:SSK:157-65](#)), not sure that really counts as a 'historical birthday' in the same sense as Jesus'; so, Eliade: "The anniversary of the Deus Sol Invictus was set at December 25th, the 'birthday' of **all** Oriental solar deities" [[WR:HRI2:411](#)]...)

Secondly, what difference would it have made? The Roman Empire, with the "conversion" of Constantine, **knew quite clearly the difference between the Jesus of the Christians and the Sun God of the Roman elite or the Mithras of the military**. There would be no confusion between the two. The fierce struggles "for the minds of men" between Christian thought and pagan thought of the past two centuries kept the distinctions very, very clear..."Converting" a holiday from Sol/Mithras to Christ would even "make sense", given the early Kingdom-theology of the Church (see below discussion)...Just as 'converting' temples would look to them a bit later, and maybe even 'converting' statues (and changing the names, obviously). And you can rest assured that Mithraists no more celebrated the birthday of Christ on that day, any more than the Christians did Mithra's. For someone to assert that this could only happen if the two 'gods' were already very similar, simply does not understand the **intense** Christian-versus-pagan polemic of those times, and the highly developed positions within that polemic. The major exchanges between the second and third century Christian apologists and theologians, and the sharp and powerful attacks of Celsus and Porphyry, were only the tip of the iceberg. The Roman legislation battles and the constant watchful eye (and interventions) of the Roman government over this 'dangerous sect' insured that the battle lines were always clear to the rulers, elites, and urban middle-class. And, we don't even have to get all the way to 'conversion'--**it might have been picked for 'protest' reasons**: "The purpose was that it should be celebrated **in opposition to the sun-cult**" [[NIDNTT](#)]

So,

- It's not clear that it was *deliberately set to the same day* as the birthday of Sol Invictus (it may have be December 25 *anyway*)
- It's not clear that it was established **later** than the first known celebration of Sol's birthday (Hippolytus is writing *before* Aurelian's law)
- It could have been *deliberately set to the same day*, as a 'protest' or 'opposition' movement, or as a 'conversion' initiative--**without true 'borrowing'** of the holiday itself (i.e., the ***content and conceptual meaning*** of the holiday would certainly be massively different, and clear to the participants, *even if* the 'trappings' were the same)

And, therefore, it is not at all clear that the action was a case of 'borrowing pagan ideas' and smuggling them into Christianity.

But back to the *pushbak*: There are two ways to look at this issue:

First, the pushback doesn't actually provide any evidence that borrowing occurred during the construction of the New Testament.

Let's agree that the later church--somewhere, sometime, someway--did some 'illegal syncretism'. What would that actually *prove*? Only that some Christians did borrow, and by implication (loosely speaking, though) that other Christians **could have done** the same thing. And, in the mouth of the pushbacker, it **could have been** the New Testament authors who could have done this, in the 35-70 AD timeframe.

But **no one is arguing** (certainly not me) that they *couldn't have done it*, but rather that they *didn't do it*. The **evidence** may support borrowing **later**; but in *our (earlier)* case, it doesn't...That's my argument--that "*the evidence leads us to believe borrowing did **not** occur*", and NOT that "*our presumptions about the purity of the apostolic church leads us to believe it*"! Huge difference...

I don't put syncretistic borrowing past *anyone* (pagan or Christian), and we **know** that splinter groups in the apostolic age did *just that*. The apostles are **constantly having to deal with** people who were **trying to** smuggle non-Jesus elements into the early church: the Jesus-plus-Law group (cf. Galatians), the Jesus-plus-magic group (cf. Acts 19.17ff), Jesus-plus-ApolloTyrimnaeus (cf. Rev 2.20, Thyatira), Jesus-plus-Epicureanism (the adversaries in 2 Peter), Jesus-plus-PlatonicDualism (First John), Jesus-plus-Phrygian-cults (Colossians), Jesus-plus-astrology (Eph 1). **Paul himself can be seen in active, aggressive, and 'antagonistic' combat against the various pagan systems of his day; NOT a 'borrowing kind of guy'** [quotes below are from NT:DictPL, s.v. "Religions, Greco-Roman"]:

- **The mystery cults:** "However, there are what appear to be a number of words and phrases in Pauline vocabulary which seem to have been derived ultimately from the language used to describe aspects of the mystery cults. These terms, which include "wisdom" (1 Cor 1:17–31),

“knowledge” (1 Cor 8:1; 13:8), “spiritual person” contrasted with “psychic person,” (1 Cor 2:14–16), “to be initiated” (Phil 4:12), “mystery” and “perfect” or “mature” (1 Cor 2:5–6), “unutterable” (2 Cor 12:4), **do not appear to be drawn directly from the mystery cults but had much earlier passed into the common fund of figurative religious language.** In particular instances it appears that **Paul actually adopted the language of his opponents in his attempt to refute them** (e.g., 1 Cor 2:6–13)."

- **The imperial cult:** "The imperial cult was particularly influential throughout Asia Minor, including the eastern region where Tarsus was located. Beginning with the divine Augustus, Roman emperors were frequently lauded with such titles as *kyrios* (“Lord”) and *soter* (“savior”), and **these titles were also used of Jesus by Paul** and other early Christians (Rom 1:4; 4:24; 16:2; Phil 2:11; 3:20). While **these titles are used of God frequently in the Greek OT**, they would have had clear associations with the imperial cult to many ancient Mediterraneans. **While the title “Son of God” was certainly derived from the OT** (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7), the phrase *divi filius* (“son of god”) was used of Augustus (referring to his adopted father Julius Caesar) and was a title taken over by other Roman emperors to underline their filial relationship to their divinized predecessors, so that this designation would also have had associations with the imperial cult for many ancients." [**Paul specifically says that there are no 'Lords' but Jesus.**]
- **Pagan sacrifices:** "Since observant Jews had scruples against idolatrous practices and followed dietary laws based on the Torah, which prohibited the consumption of meat from unclean animals or even clean animals not killed in a ritually appropriate manner, Jews and Jewish Christians were naturally reluctant to eat the meat of animals sacrificed to pagan deities. While part of the victims sacrificed in Greek temples was consumed on the premises by priests and worshipers, the rest was sold to the public in the market place. The practice of eating “meat sacrificed to idols”, could refer to participation in a sacral meal in a temple or during the distribution of sacrificial meat in the course of a public religious festival, or to the practice of eating meat purchased at the marketplace but which had originally been part of a pagan sacrifice. **Paul thought that when people sacrificed to idols they were really sacrificing to demons** (1 Cor 10:20), **a view common in Judaism** (Deut 32:17; Ps 19:5; Jub. 1:11; 11:4–6; 1 Enoch 19:1), and even found among some pagans such as the philosopher Celsus, though for him *daimones* were petty deities (Origen *Contra Celsum* 8.24)."
- **Pagan divination:** " In Philippi Paul **exorcised a “spirit of divination,”** from a young female slave used as a fortune teller by her owners (Acts 16:16–18)."
- **A local Zeus/Hermes cult:** "Following the narrative of the healing of a cripple at Lystra by Barnabas and Paul, the onlookers make the

acclamation “The gods have come down to us in human form,” and they called Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes (cf. Acts 28:6). The priest of the local temple of Zeus then brought oxen and garlands with the intention of sacrificing to Barnabas-Zeus and Paul-Hermes. From Homer on, Greek tradition entertained the possibility that gods could disguise themselves as human beings (Iliad 24.345–47; Odyssey 1.105; 2.268; 17.485–87; Homeric Hymn to Demeter 94–97, 275–81; Plato Soph. 216b; Rep. 2.20 [381b–382c]; Silius Italicus 7.176; Ovid Metam. 8.626), though such disguises were not usually maintained very long and were generally followed by a recognition scene. Zeus and Hermes were occasionally paired since Zeus had chosen Hermes as his herald and spokesperson (Diodorus Siculus 5.75.2; Apollodorus 3.10.2; Iamblichus De Myst. 1.1). Paul was identified by the onlookers with Hermes precisely because he was the chief speaker (Acts 14:12). The closest mythological parallel recounts how Zeus and Hermes, disguised as mortals, were barred from a thousand homes until welcomed by the aged farm couple Baucis and Philemon (Ovid Metam. 8.611–724). In Greek tradition the appearance of a deity is traditionally the occasion when divine honors are instituted, a fact which accounts for the behavior of the priest of the temple of Zeus in Acts 14:13." **[Paul calls their gods 'worthless things']**

- **An unknown god at Athens:** " In the context of a visit to Athens narrated in Acts 17:16–34 (a section in which the author of Luke-Acts reveals a familiarity with philosophical traditions and language), Paul visits the Areopagus and, in the manner of an ancient philosopher, directs an apologetic speech to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers present. In the introduction to this speech (the *captatio benevolentiae*), he congratulates the Athenians for their piety and then refers to an altar in the vicinity with an inscription “to an unknown god,” claiming that it is this God whom he is now proclaiming to them... Pausanias reports the existence of altars to “unknown gods” (in the plural) in Athens and Olympia (Pausanias 1.1.4; 5.14.8). Important cult centers such as Athens, Olympia and Pergamon had dozens of altars to traditional Greek gods (Zeus, Athena, Hermes, etc.), to less traditional deities (e.g., Helios, “sun,” and Selene, “moon”), to abstractions (e.g., Pistis, “fidelity,” and Arete, “virtue”) and (in an attempt to be complete, i.e., to have a “precinct for altars of all gods without exception”) to “unknown gods” and (safer still) to “all the gods.” Though no inscription has been found which exactly reproduces the phraseology of Acts 17:23, it is quite possible that such inscriptions actually existed." **[Paul specifically rejects the entire pantheon of their gods, as those who 'live in temples' and are 'served by human hands']**
- **Artemis of the Ephesians** (Acts 19:23–41). "In this episode (perhaps alluded to in 1 Cor 15:32 and 2 Cor 1:8–11), Paul's success in proclaiming the gospel in the Roman Province of Asia is perceived as threatening the livelihood of the silver-workers guild, which made miniature silver replicas of the temple of Artemis to be sold as souvenirs or amulets (Acts 19:24). The temple of Artemis in Ephesus

was one of the seven wonders of the world (Strabo 14.1.20–23; Pausanias 2.2.5; 4.31; Achilles Tatius 7–8; Xenophon Eph. Ephesian Tale 1.1–3), and the city was given the title “temple-keeper” (Acts 19:35), as a major center of the imperial cult. The acclamation “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” (Acts 19:28) reflects a popular title of the goddess (Xenophon Eph. Ephesian Tale 1.11).” [**The local populace knew that Paul taught 'that man-made gods are no gods at all',** 19.26]

The issue, then, is **not** *could* they, **but** *did* they. And that is what we are trying to analyze in this article. If our study of the alleged parallels don't turn up some really 'numerous, complex, detailed, striking' and "with underlying ideas" parallels, then any cases of 'borrowing' *at any other time period* remains **irrelevant** to our discussion.

The church was **never unclear in its exclusivistic** message--the pagan world knew exactly what its "mission" was relative to 'other gods':

"That **attack was sharp and consistent**. It followed from Jewish practice. **Saint Paul is at pains to emphasize and control his usage**, referring to 'the **so-called gods**', 'gods that are **not in their nature (gods)**'; Eusebius speaks of the '**mis-named gods**'; and a triumphant champion of the church erected an inscription at Ephesus that begins, 'Destroying the delusive image of the **demon Artemis...**'" [[CRE:18](#)]

"If we stop here a moment, however, to assess the various familiar ways...**in which Christianity differed** from the general context of opinion around it, the one point of difference that **seems most salient was the antagonism inherent in it**--antagonism of God toward **all other supernatural powers...**" [[CRE:19](#)]

And, **judging from** (a) the **reported anti-syncretistic attitude of the apostolic group toward pagan elements encountered** in their missionary, evangelistic, and teaching activity; (b) the **current state of scholarly research/consensus against the paganism-as-source-of-NT-content position**, and (c) the research done for the *previous* version of this article in 1997, I personally have my doubts that we are likely to surface any/much data to support borrowing in the period we are studying...but we'll see...

Secondly, although it is not really necessary to discuss this (given the evidential nature of our task here), I should point out that **the post-Constantine church had a radically different set of pressures and issues on them, than did the NT church, and that much of the later 'borrowings' would be unique (and generally 'reluctant!') to that later period**. So, MacMullen, in his study of exactly this--the interaction between Christianity and Paganism in the 4-8th centuries--consistently points this out [quotes are

from HI:CP48C], explaining the historical process as it unfolded:

1. The conversion of Constantine 'encouraged' the rest of the Roman Empire to convert too, and this created a massive problem for the church--an influx of people with social needs previously met in pagan praxis, *without* a corresponding Christian equivalent:

"In the **opening century or two of their existence** as a religious community, **Christians lacked** a distinctive poetry, rhetoric, drama, architecture, painting, sculpture, music, or dance--all, arts serving the older faith richly. **They lacked arts** of play and celebration that other faiths enjoyed. They **had almost no special language of gestures or symbols** in which to express their feelings or their wishes to, or regarding, the divine, **such as pagans had developed...**" [p.150]

"By the turn of the fourth century, it [Christianity] could claim a substantial minority of the population in the eastern provinces though only a small minority in the west. Thereafter, as it registers more clearly in our surviving sources, an estimate of its place becomes less uncertain. It constituted perhaps as much as a half of the population by A.D 400. The figure is not likely to be far wrong; unlikely, then, that the far lower estimate for the church is wrong, either, at the moment when Constantine was converted; **for rapid growth in the intervening period is quite evident. Constantine and his successors held out many new and effective inducements to join.** In the course of the response, **greater numbers but also a greater diversity of human types and temperaments were swept into the church, and along with them, a far greater diversity of demands and expectations.** In consequence, **the deficiencies noted just above began to be supplied from paganism, partly unopposed, partly against the leadership's wishes, but necessarily, because of the numbers of newer converts and the impossibility of entirely reeducating them.**" (p.151)

"[T]he **old means of satisfying them** (the needs met by pagan social and artistic life) **were denied or destroyed** [by the Roman emperors], and the **equivalent in Christianity did not exist.** Unlike the forms of expression developed by communities of Christians in the first century or two of their history, those developed by non-Christian communities had had a very long time indeed to incorporate the arts and pleasures of life into worship. ..The remarkable diversity of cult-centered arts, activities, and psychological rewards...**All these, church leadership wished converts to surrender....Many or most converts simply could not make so great a sacrifice. It could not and did not happen.**" (p.152)

“In the nature of the case no one today can make any good guess at the depth or prevalence of the converts’ inner feelings. **Only, no one can doubt that loyalties and preferences, the conscious and the unthinking, still attached them to the old ways. The bishops certainly thought so and say so often enough in both eastern and western sermons.**” (p153)

“Inflow of novelties into the church was perpetual. And why should this not be so since **the period post-Constantine brought about the baptism of so many persons raised in another religious faith? Though baptized, they were nevertheless not easy to reach for more perfect instruction:** they were poor and rural and hard to get at, rarely to be seen in church. **Yet they counted in the tens of millions.** Small wonder that the church which included them, looked at sociologically and demographically rather than theologically, underwent significant change of character in the process of taking them in.” (p144)

2. The Church leadership had to quickly respond, without prior practice or warning, and scrambled to try to 'convert' the **content** of the pagan practices, while maintaining the '**less theological**' elements such as art, sculpture, festivals, and dance. (Generally this involved offering a 'substitute' festival or location, but in each case the attempt was made to make it clear to the pagan that the "theological content" had radically changed):

“It was religion as a **time of communal rejoicing and social intercourse** acted out in the company of the divine **that converts were used to and could not do without...**The same **need forced the invention of many celebrations during the year,** since Christians’ attendance at events like the Kalends **proved too much for the church leadership to control except by competition...**” (p.155)

“**The church calendar was thus to some considerable degree amplified** (though the names of the days of the week, to be called by plain numbers, were advertised in vain). In the same way, the choice of where to build shrines for Christian worship was dictated by the location of the antecedent pagan ones. **They must be challenged and resanctified, if not rather destroyed.**” (p155f) [Notice how the church leadership **attempted to remove the pagan elements**--even the names of the days of the week!--but their attempts failed, due to the overwhelming number of people now joining the body of the church.]

“For, when peace came after so many and such violent persecutions, **crowds of pagans wishing to become Christians**

were prevented from doing this because of their habit of celebrating the feast days of their idols with banquets and carousing; and, since it was not easy for them to abstain from these dangerous but ancient pleasures, **our ancestors thought it would be good to make a concession for the time being to their weakness** and permit them, **instead of the feasts they had renounced, to celebrate other feasts in honor of the holy martyrs**, not with the same sacrilege, but with the same elaborateness” (Augustine *Ep* 29.8f...cited at p.114f; notice that part of the motivation of the leadership in trying to offer alternatives was that of sympathy and consideration for the needs of these new converts)

“What he makes plain as his strategy finds an echo in Pope Gregory's directive for the conversion of the Angles, **‘that the shrines should not be destroyed but only the idols themselves**. Let it be done with holy water sprinkled in those same shrines and **let altars be built and relics be placed there so that the Angles have to change from the worship of the daemons to that of the true God’**; and thus, **with the shrine intact, ‘the people will flock in their wonted way to the places they are used to.’** He goes on to note **the tradition of sacral feasting for which also a direct alternative must be supplied**, in the form of a festival...As to the choice of a site, **to challenge directly and so far as possible to displace the past**, there is a great deal of evidence for that strategy.” (p124; notice the effort to avoid the pagan aspects of this accommodation, and the attempt to de-paganize the praxis)

3. In a very real sense, the church did not 'borrow' these pagan elements (i.e., cult of the dead, art, festivals, iconography, etc) at all; they were the suddenly-appearing-in-bulk baggage of the past that every new believer (ancient or modern) brings with them into their New Life. In the case of *tens of millions of people* joining the church--at various levels of sincerity, enthusiasm, education, access, and depth--there was simply **nothing the leadership could do** but (a) complain about it!; and (b) try to create alternate forms of these that were **close-enough-to-the-practice** (to meet the social needs) but **far-enough-away-from-the-theology** (to avoid creating core-belief problems), to balance out the various ethical, theological, and practical constraints in the situation. And they **constantly complained about these pagan elements--even as** they had to find some innocent way to help these folk:

“Ecclesiastical authorities declared, while they **deplored**, the identity of the [grave cult] routines and their pagan character” [p154]

“It made inevitable some bringing in of inherited rites and beliefs to the church. But **influences and alternatives which their bishops might disapprove** of pressed heavily on

Christians from their surrounding society, too, even if they had been church members from birth.” (P117)

“In other respects the Christian vigils seem to have been nearly identical with the pagan. Too nearly: **they were sometimes condemned as immoral by church authorities**, as has been seen; **yet the authorities also tolerated them, having little choice**, or, like the pope, actually instituting them [as oppositional alternatives].” (p124)

“This may be the place to mention **early images of Jesus, with Paul and Peter on display in places of worship—a practice, it need hardly be said, originating neither in Judaism nor in primitive Christianity. Nor did it originate among the Christian leadership.** The Council of Elvira of ca. 306 **forbade it inside churches.** It had nevertheless become a popular element in cultic settings by the third century...” (p130)

“Until grown familiar, however, **veneration of images could hardly escape suspicion as heathen idolatry.**” (p131)

“Against all these [seers], so commonly sought out by their flock, **the bishops spoke very harshly.**” (p139)

“‘How many’ exclaims another Syrian voice, ‘**how many are only Christians in name but pagans in their acts...** attending to pagan myths and genealogies and prophecies and astrology and drug lore ...’” (P145)

4. But the important element for OUR study here, is that, *amazingly*, the theological content of the core beliefs of the faith did not change during this flood of pressures:

“**The creed that was the true heart of the Christian community in the first century or two of its existence was retained untouched by the inflow of new members** after Constantine.” [p154]

In other words, the evidence used to prove that the **later church** was syncretistic (and that therefore the *earlier* church might be also), **did not apply to the core content.** And so the argument of ‘*why would we think they were any different?*’ loses even the little psychological force that it had at first. The evidence we have about the *later* church shows its surprising fidelity to the ‘core’--in the face of incredible turbulence--and the earlier church was even more ‘stubborn’ in its tenacity to fidelity (e.g, the martyrs, Paul’s being voted “least likely to graciously compromise with other beliefs” by his graduating class of Rabbis--smile). And as MacMullen pointed out, the **creed preserved its continuity from its inception** through this overwhelming influx of

'unprepared' and needy converts. In the spectrum metaphor used by MacMullen, the creed would be at one end and the social praxis at the other end. The *creed end* was kept 'pure', the *praxis end* was transformed, and there would have been *many* questionable (and varying) points of compromise/alternatives in between. But since our discussion deals with the central tenets of who Jesus was--as recorded in the gospels and epistles--we would be on safer ground to **doubt** 'borrowing' *than to suspect* it.

So, even apart from the fact that the evidence of pre-NT borrowing is just not there (our main line of investigation), even this Pushback argument casts little 'doubt' on the interpretation of the evidence.

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Another common example offered is the **Mother & Child iconographic evidence**. The images of Horus-the-Child on the lap of his mother Isis was certainly used by the post-Constantine church as a exemplar for the post-NT elaboration of the Mary & Child-Jesus art [TAM:159]. We saw in the above discussion that this was done--after Constantine and therefore *several centuries later than is relevant to our discussion here*-- as a concession to help the new converts, and done with every effort to not 'confuse' them about their new faith. Many were destroyed, and others retained for teaching purposes [HI:CP68C:130ff].

"Objections by Christians to the use of images and pictures--icons as they were technically known--were by no means new. We have seen that pictures of Christian subjects, even of Christ himself, had been made long before the sixth century. **Yet there had also been opposition to them on the ground that they smacked of paganism.** In the sixth century, before his consecration a Syrian bishop denounced the veneration of the representations of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the apostles, and other saints. In that same century, moreover, a bishop of Massilia (Marseilles) was reprimanded by the Pope for ordering the destruction of the images in the churches of his diocese, for that pontiff, while agreeing that they should not be adored, **held that they were a valuable means of instructing illiterate Christians** in the faith." [LHC, 1:292f]

Each case would have been decided independently (and typically, with controversy among the leadership). This is interesting stuff, of course, but the late date of this phenomena means that it is **not germane to our discussion here**.

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The same can be seen in the use of **the motif of "the Cross"**. The several forms of a cross have been major symbols in world religion since humanity began, **but the NT church didn't use ANY of this symbolism!** Julien Ries in Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Cross" documents the almost universal usage of some kind of cross symbol, and draws out the elements involved in the symbolism:

"Symbolism of non-Christian crosses. The extraordinary dissemination of the cross throughout many different parts of the world prior to Christianity and outside its influence is explained by the multivalence and density of its symbolic signification. It is a **primordial symbol related to three other basic symbols: the center, the circle, and the square**...By the intersection of its two straight lines, which coincides with the center, **it opens this center up to the outside, it divides the circle into four parts, it engenders the square.** In the symbolism of the cross, we will limit ourselves to **four essential elements: the tree, the number four, weaving, and navigation**...In the eyes of primordial man, the **tree** represents power. It evokes **verticality**. It achieves communication between the three levels of the cosmos: subterranean space, earth, and sky." (p.158)."

Anyone familiar with NT usage of the images of cross and crucifixion will note the obvious: there is **nothing remotely similar** between the symbolism of the cross in the words of Jesus (i.e., of death to self) and the words of the apostles (e.g., judgment on sin, example of resignation to God's will) and the "essential" elements of "the number four, weaving, and navigation", and there is **nothing remotely similar** with the NT usage of the word/image of 'tree' (e.g., place and means of execution, place of God's cursing) and "power, verticality, or communication"...The *geometry* of the place of Christ's death (i.e., the *shape* of the cross) is **never** evoked, commented on, or 'exegeted' for this meaning **in the NT**. The parallel is simply not there, and this seems like another case of '**no parallel underlying idea**' again. [Note, however, that **AFTER** the NT, some of the Church Fathers began to use the Cross in more "symbolic ways--cf. Ries's article, pp.163ff--but this wouldn't apply to NT usage and the words of Jesus.]

Let me make sure this last point is clear...The NT **does not make the cross central--as a symbol**--in its proclamation; **rather, it makes Jesus** who died for humanity's sin and who was raised from the dead its central proclamation. The centrality of the apostolic message was on Jesus, on his sacrificial death, and on the significance of that death for the possibility of New Life and a New Future for us. The 'cross' aspect--for them--was in its element of *shame*, and not an evocative symbol of religious 'power'.

And historically, the **negative implication and imagery** associated with the *act of crucifixion* at that time **vastly outweighed** any 'evangelistic value' any more general symbolic associations with *a cross-shape* might have had. The

cross of Jesus was weakness, folly, madness, scandal in that world:

"to assert that God himself accepted death in the form of a crucified Jewish manual worker from Galilee in order to break the power of death and bring salvation to all men could only seem **folly and madness to men of ancient times**" [[Crux](#):89]

"The crucifixion of Jesus, attested by the first generation of Christians, lies at the heart of the Fathers' theology and early church teaching. However, the image of a god abandoned to a shameful punishment and **nailed on a cross was not likely to arouse enthusiasm**. On the contrary, **such an image created serious difficulties in the eyes of the pagans**, who were unable to resolve the apparent contradiction of a crucified god who in so dying became a savior." [Ries, p.161; notice, btw, that the copycat advocate has to maintain, *on the contrary*, that this 'contradiction' was NOT a problem for the pagans--that they in fact celebrated it in all their mystery religions and their myths...]

"In his important survey of the treatment of crucifixion in ancient literature, Hengel queries whether, outside early Christianity, death by crucifixion was ever interpreted in a positive manner. Within the Gentile world, he finds in Stoicism the use of crucifixion as a metaphor "... for the suffering from which the wise man can free himself only by death, which delivers the soul from the body to which it is tied" (Hengel 1977, 88; cf. pp. 64–68). However, beyond this **the cruelty of the cross seems to have forbidden any positive interpretation or metaphorical use of death by crucifixion...If this was true for the Gentile world, it was even more so for the Jewish**. Inasmuch as the use of crucifixion by the Romans as a deterrent against Jewish nationalism was widespread, **we might have anticipated that the cross would come to serve as a symbol for martyrdom**. However, in addition to the humiliation and brutality associated with this form of execution, **for Jews an additional, profoundly religious, obstacle existed**...Already by the time of the first century A.D., the victim of crucifixion was understood in terms of Deuteronomy 21:22–23—specifically, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under the curse of God." In its own context, this passage refers to the public display of the corpse of an executed criminal. But the NT gives evidence that this meaning was expanded considerably within the early church to include persons who had been crucified. This is seen in the verbal allusions to Deuteronomy 21:22–23 (e.g., Acts 5:30; 13:29; 1 Pet 2:24) and Paul's explicit citation of Deuteronomy 21:23 in Galatians 3:13. Apart from and prior to Christianity, evidence from the Qumran literature (4QpNah 3–4.1.7–8; 11QTemple 64:6–13) as well as from the writings of the first-century Alexandrian Jew Philo (Spec. Leg. 3.152; Post C. 61; Somn. 2.213) attests that victims of crucifixion could be understood this way within Judaism. **Thus, the cross could not be interpreted positively as a symbol of the Jewish resistance.**" [[NT:DictJG](#), s.v. "Death of Jesus"]

The implications should be clear: **the negative associations of crucifixion would have precluded the apostolic group from trying to use the Cross as a 'symbol of superstitious significance' in their evangelism, teaching, and writings.** Both to the Romans and to the Jews *of that time*, the image of the Cross was a *significantly negative one*, and one that would **not in any way contribute to the winning over of pagan people** to the message of Jesus. This negative imagery would have been consistent **throughout** the Greco-Roman world of the time--*anywhere* Roman crucifixion was used as a means of execution. [BTW, this negative association with the image of the cross is one of the reasons NT scholars are convinced that Jesus' own words about the cross must be authentic--in the culture of the day, the early church would not have 'made that up' because it would have been so negatively understood by pagan and Jew alike. (The technical name for this NT principle is the "criterion of embarrassment"--the church would be unlikely to make up embarrassing sayings and put them on the lips of Jesus.)

Consideration: It must be remembered that SOME general **similar traits of leadership** MUST apply to **any** religious leader. They must generally be good leaders, do noteworthy feats of goodness and/or supernatural power, establish teachings and traditions, create community rituals, and overcome some forms of evil. These are common elements of the religious life--NOT objects that require some theory of dependence. [For example, the fact that that *Aztec* divine heroes were said to have done wonders *similar to those from Asia Minor* doesn't necessitate us coming up with a theory of how one of these religions 'borrowed' from the other...smile.] In our case, to argue that since Jesus allegedly did miracles *and so did* the earlier figure of Krishna, the Jesus 'legend' must have borrowed from the Krishna 'legend' is simply fallacious. The common aspect of *homo religiosus* is an adequate and more plausible explanation than dependence, in such cases.

Consideration: Closely related to the above is the use of **common religious language and symbols**. As [CMM:160](#) notes (in studying parallels between John 1 and the Mandaean cult):

"Words such as light, darkness, life, death, spirit, word, love, believing, water, bread, clean, birth, and children of God **can be found in almost any religion. Frequently they have very different referents as one moves from religion to religion, but the vocabulary is a popular as religion itself.** Nowhere, perhaps, has the importance of this phenomenon been more clearly set forth than in a little-known essay by Kysar. He compares the studies of Dodd and Bultmann on the prologue (John 1.1-18), noting in particular the list of possible parallels each of the two scholars draws up to every conceivable **phrase** in those verses. Dodd and Bultmann each advance over three hundred parallels, but the overlap in the lists is only 7 percent. The dangers of what Sandmel calls **parallelomania** become depressingly obvious."

Parallelomania has been described as "the associative linking of similar words, phrases, patterns, thoughts, or themes, in order to claim the influence or dependence of one text or tradition on another. Many of the earlier studies using rabbinic sources were based on **isolated and superficial similarities** in

very dissimilar texts." [Sounds a lot like our criterion of 'underlying ideas' and 'complex structures'.]

The need for caution (as noted already many, many times) is highlighted when we move into the area of religious-oriented language and ideas:

"Even though the reader is less likely to explore the NT writers' appropriation of pagan sources than their reliance on the OT or Judaistic texts, **a word of caution is in order**. Whether one is analyzing classical texts that circulated in the Hellenistic world, texts from the Hebrew Bible or rabbinic parallels that surface in the NT, a common temptation accompanies the examination of ancient sources. **Superficial but erroneous parallels that appear to illuminate the NT** might be discovered by unconsciously importing contemporary cultural assumptions into the world of antiquity. Texts that are alien to the NT are to be understood in their own terms and **not apart from their literary environment**. The tendency of the modern reader may be to describe source and derivation "as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction" (Sandmel, 1). The cautionary reminders of D. E. Aune and F.W. Danker need restatement: there exists the perennial danger that those whose primary interest is early Christian literature will "**seize only the more easily portable valuables found in random raids on ancient texts**" (Aune 1988, ii); those who have explored the labyrinth of Greco-Roman studies will be familiar with the hazards that await the enthusiastic but unwary seeker (Danker, 7)." [[HI:DictNTB](#), s.v. "Pagan sources in the New Testament"]

As we noted in our initial discussion of criteria, the issue is not one of what *individual* words, symbols, or motifs are used, but rather (a) the underlying concepts and systems of concepts; (b) the intensity of the parallels (e.g., numerous, complex, detailed); and (c) the 'unexpectedness' of the parallels.

So, to say that Horus was called the "Son of the Father" or that the Iranian version of Mit(h)ra was called the "Light of the World" or that Krishna was called a "Shepherd God" is not saying very much at all. Each case would need to be examined more closely, to see if the underlying concepts suggested 'striking' parallels. Many of these generic religious terms just cannot carry much weight in supporting a theory of borrowing. And, again, we would have to determine the 'most probable source' for the individual term.

For example, take the '*Light of the World*' title. In the case of Jesus, it is **significantly more likely** (noted in detail earlier) **that this came from the Jewish background** than from a non-Jewish one:

"Jewish literature was generous with the title "light of the world," applying it to Israel, Jerusalem, the patriarchs, the Messiah, God, famous rabbis and the law (cf. 1:4–5); but always it refers to something of ultimate significance. One of the most spectacular celebrations of the

Feast of Tabernacles involved torches that lit up the city; this feast, along with Hanukkah (10:22), was thus known for splendid lighting. That Jesus offers his light to the whole world, to all the nations, may suggest an allusion to Isaiah 42:6. [BBC, at John 8.12]

Or take the phrase "*Shepherd God*" ...Not only was Jesus never actually called this exactly (He is called the good Shepherd, the great Shepherd, the chief Shepherd), but this is a perfect example of the "underlying idea" criteria, for 'shepherd' had *different underlying meanings* for Krishna and for Jesus.

For **Krishna**, the reference to Shepherd God was to highlight his background--*he actually was a shepherd* (or cow-herd, actually). But in **Jesus'** case (who never actually worked at shepherding--He was a carpenter by trade) the *term refers to his Davidic lineage of messianic royalty*--a HUGE conceptual "underlying" difference:

"It is based on Old Testament images of **God as the shepherd of Israel** (Gen 48:15; 49:24; Ps 23:1; 28:9; 77:20; 98:71; Is 40:11; Ezek 34:11–31), of Israel as his flock (Ps 74:1; 78:52; 79:13; 100:3) and of abusive or unfaithful religious **leaders** as destroyers of his flock (Jer 23:1–2; Ezek 34). Faithful human shepherds (Jer 3:15) included Moses, David (2 Sam 5:2; Ps 78:71–72) and **the Davidic Messiah** (Mic 5:4). [BBC, at John 10]

"Fundamentally it is a parable rather than an allegory; nevertheless it has within it features that recall to any Jew **a wealth of biblical associations** that make certain applications of imagery almost inevitable. Four elements in its background may be distinguished. (i) Of the many relevant OT passages the polemical discourse in Ezekiel 34 is outstanding; **Israel's leaders** are condemned for neglecting the sheep, lot slaughtering them and leaving them as prey to the wild beasts; the **Lord declares that he will be their Shepherd**, that he will gather his scattered sheep and pasture them on the mountains of Israel, and **set over them as shepherd "my servant David," i.e., the Messiah**. (ii) The use of the imagery of shepherd and sheep in the synoptic teaching of Jesus is inevitably recalled, especially the parable of the one lost sheep, which depicts the care of God to the lost and justifies Jesus' seeking them (Luke 15:1–7; Matt 18:12–14), and Mark 14:27, which links **the death and resurrection of Jesus the shepherd with Zech 13:7–9**." [WBC, at John 10]

And the phrase "*Son of the Father*" (of Horus) was simply too common/general a title in a world of very 'sexually active' Greco-Roman gods...nothing striking about divine paternity in the ancient world at all. Even slightly more specific titles, such as "Corn Mother" might be too general--it is found in Eurasian, Germanic, and Native American cultures (not that easy to prove/assume 'borrowing' between...smile) [see discussions in [HI:FG:45-47](#) (and index) and WR:MNNA].

Consideration: But there is a more fundamental issue/question here, in dealing with "religious language"--**who "owns" it, that it needs to be "borrowed"?**

Religious terms and concepts like god, divinity, savior, salvation, life, sin, impurity, afterlife, faith, etc are **shared vocabularies within a culture**. They are not 'owned' by pre-Christian pagan religions, any more than they were 'owned' by pre-Christian Judaism. Paul is not 'borrowing' anything from Judaism when he calls Jesus the "Messiah", nor is he 'borrowing' anything from paganism when he calls him Lord (kurios). Religious language--at the generic level used in the NT--is **a shared linguistic asset**, and not something "copyrighted" by pagan thought.

And, as with all users of a language, the speaker will often have to 'qualify' their use of the term to avoid confusion on the part of the listeners--Christian or not. Shared categories of language and concepts require that from all "sides". The Mystery Religions, for example, had to 'qualify' their use of the term 'salvation' sometimes--when talking to their more 'conservative' pagan neighbors. NeoPlatonists had to do the same, as did the later Gnostics, and the earlier pagan monotheists. They were **not 'borrowing' from their audiences**, they were simply explaining themselves via shared vocabulary and language conventions.

Likewise, when the early Christians used language shared with their "pagan" neighbors (as the movement spread into the Gentile community), they had to explain how their terminology was 'different' from their varying-by-location audiences. There is nothing 'odd' or 'shady' or 'sinister' about this practice--this is a basic feature of conceptual communication. EVERYBODY has to do this...Aristotle pointed out long ago that to understand something you have to *first* place it in its 'class or group', and *then* learn how it differed from the *other* items in that class...This is how we communicate *ordinary* matters to one another, and it is no different for *religious* terms and concepts.

For example, the Christian had to use the two 'shared' categories of deity at the time to 'start the conversation':

"It has not been our intention to oversimplify what is in fact an extremely complex subject, namely, the ways in which ancient Mediterranean peoples conceived of their Savior Gods. Nevertheless, during the Hellenistic-Roman period (300 B.C.E.-200 C.E.) there seems to have been a definite pattern across many cultural boundaries regarding certain Gods, who were consistently called "Saviors." They seem to have been of two types. One was the divine/ human offspring of a sexual union between a God(dess) and a human, who was rewarded with immortality for her or his many benefactions. The second type was the temporary manifestation in adult human form of one of the great, immortal Gods, who came into the human world to save a city or nation or the

whole civilized world. We have called these, for lack of better labels, **the demigod type and the incarnation type**. One thing is certain. Justin Martyr had good reason for saying that Christians did not claim anything about their Savior God beyond what the Greeks said about theirs. [DSG:15-16] And then they had to 'differentiate' their specific usage by additional details, and by additional 'negations'(!):

"However, it has not been our intention to oversimplify in the other direction either, that is, by glossing over or ignoring the manifold **ways in which Christianity stood out as a unique and unusual religion in its time. If Christians utilized familiar concepts and terms in order to communicate their faith, they made two significant changes to them. First of all, they used them in an exclusivist sense. When they proclaimed that Jesus Christ was the Savior of the world, it carried with it a powerful negation: "Neither Caesar, nor Asklepios, nor Herakles, nor Dionysos, nor Ptolemy, nor any other God is the Savior of the world--only Jesus Christ is!"...**

"The apologists devoted much time to **explaining that the gods of paganism were demons or dead men or did not exist**" [GASC:31; and so they 'borrowed these concepts from them'?!]

And the **pagan** (and Jewish) audiences **understood exactly what the Christian content was**--and the result was shock, unbelief, and eventually, persecution as 'atheists':

"Second, if the Christians took over many basic concepts and ideas **from their cultures** [notice: not 'from the pagan religions']--and how could they do otherwise--they nevertheless **filled them with such new meaning that their contemporaries were often mystified and even violently repelled by what they heard**. The same Justin Martyr who was conscious of the similarities also said:

"People think we are insane when we name a crucified man as second in rank after the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of all things, for they do not discern the mystery involved." (*Apol.* 1.13; lest we mis-understand Justin's use of "man" here, let me simply note that Justin is very clear on the *deity of Christ* as well as his humanity--cf. GASC:60-63)

"The Apostle Paul had also experienced the painful rejection of his so-called 'good news': his Jewish kinsmen considered it an abhorrent blasphemy, while his Greek listeners thought it utter foolishness. Nevertheless, this did not prevent him or other Christians from continuing to use--**and break up and reshape into new meaning--all of the familiar concepts** and well-known categories in their attempts to communicate something new, something radically unfamiliar, which had been revealed to them by their God through his Son Jesus Christ, about the whole divine-human relationship." [DSG:15-16; notice, btw, that something 'radically unfamiliar' cannot be something 'borrowed without major modification'...]

"One of the traits of their religion which **Christians emphasized from the first** was that it was **a revolt 'against the old ways.'** **To pagans the most startling way in which the novelty of Christianity appeared was in its substitution of new ideals for old...**" [CAP:17]

A great example of this **pagan-clarity** would be the brilliant skeptic **Celsus**, who saw the **unique** Christian content *very* clearly:

"Celsus obviously **knew Christianity at first hand**, and as a skilled polemicist his portrait of the Christian movement is detailed and concrete. He has a keen eye for Christianity's most vulnerable points and the wit to exploit them for a laugh" [CRST:95]

"However, it is clear from a closer reading of Celsus's work that he recognized, as did Galen, that **Christianity had set forth some new and original religious teachings**, and these are the chief target of his polemic." [CRST:102; note that he was not 'confused' by their terminology, but understood quite clearly the differences in how the 'words' were used.]

His first target was the **Incarnation, as a new idea**: "The first is the Christian claim that God came down from the heavens to live on earth among men. This assertion, says Celsus 'is most shameful and no lengthy argument is required to refute it'" [CRST:102; note that Celsus doesn't understand the Incarnation *as something similar* to pagan theophanies, etc.]

His second target was the **resurrection, as a new idea**: "His more serious criticism, however, is directed against the idea that God could reverse the natural process of the disintegration of the human body, or that a body that had rotten could be restored again...As Origen observed, Celsus 'often reproached us about the resurrection', suggesting that **pagan critics realized that the resurrection** was one of the central and **distinctive** of Christian doctrines." [CRST:104; note that the pagans recognized the difference between Christian usage of 'resurrection' and *their own pagan uses of the same word*...there was no confusion here as to what the Message was.]

The shared linguistic base and cultural base was more than adequate for the New Testament authors to be able to express **distinctive** Christian content, and this communication was generally understood by their audiences both Jewish and pagan. The Christians were often confused (in the first generation) *with the Jews*, but **never** *with the Mithraists* (e.g., the Mithraists were not fed to the lions, nor used as human torches by an emperor...for a sect who allegedly borrowed so much from these 'welcomed' mystery cults, it certainly didn't blend it very well, in the eyes of those in power...).

Consideration: We also have a special problem in the religions of antiquity, **the problem of syncretism**.

The vast majority of the pre-modern world was **syncretistic**, meaning that one religion would often incorporate the myth and ritual of other cults with which

it came in contact. Often the deities would simply change names. In the ANE, Western Semites adopted deities from the Sumerian pantheon and Israel took up the pagan Canaanite cult. Closer to NT times, we see the Greek colonists at Ephesus "adopt" the goddess of the natives (e.g. The Great Mother) and call her by THEIR name "Artemis" ([ZPEB](#), s.v. "Ephesus"). In some cases, deities would 'merge' into one. [Christianity, as we have noted often, was the **opposite**--it was **not** 'inclusivistic', **but** 'exclusivistic'--it would not 'merge' with anything. It was completely out-of-synch with the age and culture of the day. And hence, it was understood as such--and attacked by the powers and elites.]

The problem this creates for us is that we will sometimes be comparing Jesus (one individual in the NT) to the combined characteristics of multiple agents that are all called by the SAME NAME. For example, "Horus" applies to several DIFFERENT deities in the multi-threaded Egyptian religion [see Lesko, in EOR:s.v. "Horus"]. Horus literally has some TEN to TWENTY different names/versions/forms, some of which are: "Horus-the-Child" (Egyptian), Harpokrates, Harsomtus, Horus (as king), Harsiese, Horus-Yun-Mutef, Harendote Harakhti, Horus of Behdet, Harmachis, and several local versions (Nekhen, Mesen, Khenty-irty, Baki, Buhen, Miam) [[EGG](#):87-96]. All of these have slightly different characteristics and legends--esp. with the wide variation between Horus the King and Horus the Sun-God:

"There are several manifestations of Horus, which tend to overlap, and the problem of disentangling them is not always easy, as Horus may well have been the name of a whole series of pre-dynastic rulers or priests. Another difficulty arises from the **habit of the Egyptians of combining two or three gods into dyadic or triune deities**, which was frequently done with Amon, Horus, Osiris, Ptah, and Re."
[[WR:WWNCM](#), s.v. "Horus"]

When one glugs together the diverse characteristics of a dozen deities, one is bound to come up with overlap with the true God! We have the same problem with Mitra--he is a mixture of Iranian, Greek, and Roman cults; Buddha--he is a mixture of various strands of "later" developing biographical tradition; Krishna fares the same--it is difficult to separate the pieces of legends that belong to Vasudeva Krsna and those which belong to Krsna Gopala [EOR:s.v. "Krsna", p.385].

In the case of the specific question above, the impact of this issue can be seen quite readily. The questioner makes the comment that Roman Mithraism predates Jesus. As we shall see, only *Iranian* mithraism predates Jesus, and *Roman* Mithraism--which shares ONLY its name with the other!--does NOT predate Jesus in any relevant sense.

Consideration: Related to the above is the fact that we must compare the **core**-Jesus with a **core**-Other-Deity. [This was part of the **initial criterion of 'structure' or 'system'**.] In other words, in religions of antiquity, legends about deities would grow and develop along different paths in different parts of a geography. Hence, the legends of **Horus in Northern Egypt** would be *different* than the legends of **Horus in Southern Egypt**. What this forces us to do is to compare *like with like*. We will need to confine our description of a deity to **either** all the characteristics of that deity IN A

SPECIFIC LOCALITY **or** confine our description to the common elements across ALL locations. Osiris was considered the *brother* of Seth in some traditions, and the *father* of Seth in others. We cannot combine the two meaningfully (for any number of reasons) in comparing the historical image we have in the NT of Jesus Christ.

Consideration: We must also be careful to focus on the **critical** and **radical** similarities, not the incidental ones. [This was one of the criteria we surfaced at the beginning of the piece--the criterion of "**central features**".] The Christian message about Jesus centered on His Lordship over all creation, His voluntary and sacrificial death, His physical resurrection, and His fulfillment of a stream of OT prophetic prediction (as means to identify Him and as means to fulfill the plan of God in salvation history). "Incidental" elements might include (but the issue of fulfilled prophecy might counter this by making the 'incidentals' into 'requirements') the number of the original disciples (although that might be keyed to the twelve tribes of Israel), how long He stayed dead before the Resurrection, His ministry in Galilee, His birthplace, and even His virgin conception/birth.

Consideration: A final consideration on data sources and methods concerns **not overstepping the evidence**. Much of our data about the mystery cults (esp. Mithra) comes from *iconographic* data--pictures and carvings on walls. Without some textual material to guide us, the interpretation of that material must necessarily be tenuous. So the cautionary words of Barrett [NTB:120]:

"The evidence upon which our knowledge of the so-called mystery religions rests is for the most part fragmentary and by no means easy to interpret. Very much of it consists of single lines and passing allusions in ancient authors (many of whom were either bound to secrecy or inspired with loathing with regard to the subject of which they were treating), inscriptions (many of them incomplete), and artistic and other objects discovered by archaeologists." An example of where this would apply to our study can be seen in the grossly out-dated (but, AMAZINGLY, still widely cited by skeptics) work of [The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors](#) by Kersey Graves. The chapter in which he identifies these 'saviors' (some of whom will be discussed below) is dependent TOTALLY on a secondary source (without citations often) that itself is based almost TOTALLY on interpretations of iconographic data. And these interpretations were made 150 years ago, without the benefit of the virtual explosion of knowledge in comparative religion, cognitive archaeology, and ANE thought, and without the scholarly 'control' of even *slightly later* works (such as Budge, GOE). Graves identifies 16 of these 'crucified Saviors' whereas modern scholarship, working on a much broader base of literary and archeological data, disagrees. So, Martin Hengel, in the standard work of the day [[Crux:5-7](#), 11]:

"True, the Hellenistic world was familiar with the death and apotheosis of some predominantly barbarian [*as judged by the ancient authors themselves*] demigods and heroes of primeval times. Attis and Adonis were killed by a wild boar, Osiris was torn to pieces by Typhon-Seth and Dionysus-Zagreus by the Titans. Heracles alone of the 'Greeks' voluntarily immolated himself of Mount Oeta. However, not only did all this take place in the darkest and most distant past, but it was narrated in questionable [*note: to the ancients*] myths which had to be interpreted either euhemeristically or at least allegorically [*by the Graeco-Romans*]. By contrast, to believe that the one pre-existent Son of the

one true God, the mediator at creation and the redeemer of the world, had appeared in very recent times in out-of-the-way Galilee as a member of the obscure people of the Jews, and even worse, had died the death of a common criminal on the cross, could only be regarded as a sign of madness...**The only possibility of something like a 'crucified god' appearing on the periphery of the ancient world was in the form of a malicious parody**, intended to mock the arbitrariness and wickedness of the father of the gods on Olympus, who had now become obsolete. This happens in the dialogue called *Prometheus*, written by Lucian, the Voltaire of antiquity."

The point should be clear: perhaps there was not enough data when Graves wrote, but there is now--and Jesus of Nazareth starkly stands out as unique in His manner and purpose of death, among claimants to "all authority in heaven and earth"! (cf. Matt 28.18)

Most of the observed 'similarities' are explained by the above considerations, but let's go ahead and probe a little farther.

These alleged "identicalities" generally attempt to identify Jesus with deities within a couple of categories (which have some overlap).

1. First there are the "**Dying and Rising Gods**" (e.g. Adonis, Baal (and Hadad), Marduk, Osiris, Tammuz/Dumuzi, Melquart, Eshmun), popularized in James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* [[WR:GB](#)]
2. Secondly are the figures in **the Mystery Religions** (e.g. Mithra, Dionysos, Hellenistic period Isis/Osirus).
3. Third, there are the more "**major players**" (e.g. Buddha, Krishna)
4. Finally are the figures that are allegedly linked by broader motifs such as 'miracle worker', 'savior' or 'virgin born'--**heroes and divine men**-- without an explicit death/resurrection notion (e.g. Indra, Thor, Horus?)

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.....

Let's look at these in turn...

The Dying and Rising Gods

This is an older category, originally brilliantly championed by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, that has been abandoned by scholars in that field:

“The Frazerian construct of a general ‘Oriental’ vegetation god who periodically dies and rises from the dead has been **discredited by more recent scholarship. There is **no evidence for a resurrection of Attis; even Osiris remains with the dead**; and if Persephone returns to the world every year, a joyous event for gods and men, the initiates do not follow her. There is a dimension of death in all of the mystery initiations, but the **concept of rebirth or resurrection of either gods or mystai is anything but explicit.**”** [[HI:AMC:75](#)]

"Despite its faults, Sir J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* remains a pioneering monument in the field. It is full of comparative data on kingship and ritual, but **its value is lessened by** Frazer's ritualist interpretation of myth and by **his eagerness to establish dubious analogies between** myths of primitive tribes and classical myths." [[HI:CMY6:2-3](#)]

"Like writers on myth during the Enlightenment, Frazer ignored the possibility that change might not always bring improvement. Frazer himself did no field work. He integrated into his master scheme a vast body of data, often carelessly gathered, **and manipulated it to fit his theory.**" [[HI:CM3:645](#)]

"*The Golden Bough* is an extensive study of ancient cults and folklore and comprises a vast amount of anthropological research. While remarkable as a collection of data, **the work's conclusions are now often considered somewhat dubious.**" [[SDFML](#), s.v. "Frazer, Sir James George"]

By the way, this is **not** a problem with us somehow only having "slight amounts of data"--we have TONS and TONS of information today about this issue. But it is this **abundance of data** about these ancient figures that leads us away from Frazer & Co's mis-interpretation of that data.

Unfortunately, too much popular 'skeptical' literature on the subject **still uses this** category and concept as 'credible', but the scholarly worlds--both Christian-oriented and non-Christian in orientation-- has essentially 'moved away' from this...[BTW, this is not a matter of the work just *not being cited* today because it is already

'established'(!), as the quotes above specifically demonstrate. It has been "discredited" not 'accepted as being indisputable fact'.]

I want to give an extended quote here from *The Encyclopedia of Religion* [Macmillian: 1987; article is by Jonathan Z. Smith, Professor at University of Chicago, and general editor of the HarperCollins *Dictionary of Religion*]. The entry under "Dying and Rising Gods" starts this way (emphasis mine):

"The category of dying and rising gods, once a major topic of scholarly investigation, must now be understood to have been largely a misnomer based on imaginative reconstructions and exceedingly late or highly ambiguous texts.

"Definition. As applied in the scholarly literature, 'dying and rising gods' is a generic appellation for a group of male deities found in agrarian Mediterranean societies who serve as the focus of **myths and rituals that allegedly narrate and annually represent their death and resurrection.**

" Beyond this sufficient criterion, dying and rising deities were often held by scholars to have a number of cultic associations, sometimes thought to form a "pattern." They were young male figures of fertility; the drama of their lives was often associated with mother or virgin goddesses; in some areas, they were related to the institution of sacred kingship, often expressed through rituals of sacred marriage; there were dramatic reenactments of their life, death, and putative resurrection, often accompanied by a ritual identification of either the society or given individuals with their fate.

"The category of dying and rising gods, as well as the pattern of its mythic and ritual associations, received its earliest full formulation in the influential work of James G. Frazer *The Golden Bough*, especially in its two central volumes, *The Dying God* and *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*. Frazer offered two interpretations, one euhemerist, the other naturalist. In the former, which focused on the figure of the dying god, it was held that a (sacred) king would be slain when his fertility waned. **This practice, it was suggested, would be later mythologized, giving rise to a dying god.** The naturalist explanation, which covered the full cycle of dying and rising, **held the deities to be personifications of the seasonal cycle of vegetation.** The two interpretations were linked by the notion that death followed upon a loss of fertility, with a period of sterility being followed by one of rejuvenation, either in the transfer of the kingship to a successor or by the rebirth or resurrection of the deity.

"There are **empirical problems** with the euhemerist theory. The evidence for sacral regicide is limited and ambiguous; where it appears to occur, **there are no instances of a dying god figure.** The naturalist explanation is flawed at the level of theory. **Modern scholarship has largely rejected, for good reasons, an interpretation of deities as projections of natural phenomena.**

"Nevertheless, the figure of the dying and rising deity has **continued to be employed, largely as a preoccupation of biblical scholarship,** among those working on ancient

Near Eastern sacred kingship in relation to the Hebrew Bible and among those concerned with the Hellenistic mystery cults in relation to the New Testament.

"Broader Categories. Despite the shock this fact may deal to modern Western religious sensibilities, **it is a commonplace within the history of religions that immortality is not a prime characteristic of divinity: gods die.** Nor is the concomitant of omnipresence a widespread requisite: gods disappear. The putative category of dying and rising deities thus takes its place within the larger category of dying gods and the even larger category of disappearing deities. Some of these divine figures simply disappear; some disappear only to return again in the near or distant future; some disappear and reappear with monotonous frequency. **All the deities that have been identified as belonging to the class of dying and rising deities can be subsumed under the two larger classes of disappearing deities or dying deities. In the first case, the deities return but have not died; in the second case, the gods die but do not return. There is no unambiguous instance in the history of religions of a dying and rising deity."**

Now, we can summarize this quote thus:

1. There is simply "NO unambiguous data" to support the belief in the existence of ANY dyin'-n-risin' deity apart from Jesus Christ;
2. There is (therefore) data CONTRARY to the belief that this was a COMMON figure before the time of Christ (to say the least);
3. And therefore, there would not be ANY motif/images FROM WHICH the NT authors could even borrow the image of a dying and rising God.
4. (And also that any biblical and ANE scholarship that still uses this image in trying to understand ANE sacral kingship and NT Mystery Religions is simply unaware of the fact that the comparative data has moved out from under them)

Now, from a practical standpoint, we SHOULD BE able to end the matter here. Since most of the alleged pre-Christian "Christs" are held up as dying-and-rising deities, this SINGLE criticism of modern scholarship ALONE would destroy the 'material borrowing' or CopyCat hypothesis totally.

But let's go a bit further...let's look at some of the specific deities offered as pagan christs, and see how scholarship views these 'almost identical' claims (pages cited are from the Eliade work, cited above, "Dying and Rising Gods", by J. Smith, unless otherwise noted):

Adonis (p.522). "There is **no suggestion of Adonis rising** (in either the Panyasisian form or the Ovidian form of the myth)".....

The two versions of this myth are:

- (Aphrodite sees the dead body of Adonis, killed by a boar while hunting) "she rushed down...she complained against the Fates, crying: 'But still everything will not be subject to your decrees; a memorial of my grief for you, Adonis, will abide forever. The **scene of your death will be recreated annually** with the ritual of my grief performed. **But your blood will be transformed into a flower.** O Persephone, you were allowed at one time to change the limbs of the maiden Mentha into the fragrant mint--will I be begrudged then the transformation of my hero, the son of Cinyars?'...With these words **she sprinkled fragrant nectar on his blood which, at the touch of the drops, began to swell just like a gleaming bubble in the rain. In no longer than an hour's time a flower sprang from the blood,** red as the thick skin of the fruit of the pomegranate that hides the seeds within. Yet the flower is of brief enjoyment for the winds (which give it its name, anemone) blow upon it; **with difficulty it clings to life and falls under the blast and buffeting.**" [Ovid's version, cited at [HI:CMY120f](#); note that this might be considered some kind of survival 'inside' death? but certainly not a resurrection in any real sense. The scene of death is recreated annually, but the **death** is a once-for-all event in the myth.]
- **"When Adonis was an infant, Aphrodite put Adonis in a chest** and gave it to Persephone to keep. Persephone looked inside; and once she saw the beauty of the boy, she refused to give him back. Zeus settled the quarrel that ensued by deciding that **Adonis would stay with Persephone below one part of the year and with Aphrodite in the upper world for the other part.**" [[HI:CMY6:122](#); note that this 'movement' from the underworld to the upperworld is done BEFORE Adonis dies (when he is still an infant)...it is easy to see why Smith sees no reference to resurrection in this: "This tradition of bilocation has no suggestion of death and rebirth.".]

"By every indication, however, the **Adonis of the Athenians could not have been a god of vegetation** but the very opposite...The gardens of Adonis, where new growth withered, were conceived by the Greeks themselves as the negation of the cultivation of grain and the order of Demeter...The Athenian Adonis, adopted by women and celebrated in the home, suggests a crisis in the city marked by the intrusion of private values, **rather than a cosmic drama occasioned by the death of a god who is supposed to be the symbol of the agricultural cycle.**" [[WR:MYB:1:434f](#)]

"The frequently cited 'gardens of Adonis' (kepoi) were proverbial illustrations of the brief, transitory nature of life and contain no hint of rebirth. The point is that the young plant shoots rapidly whiter and die, and not that the seeds have been 'reborn' when they sprout" (Smith)

Baal/Hadad/Adad (p. 522f). In discussing the fragmentary evidence we have about these, Smith points out that

"As it stands, the text appears to be one of a **descent to the underworld and return--a pattern not necessarily equivalent to dying and rising**. Baal is 'as if he is dead'; he then appears alive." (p523) [One might also note that in the Baal-Mot interchange, Baal actually agrees to 'be Mot's slave'--not the same as being 'consumed by Mot'. Mot 'consumes him', of course, but perhaps Baal maintained his essential life order to 'serve Mot'. This would make sense of the 'slave' image, and also explain why he 'descends' to the underworld with his entire 'staff' of weather servants.]

"This is a **disappearing-reappearing narrative** [note: Hadad hides in a bog for seven years]. There is **no suggestion of death and resurrection...Nor** is there any suggestion of an annual **cycle of death and rebirth...The question whether Aliyan Baal is a dying and rising deity must remain *sub judice***." (p.523)

"**It should be noted that the identification of Baal as an annually dying and rising god with the Babylonian Tammuz has lately suffered. New Sumerian tablets published by S. Kramer show that Tammuz died once for all and C. H. Gordon has argued that Baal too had no annual death and resurrection.** See the whole discussion with refs. in E. M. Yamauchi, "Tammuz and the Bible" JBL 84:283–90. r.l.h.]" [[TWOT](#), s.v. 'baal']

"There has been **considerable discussion** whether the Baal cycle and, in particular, the Baal-Mot cycle **reflects the seasonal cycle of an ordinary agricultural year or a 7-year (sabbatical) cycle**. The chief proponent of a cyclic seasonal interpretation of the whole of the Baal epic is J. C. de Moor (1971), who compares the allusions in the various sections with current climactic conditions known from Syria today. However, there are a number of objections to the details of de Moor's thesis, as for example **his reordering of the tablets** so that the first 3 are to be read in the sequence 3, 1, 2. Thus, tablet 3 is related to the autumn, tablets 1 and 2 to the winter, tablets 4 and 5 to the spring, and tablet 6 to the summer. However, de Moor's reordering creates a problem in connection with the building of Baal's house, which de Moor has to suppose was begun, then abandoned, and only later completed." [[ABD](#), "Baal"; note the issue of the 'fragmentary evidence'--there is a huge problem in how to sequence the events in the tablets and pieces of tablets we have.]

After Baal wins his palace, he is challenged by Mot, the god of death, who kills him. On another occasion Baal killed Mot for seven years. Since Mot remains dead for seven years, this **cannot be seasonal conflict**" [Cyrus Gordon, in BANE:93]

(The relevant texts on Aliyan Baal are collected and translated in Cyrus H. Gordon's *Ugaritic Literature* (Rome, 1949) and Godfrey R. Driver's *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh, 1956), both of which reject the dying and rising pattern.)

Baal is supposed to be one of the best examples of a dying and rising god--that the data is ambiguous *at best* is not a good sign for the CopyCat thesis...

Attis (p. 523). "The complex mythology of Attis is **largely irrelevant to the question of dying and rising deities**. In the old, Phrygian versions, Attis is killed by being castrated, either by himself or by another; in the old Lydian version, he is killed by a boar. **In neither case is there any question of his returning to life...Neither myth nor ritual offer any warrant for classifying Attis as a dying and rising deity.**"

"All of the attempts in the scholarly literature to identify Attis as a dying and rising deity depend not on the mythology but rather on the ritual, in particular a questionable interpretation of the five-day festival of Cybele on 22-27 March. The question of the relationship between the Day of Blood (24 March) and the Day of Joy (25 March) caught the attention of some scholars, who, employing the analogy of the relationship of Good Friday to Easter Sunday, reasoned that if among other activities on the Day of Blood there was mourning for Attis, then the object of the 'joy' on the following day must be **Attis's resurrection**. **Unfortunately, there is no evidence that this was the case.** The Day of Joy is a late addition to what was once a three-day ritual in which the Day of Blood was followed by a purificatory ritual and the return of the statue of the goddess to the temple. Within the cult, the new feast of the Day of Joy celebrates Cybele. **The sole text that connects the Day of Joy with Attis** is a fifth-century biography of Isidore the Dialectician by the Neoplatonic philosopher Damascius, who reports that **Isidore once had a dream in which he was Attis and the Day of Joy was celebrated in his honor!**" [p.523]

There are several accounts of Attis' death (and relationship to Cybele):

- "Attis was born in Phrygia of human parents, normal except for the fact that he was unable to beget children. As an adult, he moved to Lydia and established the rites of the Mother there. These rites attracted an enormous following, more so than the cult of Zeus, with the result that **Zeus was jealous and sent a boar to kill Attis. In view of the manner of his death**, the Galatian residents of Pessinous refused to eat pork." [ascribed to Hermesianax, in Pausanias 7.17.9, from [HI:ISGM:240](#), no mention of resurrection, etc.]
- "A more grisly variant on this narrative can be found in Servius' Commentary on Aeneid 9.115. In Servius' story, too, Attis becomes conspicuous for his devotions to the Magna Mater, but in this account Attis's undoing is his physical beauty, which attracts the attention of the king of his (unnamed) city. To escape the advances of this king, Attis flees from the city to the forest, but the king pursues him and rapes him. Attis retaliates by castrating the king, who then castrates Attis in turn. Attis is found by the attendants of the Mother's temple lying under a pine tree, dying of his wounds. **They try unsuccessfully to save him, and after his death, they institute an annual period of mourning in**

his honor, during which the goddess's attendants, here called *archigalli*, castrate themselves in memory of Attis." [[HI:ISGM:240n11](#); no mention of resurrection--only perpetual death]

- "Diodorus preserves a rather simple tale in which the human Cybele, cast out by her parents, falls in love with the handsome young shepherd Attis. She becomes pregnant by him but then is recognized by her parents and taken in again. When they learn of her pregnancy, **they cause Attis to be killed**, whereupon Cybele goes mad with grief and wanders through the countryside. Eventually, after a famine, she is recognized as a goddess and Attis is worshipped with her. **Because his body had long since disappeared**, an image of him served as the focal point of his cult" [[HI:ISGM:241](#)]
- "Attis rages round like a wild maenad, until he falls down exhausted, under a pine-tree and in an access of insanity emasculates himself. Only when he sees Attis dying of his mutilation does Agdistis regret his behavior, **beseeking Zeus to raise Attis from the dead and resuscitate him. The god does not refuse Agdistis' request completely, and allows Attis' body to remain uncorrupted, his hair to grow on and his 'little finger' to stay alive and move continuously** (*digitorum ut minimissimus vivat*)." [from Ovid, Pausanias, Arnobious, et.al. XCA:91]

Notice that **none** of these accounts have even a semi-resurrection or semi-rebirth aspect in them...

Marduk (p. 523-4).

"There is **no hint of Marduk's death** in the triumphant account of his cosmic kingship in *Enuma elish*.....The so-called *Death and Resurrection of Bel-Marduk* is most likely an Assyrian political parody of some now unrecoverable Babylonian ritual...it is doubtful that Marduk was understood as a dying and rising deity...**There is no evidence that the Babylonian Marduk was ever understood to be a dying and rising deity...**" [Smith]

"This interpretation of the so-called enthronement Psalms unfortunately has continued for quite some time, **notwithstanding the fact that Assyriologists doubt whether the resurrection of Marduk was in fact part of the cult**. It has been shown by W. von Soden (130-66) and P. Welten (297-310) that **texts KAR 143 and 219 could not be understood as part of the main festival, and therefore could not be held as proof of the glorious reappearance of Marduk.**" [[NIDOTTE](#), s.v. Melek; note: the Enuma Elish certainly does not

describe a death for victorious Marduk, but some have argued that the New Year's festival of *apiku* did relate some such story. This is what the KAR 143/210 documents are referring to.]]

"According to an earlier hypothesis (Zimmern 1918: 2–20; Pallis 1926: 221–43), the New Year festival's cultic drama included another episode, in which Marduk, prior to his battle with Tiamat, was put to death, taken down to the netherworld, and resurrected, in imitation of the cult of the dying god Dumuzi—Tammuz. However, the NA cultic commentary, on which this hypothesis is based, turned out to be nothing but an anti-Babylonian or pro-Babylonian propaganda. The purpose of this text was either to justify Sennacherib's destruction of Babylon and capture of Marduk's statue, in terms of a divine trial (von Soden 1955:51: 130–166), or to explain Marduk's **exile and his return to his city**, in terms of death, descent to the netherworld, and resurrection (Frymer-Kensky 1983: 131–44). **In any case, this vestigial and late addition to the New Year's Day ritual has nothing to do with the motif of the dying fertility god.**" [[ABD](#), "akitu"]

Osiris (p.524-525).

As Smith points out, the Osiris story is surprisingly consistent over its long history.

"Osiris was murdered and his body dismembered and scattered. **The pieces of his body were recovered and rejoined, and the god was rejuvenated. However, he did not return to his former mode of existence but rather journeyed to the underworld**, where he became the powerful lord of the dead. **In no sense can Osiris be said to have 'risen' in the sense required by the dying and rising pattern** (as described by Frazer et.al.); most certainly it was never considered as an annual event."

"**In no sense** can the dramatic myth of his **death and reanimation** be harmonized to the **pattern of dying and rising gods** (as described by Frazer et.al.)."

"The repeated formula 'Rise up, you have not died,' whether applied to Osiris or a citizen of Egypt, signaled a new, permanent life **in the realm of the dead.**"

Frankfort concurs:

"Osiris, in fact, was not a 'dying' god at all but a 'dead' god. **He never returned among the living; he was not liberated from the world of the dead**, as Tammuz was. On the contrary, **Osiris altogether belonged to the world of the dead; it was from there** that he bestowed his blessings upon Egypt. He was always depicted as a mummy, a dead king." [*Kingship and the gods: a study of ancient Near Eastern religion as the integration of society & nature*. UChicago:1978 edition, p.289]

In other words, Osiris is a dead/dying deity, but **not** a rising/resurrected one...

Tammuz/Dumuzi (p. 525f). The death of Tammuz is fairly widely attested--his **rebirth is not**.

"The ritual evidence is **unambiguously negative**...In all of these varied reports, the character of the ritual is the same. It is a **relentlessly funereal cult**...There is **no evidence for any cultic celebration of a rebirth of Tammuz** apart from **late** Christian texts where he is identified with Adonis...Even more detrimental to the dying and rising hypothesis, the actions performed on Tammuz in these three strophes are **elements from the funeral ritual**...." (Smith, 525)

"**Early in the 20th century Tammuz was taken to be the classic example of the “dying-and-rising” god**. Based on the work of Frazer (1935: 6), this position saw Tammuz as the divine representation of the life cycle of crops and therefore **a vegetation deity** (Langdon 1914: 114). **It was held that the god died with the plants and rose again when they reappeared the next season**; the cult, it was maintained, spread from Mesopotamia throughout the ancient world and was found with assorted names given for the Tammuz deity from Egypt (Osiris) through Palestine (Eshmun) into Greece (Adonis). Even the Christian Christ story was related to the myth (Frazer 1935: 6; Langdon 1914: 1; Moortgat 1949: 142–43; Kramer 1969: 133, 160 n. 48; Burkert 1979: 105–11). **With the recognition that Tammuz was a shepherd, the death and rising of the god became less obvious** (Falkenstein 1954: 65; Kramer 1951: 1–17). **A fragmentary end of a myth has been suggested as evidence for Tammuz’ return from the dead (Falkenstein 1965: 281; Kramer 1966: 31), but this material is open to more than one interpretation**...Most of the material which has been preserved concerning the god relates him to the cult of Inanna/Ishtar. The courtship and marriage of these two deities have been recorded in numerous poems for her cult and have been taken at times to be examples of fertility rite liturgies. **It is the myth of Inanna’s Descent which supplies the best known rendition of the death of the god**; she sends her husband to her sister Ereshkigal since someone must take her place among the dead. It would seem to be this story which is alluded to in the Gilgamesh Epic (VI: 46–47). Here Inanna/Ishtar assigns annual weeping in the cult for Tammuz, while the context suggests duplicity on her part toward him; this is no doubt what the women are observing at the Jerusalem temple when Ezekiel describes their apostasy (Ezek 8:14). **Yet there are other mythological sources for Tammuz which do not include the goddess**, perhaps the most intriguing being “Dumuzi’s Dream” **as it presents a totally different version of the death of the god, one related to his being a shepherd** (Gurney 1962: 153; Miller 1980: 50). Other minor works also dwell upon the fact that **Tammuz is dead** (Gurney 1962: 154), so this aspect of the cult of the god appears to be consistent, **while a return to the living is, at best, conjectural**. "[\[ABD, "tammuz"\]](#)"

Melqart, Eshmun.

These are Phoenician deities, discussed by Ward in [POTW:204](#): "Dying and reviving gods (Melqart, Eshmun, and Adonis) related to the seasonal pattern have been **postulated** (emphasis mine), though here the evidence is all from classical sources."

"According to the Greek historian Menander, and as repeated by Flavius Josephus (first century A.D.), the temple of Heracles (that is, of Milqart) at Tyre was founded by King Hiram in the tenth century B.C. According to the same sources, a curious celebration called the "**awakening of Milqart**" belongs to the same period. Several explanations have been proposed, almost always based on Greek sources. In this perspective, Milqart is a god of vegetation, dying and reborn, the festivals of "burial and resurrection" implying sexual rites, notably the *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage). **But in the absence of direct sources, and because of the difficulties raised by the explanation of some difficult passages in the Phoenician and Punic texts, one must remain cautious.** As for the god Eshmun, in Tyre he seems to have been confined to his role as healer-god, inferior to Milqart, in contrast with the situation in Sidon where, as was noted, Eshmun was an important deity."
[\[WR:MYB:1:196\]](#)

"[C]lassical sources, however, reveal that **Melqart was thought of as being asleep** during the winter months [\[ABD, 'baal'](#); note 'asleep' is not the same as 'dead'...]

(Just so you know, [Mithras](#) is not included in *this* section because he is **not a 'suffering' or 'dying' deity**) at all:

“Finally, **even if** we grant the importance of the ‘**suffering god**’ myth for mysteries, it is **virtually impossible to include Mithras in this company**...Once again we must acknowledge the special position of the mysteries of **Mithras: they are mysteries without a ‘suffering god’ myth.**
[\[HI:AMC:76\]](#)

Macleod summarizes this:

"Since the time of the Renaissance the mystery religions of antiquity have engaged the attention of scholars, and since the nineteenth century a number of more radical scholars have argued that there was widespread worship of a dying and rising fertility god—Tammuz in Mesopotamia, Adonis in Syria, Attis in Asia Minor, and Osiris in Egypt. It is to these Greco-Oriental myths, it is said, that one must look for the origin of the belief in Jesus' resurrection. The controversial Hugh Schonfield wrote, "Christians remained related under the skin to the devotees of Adonis and Osiris, Dionysus and Mithras." Earlier in the century a French scholar, Alfred Loisy, had written that Jesus was "a savior-god, after the manner of an Osiris, an Attis, a Mithra.... Like Adonis, Osiris, and Attis he had died a violent death, and like them he had returned to life."

"The evidence for such a view is, however, is fragile. There are three serious objections to the view: First, the parallels with Christ's resurrection are superficial. Mesopotamian Tammuz (Sumerian Dumuzi), for example, is not rescued from the underworld but is sent there by the goddess Inanna-Ishtar as her substitute. In another fragmentary text Tammuz has his sister take his place for half the year. Some have argued that initiation into the mysteries of Isis are comparable to Christianity. However, there is no exact parallel. In the myth Isis promises the initiate not immortality or resurrection but that he shall live under her protection. When he does die and go to the realm of the dead, he shall adore her. Perhaps the only pagan god for whom there is a resurrection is the Egyptian Osiris. Close examination of this story shows that it is very different from Christ's resurrection. Osiris did not rise; he ruled in the abode of the dead. As biblical scholar, Roland de Vaux, wrote, "What is meant of Osiris being 'raised to life?' Simply that, thanks to the ministrations of Isis, he is able to lead a life beyond the tomb which is an almost perfect replica of earthly existence. But he will never again come among the living and will reign only over the dead.... This revived god is in reality a 'mummy' god."... No, the mummified Osiris was hardly an inspiration for the resurrected Christ...As Yamauchi observes, "Ordinary men aspired to identification with Osiris as one who had triumphed over death." But it is a mistake to equate the Egyptian view of the afterlife with the biblical doctrine of resurrection. To achieve immortality the Egyptian had to meet three conditions: First, his body had to be preserved by mummification. Second, nourishment was provided by the actual offering of daily bread and beer. Third, magical spells were interred with him. His body did not rise from the dead; rather elements of his personality—his Ba and Ka—continued to hover over his body. ["The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: Myth, Hoax, or History?" David J. MacLeod, in *The Emmaus Journal*, V7 #2, Winter 98, p169

Smith summarizes the bankruptcy of the Dying and Rising Gods position quite simply (p.526):

"As the above examples make plain, **the category of dying and rising deities is exceedingly dubious.** It has been based largely on Christian interest and tenuous

evidence. As such, the category is of more interest to the history of scholarship than to the history of religions."

In other words, the Jesus stories were NOT based on some alleged earlier (and common) Dying and Rising God theme--for it simply has never existed.

.....
Pushback: *"Hey, didn't I read somewhere that the Early Church Father dudes themselves interpreted all these pagan gods as 'dying and rising' gods? And that the main reason these gods are considered "Jesus-like" is because THEY described them this way? If that's true, then wouldn't that prove that these cults DID have DARG's in them--in spite of what modern scholars say?"*

Good question. It is true that most of our evidence about these cults come from late literary sources, and that many of these literary sources are Christian.

First of all, most of the **indigenous texts** about a deity do not indicate a 'dying and rising' status for the deity, although occasionally some texts in that language are used as evidence for a DARG-status (e.g., the early interpretations of the Marduk material):

"The list of specific deities to whom the appellation "dying and rising" has been attached varies. **In most cases**, the decipherment and interpretation of texts **in the language native to the deity's cult has led to questions as to the applicability of the category.**" [Smith, 522]

Secondly, DARG-categories aren't applied to these deities until very much later, and generally then by "re-interpreters" in the Classical tradition, and generally after Christian concepts have been established in the culture:

"The majority of evidence for Near Eastern dying and rising deities occurs in **Greek and Latin texts of late antiquity**, usually post-Christian in date." [Smith, 522]

Third, Smith gives a detailed example of Adonis [with my annotations in brackets]:

"The rituals of Adonis, held during the summer months, are **everywhere described as periods of intense mourning** [these are the 'native language' and indigenous accounts]. **Only late texts, largely** [but not exclusively, as with Lucian] influenced by or written by

Christians, **claim that there is a subsequent day of celebration for Adonis having been raised from the dead.** The earliest of these is alleged to be the **second century account of Lucian** (*Syrian Goddess* 6-7) that, on the third day of the ritual, a statue of Adonis is "brought out into the light" and "addressed as if alive"; but this is an ambiguous report. Lucian goes on to say that some think the ritual is not for Adonis but rather for some Egyptian deity. **The practice of addressing a statue "as if alive" is no proof of belief in resurrection; rather it is the common presupposition of any cultic activity in the Mediterranean world that uses images.** Besides, Lucian reports that after the "address" women cut their hair **as a sign of mourning...Considerably later, the Christian writers Origen** [185-255] **and Jerome**[349?-420], commenting on *Ezekiel* 8:14, and Cyril of Alexandria and Procopius of Gaza, commenting on *Isaiah* 18: 1, clearly report joyous festivities on the third day to celebrate Adonis (identified with Tammuz) having been "raised from the dead." [p.522]

Fourth, he points out that this occurs **often**, and that this information is generally **the only data** that indicates some kind of DARGness about the deity (!):

"This pattern will recur for **many** of the figures considered: **an indigenous mythology and ritual focusing on the deity's death and rituals of lamentation**, followed by a later Christian report **adding the element nowhere found in the earlier native sources**, that the god was **resurrected**. (p.522)

Smith lists two possible reasons for these Christian comments"

"Whether this represents **an interpretatio Christiana** or whether **late third- and fourth-century forms of the Adonis cult themselves developed a dying and rising mythology** (possibility in imitation of the Christian myth) cannot be determined.

The **Christian interpretation** point (perhaps better phrased as "Christian paranoia"?) was certainly operative in Tertullian (c.200), with his accusation of 'imitation' against the pagan cults. He mentions their competing with Christian 'sacraments', by offering their own type of water baptism and oblation of bread, and even uses the phrase "a semblance of a resurrection" (in the Mithras cult). As we noted earlier, "full" bodily resurrection was a Christian distinctive (drawing scorn from Celsus and Porphyry), so it is certainly understandable how some Christian writers could get sensitized to 'see it' hiding in analogous

images and references--especially phenomena that they **personally** were not involved in. Although they came from diverse pre-Christian backgrounds, they do not seem to know very much actual detail about the mystery initiations and beliefs, and may have been 'guessing' at this, just as the pagans 'guessed' at what went on at the Christian events (e.g. the Lord's supper was sometimes 'guessed' at being cannabalistic). And, that one couldn't be sure **what exactly a pagan meant by 'resurrection'** can be seen from this section from Celsus, in which he accuses Christians of (a) saying the *same* thing as traditional resurrection myths; and **THEN THAT** (b) our resurrection story *doesn't make sense!*

"How many others produce wonders like this to convince simple hearers whom they exploit by deceit? They say that Zalmoxis, the slave of Pythagoras, also did this among the Scythians, and Pythagoras himself in Italy, and Rhampsinitus in Egypt. The last-named played dice with Demeter in Hades and returned bearing a gift from her, a golden napkin. Moreover, they say that Orpheus did this among the Odrysians, and Protesilaus in Thessaly, and Heracles at Taenarum, and Theseus. **But we must examine this question whether anyone who really died ever rose again with the same body.** Or do you think that the stories of these others really are **the legends which they appear to be**, and yet that the ending of your tragedy is to be regarded as noble and convincing-" [2.55]

Likewise, the possibility of **real imitation of Christian elements by the pagan cults** should be given adequate weight (especially ritual elements). We have noted that many believe the 'born to eternity' taurobolic inscription was influenced by Christianity, and the period in which these references will occur (late) will be the period in which 'inducements to act/look Christian' will abound. "Imitation" at the time will be both innocent and manipulative, and often in-between. We must also remember that Tertullian's (and others') paranoia over earlier imitation might still have an element of truth in it, especially if the 'born to eternity' understanding is correct. Plus, the period in which he and Justin write are after the sweeping changes in religious praxis made by Antoninius Pius, which seem to reflect a syncretistic mood in itself (e.g., the additions of the taurobolix to Cybele, and the imperial focus for taurobolia).

We do know, for example, that Julian the Apostate (emperor 360-363 AD) specifically implemented some '**imitations**':

"He endeavored to purge the revived paganism of its more palpable weaknesses and **attempted to incorporate in it some of the institutional features of the Christian Church**, such as a hierarchy, monasteries for meditation, penance, the sermon, and almonries"
[LHC:1:94]

"Thus, a century later, the emperor Julian launched a campaign to institute pagan charities **in an effort to match** the Christians."
[ROC:83]

"Pagan attempts to counter the growing influence of Christianity **by imitating it are clearly apparent in measures instituted by Julian the Apostate**, who was the Roman emperor from A.D. 361 to 363"
[Metzger, below]

We will also discuss (below) the probable case in which Philostratus imitated some of the miracles of Jesus in his *Life of Apollonius*.

[BTW, some have argued that the late similarities of some of these cults to one another were 'parallel developments' and not interactions between the various cults. In this scenario, the 'rebirth' and/or 'risen again' terminology would have developed independently in the more intimate cults (e.g., Christianity, some of the Mysteries, some of the associations). This would not affect this particular argument, since it would still be a later-development, and hence, not in the cults at the time the NT was being written.]

I personally think that it will likely be a mix of these two. We do know that the Christian interpretation element may be overly sensitized, since the pagan responses in Celsus and Porphyry **never include** a "**what you Christians offer in resurrection**, is something **we pagans already have** in our DARGs" response. They **DO seem to recognize the novelty** in the Christian proclamation, so it is probably **more** a matter of the 'sensitive' Christian reading-into some pagan statements **than of** them seeing what was there *all along* (but **never** revealed in the pagan sources). And, we do have some data supporting the imitation model (i.e., the inscription, the accusations, Julian's actions, and the political pressures to 'imitate' later), so it is likely to be at play as well.

What we **don't have any unambiguous evidence for**--even including contemporary or near contemporary Christian witness--is for the existence of DARGs **prior to** the time of the creation of the New Testament message and documents....and **that** is what this discussion is all about.

.....
Pushback: "Well, what about the *Virgin Birth*, then?!... You almost sound like you really believe these scholars' nit-picking about the *Virgin Birth*! When, all the time, the earliest Christians believed the contrary! Justin specifically says the birth (and life, miracles, and death for that matter) of Jesus were no different from the pagan Gods... Why are these scholars trying to 'undo' the 'confession of guilt' already in your Christian writings?"

Good question—let's look at this famous passage...

But first, let's note that Justin's remarks cannot have *any real bearing* on the issue of parallels—given the criteria set up by the specialists at the beginning of the article. Justin could simply be **dead wrong**, or **partially wrong** and it not affect our study here. We are looking for objective details, in the 'numerous, complex, detailed' category, with structure and system to them. If we cannot find that in these cases (which we haven't so far in the article), then the accuracy of *other observers* will have been questioned, too. And this might be case with this Church leader...but let's see:

Let's look at Justin's remarks (in context) in *Apology* 1.20ff (trans. By Cyril Richardson; emphases mine, [letters in bold CAPS] refer to annotations/comments below):

20. Both Sybil and Hystaspes declared that there will be a destruction of corruptible things by fire. Those who are called Stoic philosophers teach that God himself will be resolved into fire, and the universe come into being again by return. **We think** that God, the Maker of all, is superior to changeable things [A]. **But if on some points we agree with the poets and philosophers whom you honor, and on others [teach] more completely and more worthily of God [B]**, and are the only ones who offer proof, why are we above all hated unjustly? **When we say** that all things have been ordered and made by God **we appear** to offer the teaching of Plato--in speaking of a coming destruction by fire, **that of** the Stoics; in declaring that the souls of the unrighteous will be punished after death, still remaining in conscious existence, and those of the virtuous, delivered from punishments, will enjoy happiness, **we seem to agree** with [various] poets and philosophers; in declaring that men ought not to worship the works of their hands **we are saying the same things as** the comedian Menander and others who have said this, for they declared that the Fashioner is greater than what he has formed. [C]

21. In saying that the Word, who is the first offspring of God, **was born for us without sexual union**, as Jesus Christ our Teacher, and that he was crucified and died and after rising again ascended into heaven **we introduce nothing new beyond [what you say of]** those whom **you call** sons of Zeus [D]. You know how many **sons of Zeus** the writers whom you honor speak of **Hermes, the hermeneutic Word** and teacher of all; Asclepius, who was also a healer and after being struck by lightning ascended into heaven--as did Dionysus who was torn in pieces; Heracles, who to escape his torments threw himself into the fire; the Dioscuri born of Leda and Perseus of Dana; and Bellerophon who, though of human origin, rode on the [divine] horse Pegasus. Need I mention Ariadne and those who like her are said to have been placed among the stars? and what of your deceased emperors, **whom you regularly think worthy of being raised to immortality, introducing a witness who swears** that he saw the cremated Caesar ascending into heaven from the funeral pyre? **Nor is it necessary to remind you what kind of actions are related of each of those who are called sons of Zeus [E]**, except [to point out] that they are recorded

for the benefit and instruction of students--for all consider it a fine thing to be imitators of the gods. Far be it from every sound mind to entertain such a concept of the deities as that Zeus, whom they call the ruler and begetter of all, should have been a parricide and the son of a parricide, and that moved by desire of evil and shameful pleasures he descended on Ganymede and the many women whom he seduced, and that his sons after him were guilty of similar actions. **But, as we said before, it was the wicked demons who did these things [F]**. We have been taught that **only** those who live close to God in holiness and virtue **attain to immortality**, and we believe that those who live unjustly and do not reform will be punished in eternal fire. **[G]**

22. Now if God's Son, who is called Jesus, were only an ordinary man, he would be worthy because of his wisdom to be called Son of God, for all authors call God father of men and gods. When we say, as before, that **he was begotten by God as the Word of God in a unique manner beyond ordinary birth, this should be no strange thing for you who speak of Hermes** as the announcing word from God. **[H]** If somebody objects that he was crucified, this is **in common with the sons of Zeus**, as **you call them**, who suffered, as previously listed. Since their fatal sufferings are narrated as not similar but different, so **his unique passion** should not seem to be any worse **[I]**--indeed I will, as I have undertaken, show, as the argument proceeds, that he was better; for he is shown to be better by his actions. If we declare that he was born of a virgin, **you should consider this something in common with Perseus [J]**. When we say that he healed the lame, the paralytic, and those born blind, and raised the dead, **we seem to be talking about things like those said to have been done by Asclepius. [K]**

23. In order to make this clear to you I will present the evidence that the things we say, as disciples of Christ and of the prophets who came before him, are the only truths and older than all the writers who have lived, and **we ask to be accepted, not because we say the same things as they do, [L]** but because we are speaking the truth--[second] that Jesus Christ alone was really begotten as Son of God, being his Word and Firstbegotten and Power, and becoming man by his will he taught us these things for the reconciliation and restoration of the human race--and [third] that before he came among men as man, **there were some who, on account of the already mentioned wicked demons, told through the poets as already having occurred the myths they had invented[M]**, just as now they are responsible for the slanders and godless deeds alleged against us, of which there is neither witness nor demonstration.

The first thing to note is something from Justin's background: he is a philosopher, and like the other philosophers of his ilk (including Augustin), believed the universe was permeated by hyper-reason (or Logos). This colored all his thinking as he wrestled with the concept of revelation and pagan myths:

"Justin always remained a philosopher. He regarded his conversion as a passing from an imperfect to the perfect philosophy. Thus **he sees the truths of the Christian religion to a certain extent foreshadowed through the**

seminal Logos, of whom all men partake, in the religious philosophies -- truths which in Christianity are guaranteed by the manifestation of the Logos in the person of Christ (Apol. 11. 8: 10). Accordingly he maintains the salvability of the heathen who lived "with the Logos;" they are Christians even though they have been thought atheists, as among the Greeks Socrates and Heraclitus and men like them (Apol. 1. 46; 11. 10). All philosophical wisdom and all prophetic inspiration came from the same origin, the Logos. "[Klotsche, *History of Christian Doctrine*.]

"In the philosophers of Gentile nations the same Logos was supposed to have dwelt that afterward appeared in Christ. 'Our [doctrines] appear more splendid than all human teaching because the Christ revealed through us was the whole Logos-nature, body, intellect, and soul. For whatever things the philosophers and lawgivers excellently uttered or invented were wrought out by them through the co-operation of the Logos in discovery or contemplation'...Hence much is found in heathen authors that is erroneous." [Seeburg, *The History of Doctrines*.]

What this means for our study of this passage is that we need to understand that Justin believed that a trace of truth existed in everything (e.g., Logos effects), but at the same time, that humans and demons had perverted much of the original truth. He is no 'accommodationist' to pagan beliefs--by any means(!)--but still maintains that pagans and Christians may have points of agreement, concerning Logos-type truth (generally moral and governance maxims--**not** mythological events and systems).

Okay, let's go through the comment markers above:

A. He starts off disagreeing with the Stoics on whether God is changeable or not.

B. In this comment we can see that logos-background. Some truth is mutual (as would be expected in a moral universe), but the Christian (having access to the incarnate Logos) sometimes teaches more 'completely' and with higher moral purity.

C. He seems to start **distancing himself from the pagan positions**, beginning in this comment, with phrases that show up throughout the rest of the selection: *we appear to offer, we seem to agree, we are saying the same things [principles] as Menander, what you say about, whom you call sons of Zeus, writers whom you honor, are said to have been placed, you regularly think worthy of, you who speak of Hermes as, sons of Zeus--as you call them, we seem to be talking about, said to have been done by Asclepius*. On the whole, this string of phrases might lead us to believe Justin is writing in a sarcastic or mocking tone (e.g. "*but YOU say*"), and/or denial stance (e.g. "*are [only] SAID to have been placed*"), and **certainly** in a 'we only LOOK close to your position' vein (e.g. "*we SEEM to be saying the same thing*"). On the basis of this rather persistent emphasis on distance, I would not feel comfortable at all in trying to make his words into an endorsement of non-superficial parallels. In fact, the 'seem to' and 'appear to' types of phrases are specific indicators of

'surface structural' similarities. Also in this section is his question to the pagan: "if you pagans notice similarities between our principles and yours, then why do you persecute us?"... "If there are even surface similarities, between us and Plato, then why do you hate us so?"

D. Given that in the above section he has set up a principle of "don't persecute us, if you can detect similarities in our theological/moral beliefs", this first sentence in 21 looks like he is building a similar case about **mythic motifs** (and not just the principles in 20). He is basically saying "hey, don't hassle us because we talk of miraculous things about OUR god--because YOU FOLKS talk the same way about yours". This type of defensive argument **would not reveal/indicate anything about** (a) the truth or falsity of the pagan position [as evidenced by the "what YOU say about those whom you call..." phrase; **nor anything about** (b) how 'close' a parallel or similarity Justin thought the pagan could see. In other words, the argument *starts from* the position that **it is the pagan who can see the 'similarity'** and **NOT from the position that Justin believes in one...**

E. He is continuing the 'distancing' setup here. He makes a reference to the 'writers whom YOU honor' early, which at the end of the passage he will accuse of being misled by demons! He also slurs them with his accusation of the 'false witness' ("and in whose behalf you produce some one who swears") that testifies to the divinity of their dead emperors. Not a very strong accommodation tactic...

F. He then launches into the attack on the very character (and even 'concept') of their gods, mentioning some of the more obvious moral turpitude "developmental needs" of the pantheon. In fact, a 'sound mind' should not even reflect on these gods. But at the end of this passage, Justin probably alludes to a Jewish story, about the 'sons of God' of Genesis 6 cohabiting with women. He seems to be saying that the wicked deeds of the pagan gods might actually have some basis in truth, in the story of the Fallen Watchers of Genesis 6. But once again, Justin is simply calling their gods 'demons' (and in one case, a dead emperor). Not quite an out-right denial of their myths, but polemically *even worse*: **all the 'bad part' is true**--they are demons, not gods--and **none** of the 'good part' is true.

G. This seems to contradict the pagan belief expressed earlier, that the various 'sons of Zeus' (moral failures as they were) and dead Roman emperors ascended to immortality. This seems to flatly deny immortality to ANY person--god, emperor, human--apart from true virtue before the true God. This, of course, is another denial of the truth of their myths.

H. This is another statement of 'why should you be surprised at our terminology? you use the same things in talking about YOUR false gods'. The fact that he is talking about THEIR perception and not about HIS BELIEF can be seen from the phrase "be no strange thing TO YOU" (we have noticed above that many of the statements start from THEIR perspectives, and NOT from Justin's belief system).

I. This looks like a technical argument, in which he tries to answer the possible objection that "Hermes was the Word, and he didn't die--so the fact that Jesus died means he cannot be the Word (i.e., Logos cannot die)". He counters with something like 'but YOU saw that OTHER sons of Zeus can die, so why couldn't the ONLY Son of God fulfill multiple roles?'. He also distances Jesus' sufferings from the others with the phrase "peculiar" or "unique" sufferings.

J. This is clearly a 'let's assume YOUR position for a moment' type of argument, of the kind he has been making all along. The tip-off is the "YOU should consider this" (again, from the pagan perspective). At the same time, again, Justin distances himself from actually saying they are the same, with the phrase "something in common with". But the main point is that *if the pagan wants to object* to Justin's claims of a virgin birth for Jesus, then they *had better figure out how to avoid the same objection against their own system*. But notice carefully that nothing is said in this passage about what Justin *actually* believes about this. He doesn't actually say that Perseus was born of a virgin at all. (In fact, he has already argued that Perseus doesn't actually exist as such!).

K. Another distancing statement (*seem to be talking*), another denial statement (*said to have been done by Asclepius*), another pagan-perspective (*seem to be talking* [from your pagan perspective, NOT ours]).

L. This is an odd statement, but there are a couple of things to note here. (a) This is an announcement of the program for the rest of the book; (b) He explicitly states that Christ's truth is the ONLY truth (as opposed to all the myths he has just discussed and disparaged); (c) That the Logos truth that came through Jesus is the most ancient--and therefore uncorrupted--truth; (d) He appeals to his reader to 'accept' or 'acknowledge' their evidence/case [i.e., 'give them a fair and impartial hearing', 'allowing him to present his apologia']; (e) he asks that the appeal be heard/evaluated on the basis of (philosophical or Logos) truth--as opposed to any simple similarity of words and images to the ancient writers. Again, he does **not** seem to be saying that **they are saying the same thing**, but only that similarity of expressions is **not his basis for** appeal.

M. And here, again, he flatly denies all the truth-content of the myths under discussion. He accuses the demons (of Genesis 6)--who actually *did* some of the wicked deeds ascribed to the greek pagan deities--of fabricating the myths and passing them off as 'true' through the instrumentality of the Greek Poets. There is no way to see this as supporting a view that Justin believed the Greek myths enough to try to build 'common ground' there. He certainly did in some aspects of moral teaching and structure (e.g., Logos-type truth), but the pagan stories were all lies, peddled by demons onto the Greek poets.

Okay, if we back up now and look at the overall pattern of the argument, we should recognize that (1) Justin in no way took the pagan stories seriously and that (2) he used them in an argumentation structure that didn't have to assume the truthfulness of the stories at all. Of course, he consistently--in those few short paragraphs--attacked most of the foundational beliefs of the entire system...The details of the argument, the focus on the pagan-perspective on these miraculous elements, and the consistent

denial of any truth value to them lead me to conclude that this passage cannot be used to support the position that Justin actually believed in the virgin birth of Perseus, or that he was actively teaching that Jesus' birth was actually no different than the non-existent Perseus'.

[Not all would agree with me (cf. [\[HI: AACSC:170\]](#)) on where on the spectrum of "Paganism to Logos-ism to Exclusivism" of revelation Justin stood--as a philosopher he will always be suspect (smile)--but I think it is safe to say that Justin cannot be used as a proponent of the 'Copycat Savior' hypothesis...and neither would the other like-minded Christian philosophers of that period, such as Augustine. I might expect them to use similar Logos-in-common arguments and presuppositions, but never openly state that they believed that the myths and images were 'close enough' for a basis of dialogue/common ground.]

.....

Again, the DARG stuff just doesn't match enough:

"The oriental myth of the dying and rising saviour-god (Tammuz, Bel-Marduk, Adonis, Sandan-Heracles of Tarsus, Attis, Osiris, the Cretan Zeus, Dionysus, and cf. the Mithras sacrifice and the double life of Kore) **constitutes neither the native soil of the Gospel nor a true parallel to it.** *Egeirein* and *egeiresthai* hardly occur at all in the relevant passages.... It is rather said that **the god is delivered** (Firm. Mat.Err. Prof. Rel., 22) or that he or the **deliverance has come from Hades** (Plut.Is. et Os., 19 [II, 358b]; Phot. Bibliotheca, 242 [MPG, 103, 1281a], or that **he lives** (Ps. Luc.Syr. Dea, 6). Indeed, sometimes **the continued life is only partial** (Arnobius, Adversus Nationes, V, 7 and 14 [A. Reiffenscheid in CSEL, IV]; Paus., VII, 17, 12), or **perhaps even symbolical in the form of budding almonds or figs** in the myths or wild jubilation and dramatic representation in the cults. **Decomposition may take place** (Diod. S., III, 59, 7). **The resurrection of the god is not original in the Attis cult.** Plut.Is. et Os., 11 (II, 355b); 58 (II, 374e) contests the historical character of the myths. Imaginary erotic pictures simply express the unfailing power of nature. The case seems to be **rather different when we come to Dionysus.** In him the Greeks perceive **not so much the successiveness as the identity of life and death. We thus have an advanced identity mysticism** of a speculative type. While the spiritual and ethical note is almost completely lacking in the eastern world, it is present here, but in a form very different from that of the NT, In neither case do we find the distinctive eschatological concept, e.g., of R. 6:10. For all the points of contact and mutual influence between the NT and the surrounding world, there is the decisive difference that in the NT the kernel and basis is spiritually and ethically significant history rather than nature myth or speculative myth. [\[TDNT: egeiro, 'arise'\]](#)

.....

Secondly are the figures in the Mystery Religions (e.g. Mithra, Dionysos, Hellenistic period Isis/Osirus).

First we need to note that Mystery "Religions" might be a bad term for this, and that mystery "initiations" might be better. These initiations into the various cults were not 'required' for all membership (like baptism was for Christians at this time), but was an 'optional' rite available for those who wished it:

“It should be noted that in most cases there **exist forms of a ‘normal’ cult alongside the mysteries**, that is, worship for the non-initiated, independent of possible candidacy for *myesis* or *telete*... In Rome, Mater Magna had her great festival in the spring, but the reported dates of *taurobolia* are unrelated to calendrical events. In any case, **mysteries are seen to be a special form of worship offered in the larger context of religious practice**. Thus the use of the term ‘mystery religions’ as a pervasive and exclusive name for a closed system, is inappropriate. Mystery initiations were **an option activity within polytheistic religions, comparable to, say, a pilgrimage** to Santiago di Compostela within the Christian system.” [HI:AMC:10]

“The place of the *taurobolium* in the religion of Mithras is controversial. It belongs properly to the cult of Cybele, but the cults had a close fraternal relationship. It may be taken as certain that the majority of chapels do not have the space for such a rite... **it looks as if it were a ritual occasionally practiced but not universally observed.**” [RRE:112]

The Mystery Religions flourished during the Hellenistic Age (ca. 300bc - 200 ad+), and were small, local cults up until 100 a.d. . "These mysteries, involving the worship of deities from Greece, Syria, Anatolia, Egypt, or Persia, were diverse in geographical origin and heterogeneous in historical development and theological orientation." [TAM:4], and were generally confined to specific localities until around 100 a.d. [Nash]. They were essentially closed, small groups, in which initiation into 'the secrets of the god' had to be earned through deeds and rituals. They are commonly said to offer their devotees some types of "baptism", "rebirth", and "salvation". Their main claim to fame (in our context here) is that they "re-enact" the myth through ritual. In other words, it is often claimed that the initiate 're-capitulates' (smile) the DARGing of the relevant deity. Again, this was an older view and much of the original data has been reinterpreted:

"Moreover, the key examples so favored by the early myth-ritualists and their followers among biblical scholars—the Babylonian Akitu Festival and *Enuma Elish*, and the tales of **Attis, Osiris, and Adonis**—all turn out to be examples supportive of myth-ritual conclusions **only if one utilizes very late and unreliable evidence** (Burkert 1979: 100–1)." [ABD, "myth and mythology"]

We have almost no contemporary data about the Hellenistic mystery cults [NTB:120], and we are almost totally dependent on 3rd century a.d. sources [NASH]. Nash cautions about this:

"It is not until we come to the third century A.D. that we find sufficient source material to permit a relatively complete reconstruction of their content. Far too many writers use this later source material (after A.D. 200) to form reconstructions of the third-century mystery experience and then uncritically reason back to what they think must have been the earlier nature of the cults. This practice is exceptionally bad scholarship and should not be allowed to stand without challenge. Information about a cult that formed several hundred years after the close of the New Testament canon must not be read back into what is presumed to be the status of the cult during the first century A.D. The crucial question is not what possible influence the mysteries may have had on segments of Christendom after A.D. 400, but what effect the emerging mysteries may have had on the New Testament in the first century."

We immediately run into a problem here--that of "who borrowed from whom?". If the NT was completed before the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 a.d., and the Mystery Religions (MR's) in the Roman Empire only started 'flourishing' after 100 A.D. (and were almost certainly not present/influential in Jerusalem before its Fall!), then any alleged dependence of the gospels on the MR's is a bit tenuous. This problem is most acute in the case of Mithras, but also applies to a lesser extent to the Hellenistic version of Isis/Osiris and Dionysos. So, Meyer, in his sourcebook about the subject [TAM:226]: "Scholars have proposed several theories to account for the obvious similarities between Christianity and the mystery religions. **Theories of dependence frequently have been proposed.** Early Christian authors noted the similarities between Christianity and Mithraism and charged that the mysteries were godless, demonically inspired imitations of true Christianity....Some modern scholars, conversely, have suggested that early Christianity (even before the fourth century C.E., when Christianity began to adopt the practices of its non-Christian neighbors with vigor) borrowed substantially from the mystery religions all around..."

"Today, however, **most scholars are considerably more cautious about the parallels** between early Christianity and the mysteries and **hesitate before jumping to conclusions about dependence.**"

Here, I want to go off-topic for just a second...The main topic under discussion here (in spite of my ramblings) deals with **Jesus and the deities** in other cults and religions. We have already seen that the older DARG concept is no longer held as a useful one, especially for comparisons with Jesus. And, since Jesus' main claim of distinction (from the standpoint of apostolic preaching) was His death, burial, and bodily resurrection from the dead (non-symbolic), then the bulk of our discussion should be over. In other words, similarities with *non-DARG* deities or heroes will be **less relevant** to the question of 'core borrowing' on the part of the NT authors and shapers.

However, since parallels between Christian **practice** (i.e., ritual) and MR (Mystery Religions) **practice** are sometimes alleged as evidence for wholesale 'borrowing' by Christians from the MR's, I thought it might be useful just to review the current scholarly thinking on these allegations of parallels (and borrowing). So I want to take a quick look at alleged parallels between these groups, in matters of basic praxis and non-Christological belief (i.e., beliefs about things *other than* 'who Jesus was').

Remember that we are looking for 'numerous, complex, detailed' similarities, which reveal underlying parallels. Outward 'forms' and rituals just won't be enough, unless the **meaning** can be shown to be the same. In the MR/Christianity case, these meanings can be shown to be **different**:

"The "dying and rising" of the deities in the mysteries, where it occurs, relates to the cycle of nature and was **no true resurrection**. The NT terminology of mystery has to do with the **divine plan**, previously hidden but now revealed. The Christian initiation was **not secret**. Where washings occur in the mysteries, this was part of the purification preliminary to the initiation, **not** the initiation itself as in Christian baptism. The mysteries were rather **expensive** and were **for the few deemed already worthy**, whereas **Christianity invited everyone** (as the pagan critic Celsus pointed out—according to Origen *Cont. Cels.* 3.59). [[NT:DictLNT](#), s.v. "Religions, Greco-Roman"]

Consider **Burkert's** review of the **mystery cults' "offerings"** relative to the **afterlife, "rebirth"** and even **baptism** (pages from HI:AMC):

"It is tempting to assume that the central idea of all initiations should be death and resurrection, so that extinction and salvation are anticipated in the ritual, and real death becomes a repetition of secondary importance; **but the pagan evidence for resurrection symbolism is unconvincing at best** [p23]

"In the documents of the so-called Oriental cults, the **dimension of the afterlife is much less obvious...**"[25]

"If we turn finally to Mithras, we are left with a surprising dearth of relevant evidence. It has **generally been assumed**, as a result of our ideas of what a "mystery religion" should be, that **Mithras should guarantee his followers some kind of transcendent salvation immortality**, ascent to heaven from the "cave" which is the cosmos. **Clear evidence, however, is lacking**. This is all the more surprising because spiritual life, the immortality of the soul, and the ascent of the righteous to heaven are such well-established ideas in Iranian, Zoroastrian tradition. **But this is not so with Mithras.** [27]

"The emphasis is, once again, on a "safe anchor" in this life. A redirection of religion toward **otherworldly concerns, contrary to what is often assumed**, is **not to be found** with the "Oriental" gods and their mysteries. At best they continue what was already there. In the eyes of a pagan, Christianity was a religion of tombs, excessively concerned about death and decay. None of the pagan mysteries made such an impression " [28]

"The basic idea of an initiation ritual is generally taken to be that of death and rebirth. A well-known book of Mircea Eliade has appeared in successive editions under the title of either *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* or just *Birth*

and Rebirth. Being essentially initiations ceremonies, ancient mysteries **should conform to this pattern**, which at the same time seems to supply the best explanation of why this ritual is believed to overcome the threat of real death. **Yet, as in the corresponding case of the "dying god" myth, the evidence is less explicit and more varied than the general hypothesis would postulate.**" [99]

"To sum up, there is a dynamic paradox of death and life in all the mysteries associated with the opposites of night and day, darkness and light, below and above, **but there is nothing as explicit and resounding as the passages in the New Testament**, especially in Saint Paul and in the Gospel of John, concerning dying with Christ and spiritual rebirth. **There is as yet no philosophical-historical proof that such passages are directly derived from pagan mysteries; nor should they be used as the exclusive key to the procedures and ideology of mysteries.** " [101]

"It is appropriate to emphasize in this connection that **there is hardly any evidence for baptism in pagan mysteries, though this has often been claimed.** Of course there are various forms of purification, of sprinkling or washing with water, as in almost all the other cults as well. But such procedures should not be confused with baptism proper--immersion into a river or basin as a symbol of starting a new life" [101]

And **MacMullen** makes the same observations about these matters [[HI:PTRE](#)]:

"Among felt wants, the modern observer expects to find none sharper than the need for life, promised for ever. But, like a deity to insure good harvests, **assurances of immortality prove unexpectedly hard to find in the evidence.** Even the longing for it is not much attested." [53]

"People belonging to one or another of a small number of cults, and in small groups, sought further lessons in their beliefs, lessons learned through rites designed to catch the imagination and arouse awe. Impressiveness of presentation could be heightened by rules forbidding the lessons to be talked about with outsiders. Obedient secrecy of course obscured the historical record forever. One group, nevertheless, in the worship of Dionysus, can be faintly discerned through inscriptions, developing more formal ceremonies of instruction, at least in Italy, in the later second and third century. During the ceremonies, **participants may have received promises of afterlife. But evidence for all this is unfortunately very little and very indirect.** Similarly with Isiacism: the evidence lies in the concluding chapters of Apuleius's novel, in which his hero Lucius undergoes a lengthy and most expensive course of instruction at the hands of Isis's priests. At the end, he is fully satisfied by her promise, "You shall live in blessedness," *vives beatus*; and when life is over, he may continue to worship her. He is the envy of everyone for being *renatus*, **reborn 'in a sort of way'--defined as having earned the goddess as his patron**

and at the cost of no more than temporary bankruptcy. **There is, however, no word of his being *renatus in aeternum*, which is what counts.**" [p53]

"Inscriptions here as on other points hold out the best hope for a broad sampling. **"Savior" in them, or "salvation," had to do with health or other matters of this earth, not of the soul for life eternal.** Or in epitaphs, people so often joke about annihilation that the jokes at last congeal into commonplaces or abbreviations: "I was not, I am not, I care not," boiled down to six letters. [57]

Also, let's note three of the major differences between the death of Jesus and the various deities subsumed so far in the previous two sections:

1. None of the so-called savior-gods **died for someone else**, in their place (substitution). The notion of the Son of God fully dying *in place of His creatures* is unique to Christianity.
2. Only Jesus died **purposefully** for sin. As Gunter Wagner observes, to none of the pagan gods "has the intention of helping men been attributed. The sort of death that they died is quite different (hunting accident, self-emasculation, etc.)." [cited in Nash]
3. Unlike the mystery gods, Jesus died **voluntarily**. Nothing like this appears even implicitly in the mysteries. [The closest is the self-castration of Attis, but this is generally attributed to his insanity, not to a free-and-clear choice.]

And then one last point about **'rebirth'**--it was NOT a word specific to the Mysteries, but was in general use (and would have been 'shared' by Jews, Christians, regular-pagans, mystery rites):

"It [the word for 'rebirth'] seems quite early to have come into use outside the Stoic schools and to have become **part of the heritage of the educated world, thus acquiring a more general sense.** This is shown by Cic.Att., 6, 6, **where return from banishment is described as *paliggenesiva*...It cannot be finally proved whether *paliggenesia* played any role in the Mysteries of the 1st cent. A.D.** The word occurs only in the so-called birth mystery in *Corp. Herm.*, XIII, where it is used 10 times (Reitzenstein *Poim.*, 339, 4 and 6; 340, 12: 341, 5; 342, 15; 343, 12; 344, 12 and 14; 345, 16: 348, 8). But here the word **does not have the meaning hitherto found in pagan Gk., i.e., return to existence.** It signifies renewal to a higher existence by means of an incantation. **The mystery of regeneration is certainly later than the NT.** When Plutarch uses the term in his description of the **Dionysus and Osiris myths**, it is **an open question whether he takes it from the Mysteries or from his philosophical heritage, The latter is more probable**, since this is almost certainly the derivation of the parallel *anabiosis*. In the 1st cent. B.C., then, *paliggenesiva* is in **general use in educated circles**, and its use in the Mysteries may thus be presumed." [[TDNT](#), s.v. "*paliggenesis*", 'born again']

And concepts of resurrection, immortality were neither understood the same, nor generally offered by, the MRs:

"Certainly, not all the new cults offered life after death; in the case of Jupiter Dolichenus, for example, there is **no evidence to suggest that immortality was an issue.** [footnote: "**Nor was the cult of Attis concerned with the after-life**"] And those religions that did make claims about a future life after death **presented radically different pictures.** When in a dream Isis promised Lucius escape from his ass's body, she said that he would be subject to her for the rest of his life, which she could prolong beyond what the fates appointed, and after death he would find her shining in the darkness of the underworld. His subsequent initiation, as we saw, took him down to the entrance of the underworld and back to life again. The cult of Isis had **implications for** life and death, but **even so more emphasis is placed on extending the span of life than on the after-life** - which is pictured in **fairly undifferentiated terms.** The transformational aspects of the cult of Mithras are more striking, as the initiate ascended through the seven grades. In addition to its cultic title (raven, male bride, etc.), each grade was correlated with a different planet: and the soul of the initiate was probably conceived as rising during his lifetime further and further away from the earth, finally achieving apogenesis or birth away from the material world. That is, the progressive transformation of the soul of the initiate in this life, on which much of the cult focussed, was probably conceived as continuing after death. **This is a quite different conception from the ideas of immortality or resurrection that developed among some Jews by the first century A.D., and became particularly associated with Christianity** - which offered not only a radically new life here and now, but also **the hope of a bodily resurrection and a glorious after-life.**" [[HI:RR1:289f](#)]

These are some very material and significant differences between even a most generous reading of the MR and DARG texts. This should be enough data to indicate that "*numerous, complex, and detailed parallels*" are going to be difficult to find and defend; **much more difficult will be** the allegations of "dependence". The similarities (especially theological) between early NT-time Christianity and the MR's of the same period are simply too fragile to carry the weight of such a position.

[It might also be noted here that the **similarities between the various MR's don't seem to be very strong either**--superficials abound, perhaps, but the underlying meanings are so different. Frankfort (in *Kingship and the gods: a study of ancient Near Eastern religion as the integration of society & nature*. UChicago:1978 edition, 293) compares the meaning **underlying** the various myths of Tammuz, Adonis, Osiris, concludes: "In comparison with the deep-rooted differences between the three gods, their 'generic likeness' dwindles to insignificance; they personify the life in vegetation but that in a manner which is peculiar to each case."]

There were **massive differences in ethics and actions**, also, as noted by the sociologist Stark (ROC; the following quotes, although long, will at least give the impression of the point I am trying to make here) [*italics his; bold mine*]:

"Let me state my thesis: *Central doctrines of Christianity Prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations.*

"I believe that it was the religion's particular doctrines that permitted Christianity to be among the most sweeping and successful revitalization movements in history. And it was the way these doctrines took on actual flesh, the way they directed organizational actions and individual behavior, that led to the rise of Christianity. My treatment of these two points will be brief since they have always been implicit, and very often explicit, in the previous nine chapters.

"To anyone raised in a Judeo-Christian or Islamic culture, **the pagan gods seem almost trivial. Each is but one of a host of gods and godlings of very limited scope, power, and concern. Moreover, they seem quite morally deficient. They do terrible things to one another, and sometimes they play ugly pranks on humans. But, for the most part, they appear to pay little attention to things "down below."**

"The **simple phrase "For God so loved the world . . ." would have puzzled an educated pagan. And the notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd.**

"From the pagan viewpoint, there was nothing new in the Jewish or Christian teachings that God makes behavioral demands upon humans--the gods have always demanded sacrifice and worship. Nor was there anything new in the idea that God will respond to human desires--that the gods can be induced to exchange services for sacrifices. But, as I noted in chapter 4, **the idea that God loves those who love him was entirely new.**

"Indeed, as E. A. judge has noted in detail, **classical philosophers regarded mercy and pity as pathological emotions--defects of character** to be avoided by all rational men. Since mercy involves providing *unearned* help or relief, it was contrary to justice. Therefore "mercy indeed is not governed by reason at all," and humans must learn "to curb the impulse"; "the cry of the undeserving for mercy" must go "unanswered" Judge 1986:107). judge continued: "**Pity was a defect of character unworthy of the wise and excusable only in those who have not yet grown up. It was an impulsive response based on ignorance. Plato had removed the problem of beggars from his ideal state by dumping them over its borders.**"

"**This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues--that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful.** Moreover, the corollary that *because* God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they *love one another* was something entirely new.

Perhaps even more revolutionary was the principle that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and tribe, that it must extend to "all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 1:2). Indeed, **love and charity must even extend beyond the Christian community**. Recall Cyprian's instructions to his Carthaginian flock, quoted at length in chapter 4, "that there is nothing remarkable in cherishing merely our own people with the due attentions of love, but that one might become perfect who should do something more than heathen men or publicans, **one who, overcoming evil with good, and practicing a merciful kindness like that of God, should love his enemies as well....** Thus the good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith." (Quoted in Harnack 1908: 1:172-173)

"This was revolutionary stuff. Indeed, it was the cultural basis for the revitalization of a Roman world groaning under a host of miseries.

"In his fine recent work *The Origins of Christian Morality*, Wayne Meeks reminded us that when we are talking about "morality or ethics we are talking about people. Texts do not have an ethic; people do" (1993:4). It was only as Christian texts and teachings were acted out in daily life that Christianity was able to transform the human experience so as to mitigate misery.

"Chief among these miseries was the cultural chaos produced by the crazy quilt of ethnic diversity and the blazing hatreds entailed thereby. In uniting its empire, Rome created economic and political unity at the cost of cultural chaos. Ramsay MacMullen has written of the immense "diversity of tongues, cults, traditions and levels of education" encompassed by the Roman Empire (1981:xi). But it must be recognized that Greco-Roman cities were microcosms of this cultural diversity. People of many cultures, speaking many languages, worshiping all manner of gods, had been dumped together helter-skelter.

"In my judgment, **a major way in which Christianity served as a revitalization movement within the empire was in offering a coherent culture** that was *entirely stripped of ethnicity*. **All were welcome without need to dispense with ethnic ties.** Yet, for this very reason, among Christians ethnicity tended to be submerged as new, more universalistic, and indeed cosmopolitan, norms and customs emerged. In this way Christianity first evaded and then overwhelmed the ethnic barrier that had prevented Judaism from serving as the basis for revitalization. Unlike the pagan gods, the God of Israel did indeed impose moral codes and responsibilities upon his people. But to embrace the Jewish God, one had also to don Jewish ethnicity, albeit that, as Alan Segal (1991) suggests, the Judaism of the first century may have been more inclusive than has been recognized. I agree with Segal that the existence of the God-Fearers demonstrates this inclusiveness, but it also seems clear that the God-Fearers were limited to the social fringes of the diasporan Jewish communities precisely because of their failure to fully embrace the Law, and hence the Law remained the primary ethnic barrier to conversion. Indeed, as I argued in chapter 3, many Hellenized Jews of the diaspora found Christianity so appealing precisely because it freed them from an ethnic identity with which they had become uncomfortable.

"Christianity also prompted **liberating social relations between the sexes and within the family**-to which much of chapter 5 was devoted. And, as noted in chapter 7, Christianity also **greatly modulated class differences-more than rhetoric was involved when slave and noble greeted one another as brothers in Christ.**

"But, **perhaps above all else, Christianity brought a new conception of humanity to a world saturated with capricious cruelty and the vicarious love of death** (Barton 1993). Consider the account of the martyrdom of Perpetua. Here we learn the details of the long ordeal and gruesome death suffered by this tiny band of resolute Christians as they were attacked by wild beasts in front of a delighted crowd assembled in the arena. But we also learn that had the Christians all given in to the demand to sacrifice to the emperor, and thereby been spared, *someone else would have been thrown to the animals*. After all, these were games held in honor of the birthday of the emperor's young son. And whenever there were games, people had to die. Dozens of them, sometimes hundreds (Barton 1993).

"Unlike the gladiators, who were often paid volunteers, those thrown to the wild animals were frequently condemned criminals, of whom it might be argued that they had earned their fates. But the issue here is not capital punishment, not even very cruel forms of capital punishment. **The issue is spectacle for the throngs in the stadia, watching people torn and devoured by beasts or killed in armed combat was the ultimate spectator sport, worthy of a boy's birthday treat. It is difficult to comprehend the emotional life of such peoples**

"In any event, **Christians condemned both the cruelties and the spectators.** Thou shalt not kill, as Tertullian (*De Spectaculis*) reminded his readers. And, **as they gained ascendancy, Christians prohibited such "games."** More important, **Christians effectively promulgated a moral vision utterly incompatible with the casual cruelty of pagan custom.**

"Finally, **what Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than their humanity.** In this sense virtue was its own reward." [[ROC:211-215](#)]

Or MacMullen [[CRE:54](#)]:

"**Judaism taught concern for poverty (and who outside that tradition in the ancient world would have been recorded on his tombstone as "a lover of the poor"?)**. The tradition carried forward within Christianity. As the pagan temples closed, the churches opened: the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome, for example, as setting for an enormous banquet for the poor provided by a senator in commemoration of the anniversary of his wife's death; or the Basilica of St. Ambrose in Milan, where the bishop preached on the need to succor the less fortunate. **Julian was right to see this transfer of function to his rivals as**

important to their success. "It is generosity toward non-members, care for the graves of the dead, and pretended holiness of life that have specially fostered the growth of atheism" (i.e. Christianity). Therefore he was right in his plan to make temples even more active centers for relief of the poor. However, that project came to nothing."

But let's be clear about one thing: the early church **did not achieve its massive growth rate by offering a "me too" solution.** Another 'look alike' mystery cult wasn't gonna 'win religious marketshare' (to use Stark's sociological phrase). The appeal of the early Christians--in addition to the worldview distinctiveness noted above--was in its love and care for others. Note the verdict of other historians on this:

First, Ferguson:

"Jesus claimed a unique relationship with Yahweh, with whose authority he spoke, challenging the religious authorities with their conventionality, and illustrating his teaching with varied wit and stories. As the attitude of the authorities stiffened, popular support fell away. He still hoped with his immediate followers to establish the New Israel, which he personified as the Son of Man, but soon came to see that the triumph of the new community would be won only through suffering. Hence much of his teaching is 'eschatological'; it looks to the ultimate triumph of God; yet in one sense the eschatology is 'realized', for Jesus saw Yahweh's kingship as fully realized in his own obedience. Some of his support came from those who looked for a military leader against the Romans, and it may have been in an effort to force his hand that a misguided follower betrayed him to the authorities. Jesus accepted the betrayal and, left in his full obedience the sole representative of the kingdom, allowed himself to be executed.

"Then something happened. The disciples (the word really means apprentices) who had run away in cowardice found a new lease of life. They declared that Jesus had appeared to them visibly after death, and that even after those appearances had ceased they had been lifted out of themselves by a power they called impartially the Spirit of God or Spirit of Jesus. So they went out with a proclamation (kerygma) which in its simplest form ran something like: 'Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know--this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.' The book we call The Gospel according to Mark is simply an expansion of that affirmation; it is not a biography of Jesus but a preachment of Christ.

"Those who came in shared in the teaching (didache): this was based upon **'love', a concept so new that a virtually new word (agape) had to be coined for it.** It was the dim reflection of the love they had experienced from their God; it was the cement of the new society; it was **the secret of their out-reaching to the afflicted and their relations with their enemies.** The

behaviour it implies may be seen in the collection of sayings called 'The Sermon on the Mount', or in Paul's letters to the Romans or Galatians, or the moralizing letter of James. Or, from the second century AD, we may cite the anonymous letter to Diognetus with its picture of Christians exercising their citizenship of heaven through their citizenships on earth, obeying the laws, and **going far beyond the laws in their standard of behaviour, free with their hospitality but not with their chastity, like others in having children, unlike others in not leaving children to die.** Besides, each week they shared in the sacrament of a common meal, in the course of which came the Thanksgiving or Eucharist, in which they broke the bread and poured the wine in commemoration of their founder's broken body and blood shed, and shared the power of his life as they ate and drank.

"Wherein then lay the appeal of Christianity? It was first in the personality of the founder. This has been doubted, because it is not stressed by the apologists. It is not stressed because it was taken for granted: no need to repeat in the second century what was in the gospels. **That the person of Christ was central is seen in the critiques of Celsus and Porphyry, in the exaltation of Apollonius by Philostratus and Hierocles as a counterblast,** in the heroic witness of a Polycarp: 'I have been his servant for eighty-six years and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?' It was secondly in **the way of love revealed, in the witness of community (koinonia), in a fellowship which took in Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women, and whose solid practicality in their care for the needy won the admiration even of Lucian.** 'How these Christians love one another!' was a respectful affirmation. There was a curious gaiety about the Christians; years later it was **this warmth which attracted Augustine.** The **women were a particular power:** Mithras, for example, did not admit them. It was thirdly in the very strength of conviction, in **the simple directness which cut through the multitudinous choices offered by the ancient world,** above all in the courage which faced martyrdom without flinching and wrung a grudging recognition from Celsus and Marcus Aurelius, and secured the conversion of Justin and Tertullian. It was finally in a message of hope **for all,** for from **the first resurrection of Christ had meant for his followers a certainty of victory over death.** As Nock put it pungently, 'it was left to Christianity to democratize mystery'" [\[RRE:125ff\]](#)

And, Hillgarth points out that this was still a major aspect of church life-heart, *even after* they were placed in uneasy compromise with the State:

"The Church, from a persecuted minority, became an immensely rich institution, heavily endowed by the State, its clergy largely exempt from the burdens which weighed increasingly on most of their fellow citizens. Two years after Alaric sacked Rome, church lands were exempted from most taxes. Not only were bishops (and by 412 all clergy) immune to trial in secular courts, but they acquired many of the functions of the local magistrate and judge. They became arbiters between the central government and their locality.

"Equipped with all this power and privilege, was the Church able to assimilate and change the social life of the time, or was it only able to provide an alternative to it in monasticism? Extreme oppression of the poor by the State and the rich is indisputable. **The Church was now part of the political and social structure of the oppressive Empire. It was virtually impossible for it to protest against such all-encompassing institutions as slavery or the normal use of torture for judicial purposes. "Defenders" of cities were created in 368 to defend the local populations against the rich.** In 409 their appointment was shared between bishops and the very men they were intended to control. **All the Church could do was campaign against such obvious abuses as gladiatorial combats (only finally abolished c. 438), and, in general, try to mitigate the application of a totalitarian system it could not change.** The right (419) to seek asylum in a church and permission to a bishop to visit State prisons and help prisoners are examples of the way the Church was able to alleviate the rigor of the laws. **But, by its care for the poor through its own institutions, especially through hospitals which it created in the East and in Rome in the fourth century and for which no precedent existed in antiquity, the Church did more for the ordinary man than the meager influence of Christianity on the Theodosian Code reveals."**
[\[CAP:46\]](#)

[*Would that we, "the Church", lived and loved like that today...*]

So, a little off the subject, but hopefully constructive:

1. There were major differences in the very concept and definition of resurrection.
2. The usage of the very word 'mystery' was different.
3. Christian initiation was not secret.
4. 'Baptism' had radically different purposes in MR's (and there is very little evidence for it in MR's anyway)
5. The belief in an afterlife was radically different (and there is very little evidence for it in MR's anyway)
6. MR's didn't offer a 'salvation' for the future life.
7. Even the nature of the death of Jesus (other-centered, purposeful, voluntary) was radically different from the 'deaths' of the MR deities.
8. The moral content--of love and compassion and charitable action--was completely different, and the Christian way of life was recognized by its enemies as being 'superior'.
9. The actual appeal of Jesus to others was not in some 'competitive me-too' clone strategy, but in the genuineness of lived-out, loved-out REAL resurrection life...real rebirth.

So, even some of the areas that are commonly mentioned as having being 'borrowed from paganism' do not hold up under careful scrutiny. The early church--especially at the time the NT was being formed--just didn't do "borrowing" apparently...

.....
Pushback: *"I don't get this...you are saying they mourned their gods at some of these festivals, but DIDN'T believe the gods were "truly" resurrected...but that doesn't make sense--what good is a 'dead god'? They MUST have believed their gods were resurrected every year (especially since they lamented a death every year...duh)..."*

Well, your position makes sense to me, but it would likely be wasted on the ancient pagans...

It seems the pagan writers who describe these gods (i.e., Celsus, Porphyry, Lucian, Plutarch) don't seem to believe the myths anyway--but they still celebrated the festivals anyway...

"It is "not reasonable" to consider idols as gods, when they have been manufactured by men, and, worse, by men of low social status and morals; and the point was long ago made by a pagan Heraclitus (of the first century), so says the pagan Celsus--it was no invention of higher-minded Christians. Celsus is indeed right in bringing out how much derisory or outraged criticism of current cult practices, theology, and mythology could be found in pagan writers. Here it is aimed at implications that gods are the mere creatures of men.

"And to continue the survey of divinity as it is portrayed in these less obvious sources: gods or divinity can do no ill, being goodness perfect and complete. That, like all the points now to be summarized, has also been found or implied in Plutarch, Dio Chrysostom, and Lucian. Further, the gods are infinitely remote from the material world, themselves incorporeal and insubstantial. To imagine that they have any need of the world would imply some incompleteness in them; rather, it is of the essence of divinity to have no desire, no wish, no lack or feeling at all.

"It follows that the gods cannot change, assume other shapes, grow up or grow old. Assuredly they cannot die and be reborn, like Osiris. They cannot be cut up, wounded, put in chains, tossed out of Olympus, crippled; nor have they appetites. They do not eat or drink, defecate, or fornicate. Of course not. Rejection of such pictures is registered or implied in the writings of Plutarch and Lucian but also of Heraclitus and Celsus. And no one may rightly accuse the gods of adultery, sodomy, theft, perjury, cowardice, murder, or wicked or disgraceful acts of that sort--again, features of belief shocking to pagans and highly convenient to Christians. The gods should never be thought of or portrayed as dependent, servile, or menial. The opposite is the truth. Still less should they ever be described as monsters of any sort, misshapen, abnormal, or even as animals: Egyptian crocodiles and so forth.

"From conceptualizations, the higher criticism turned to visible routines of worship to make its point. Idols that were in the first place sawn, glued, nailed, and filed could hardly be divine. The materials of their manufacture were base, and they endured the birds that shit on them and mice that nested in them. It was equally misguided, if the gods were conceived aright, to suppose

that they could "taste good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke," or respond--still more wicked folly--to human sacrifice. Of all the dancing, singing, miming, or recitation of prose hymns; of all the anointing, bathing, wreathing, robing, and parading about of images; of all the toasting, holocausts, and cheerful tables; of ivory, gold, sublime skills in painting and carving--really nothing remained that held the faintest interest for Olympus, if that high realm and all its denizens in fact existed. Probably not.

"Certainly not in the sense or shapes that Homer meant, certainly not in the Dionysiac's or Isiac's demented terms--not if the pagan purists were to be believed. The gods really lived; but at a great remove. **Cult could not reach them.** It might be inoffensive, never persuasive. **Mythology, not only as the poets had written it but as the Phrygians embraced Cybele in it, or the Syrians, Atargatis, was folly or insult to the true beings above.** The sacred had lost its story when its enlightened critics finished with it.

"**But who cared?** The **inappropriateness of common forms of worship**, seen through the eyes of Seneca or Porphyry, **appears not to have deterred a single soul** from the inheritance of his tribe. [[HI:PTRE:76f](#); emphasis mine]

And the vast majority of the festivals and special religious 'endowments' are done by the wealthy elite--in Rome, this was the educated as well...

Stark considered the **popular level** of opinion as well (as opposed to the **literary one** noted by MacMullen above):

"Nevertheless, I think there may be a substitute for an opinion poll of religious belief in antiquity. What is wanted is **a sample of unfiltered public attitudes.** Consider, then, **the archaeological discovery that the walls of Pompeii abound in extremely blasphemous graffiti and drawings, some of them very obscene as well.** While I harbor no thoughts that these were connected to the city's fate, **they arouse my deepest suspicions about the overall state of reverence--not simply because some residents were prompted to create them, but because no one was prompted to remove or cover them.**

MacMullen commented that "we may take [the existence of similar graffiti] for granted elsewhere, if there were other sites so well preserved" (1981:63). I may be leaping to unjustified conclusions, but **these data speak to me of widespread irreverence....Blasphemous graffiti may also reflect that pagan gods were not entirely godlike as we understand that term today** (or as the early Christians understood it). While I reserve extended discussion of pagan conceptions of the gods for chapter 10, we may usefully anticipate that discussion here. E. R. Dodds pointed out that in "popular Greek tradition a god differed from a man chiefly in being exempt from death and in the supernatural power which this exemption conferred on him" ([1965] 1970:74). Moreover, while people often appealed to various gods for help, it was not assumed that the gods truly cared about humans--Aristotle taught that gods could feel no love for mere humans. Classical mythology abounds in stories in which the gods do

wicked things to humans--often for the sport of it. Arthur Darby Nock noted that worship of such gods need not have inspired sincere belief." [[ROC:200f](#)]

There is no necessary 'consistency' in their position, though scholars still try to see what the worshippers believed at these festivals...The death of Attis was an event in the distant mythological past--how could someone believe it happened again each year? (where was the boar, or the castrating flint?)...Religious skepticism was rampant--from both high and low--but religion was "useful" to the society [Augustine tried to shame the Empire by pointing out their utilitarian approach to 'truth']. Consistency *itself* could easily be a sacrificial victim too...

In other words, the obvious logic in "they must have believed in a resurrected god, because what good is a dead god?" would have been met back then with MacMullen's phrase above: "who cares?"...

.....

But let's also take a brief look at the major figures that are prominent in the better known MR's of the Roman Empire. The ones most often referenced in NT background reference sourcebooks such as KOC, DSG, and NTB are the Greek MRs (Eleusinian--based on the rape of Persephone by Pluto; Dionysos (Bacchus)) and the Oriental MRs (Isis, Cybele/Attis--examined above, Mithras) [For a discussion of this breakdown, see [NTSE:132-137.](#)] We will only look at the ones of these with "unique" deities that *might* fall into a semi-DARG category.

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The MR of [Isis/Osiris/Serapis](#).

This MR was NOT the same as the earlier Osiris religion we looked at. This was a **substantial modification** of that religion by Ptolemy I in the Hellenistic period. So :

"Under Ptolemy I, the hellenistic ruler of Egypt from 305 to 285 B.C., a new cult was established in honor of Serapis, a composite deity whose attributes included features of Osiris (the God of the Nile), Aesclepius (the god of healing), Jupiter (the supreme Olympian god, Zeus, adapted for Roman use), and Pluto (the god of the underworld). In their efforts to create a one-world culture, the hellenistic rulers found a cult as inclusive as that of Serapis enormously useful, because people of diverse backgrounds could unite in honoring this divinity." [Kee in [KOC:77](#)]

"We touch here upon a most important element in the comparisons which can be made between Egyptian and Asiatic cults--the influence of the Greeks. They, too, knew "the old Mediterranean ritual of sorrow with its periodic wailing for a departed divinity, hero or heroine," expressing "the emotion of natural man excited by the disappearance of verdure, by the gathering of the harvest, or by the fall of the year." The Greeks have not only identified Egyptian gods with their own but have used the Egyptian material creatively for their own ends. **The spread of the cult of Isis throughout the Roman Empire is the outstanding example of an adaptation in which the original features disappeared almost completely. Most, if not all, of the information on Egyptian religion which classical authors offer is disfigured from the Egyptian point of view.** Even the oldest Greek source exemplifies **the peculiarly Greek tendency to transmute every borrowed trait into an expression of Hellenic thought**; Herodotus (ii. 59) equated Isis with Demeter. [Frankfort, *opcit*, p.291f]

The cult of Osiris (Egyptian) was *transformed* into an MR of Serapis by Ptolemy. The MR version made inroads into Rome--from Egypt--during the reign of Caligula (A.D. 37-41), and although Osiris was certainly a dying (but NOT 'rising') god, we know that Serapis was NOT a dying god at all. He was a deliberate mixture of deities without a DARG motif (e.g., Osiris, Zeus) and he was acclaimed for his healing abilities (because of his assimilation of Aesculapius). But again, the closest any of the component deities come to DARGs is in Osiris, which we have already seen to be dying-but-**not**-rising. [The Apis bull motif doesn't help much either, since when the bull dies, it *becomes Osiris* in the underworld--and thus *doesn't escape* the underworld at all. And of course, they then had to go and find a replacement bull (the bulls were actually mummified, signifying their continued existence *in the realm of the dead*--NOT in the realm of the living.)]

The MR of **Dionysos (Bacchus)**.

Dionysos was the god of wine, and most of the cult was concerned with partying, to such an extent that the Roman Senate restricted its size and meeting frequency in 186 BC ([NTSE:133](#)). There were the vague intimations of renewal in the seasonal changes of the earth, but the similarities with Jesus are few and insubstantial. It is one of the older cults, going back into the 7th century B.C. but it was only turned into an MR during the Roman period.

This figure had many, many various and contradictory accounts of his exploits, but the two that are most closely related to the DARG scenario are the accounts of his birth:

Here is the first (and best-known) account:

"Philandering Zeus fell in love with Semele, princess of the house of Thebes and daughter of the Phoenician immigrant king Gadmus . **Zeus**

came to her disguised as a mortal man, and Semele was soon pregnant. Hera, Zeus's queen, inflamed with jealousy, disguised herself as an old woman and hurried to Semele's door; her hair was straggly and her skin furrowed with wrinkles. For a while the two women chatted. When Semele revealed her affair with Zeus, **the disguised Hera suggested that his claim to be king of the gods might be only a ploy; perhaps he was an ordinary mortal who made up the story to bring Semele to his bed.** The old woman departed, and Semele doubted. When Zeus next came, she asked for just one wish. Zeus swore by the underworld river Styx that he would give whatever she asked. "Appear to me as you appear to Hera, when you make love to her!" Semele asked. Sorrowful, yet true to his word, Zeus appeared in all his glory, **burning Semele to a crisp. Hermes saved the fetus** and carried it to Zeus, who sewed it into his thigh. Three months later he removed the stitches, and Dionysus was born again. He was the twice-born god." [[HI:CM3:250](#); note: I only count one birth here, at most]

And then another account, with logically precedes the other:

"Another myth told about his birth even more clearly established him in this role as a god of the mysteries. **Zeus mated with his daughter Persephone, who bore a son, Zagreus**, which is another name for Dionysus. **In her jealousy, Hera then aroused the Titans to attack the child.** These monstrous beings, their faces whitened with chalk, attacked the infant as he was looking in a mirror (in another version, they beguiled him with toys and cut him to pieces with knives). After the murder, **the Titans devoured the dismembered corpse. But the heart of the infant god was saved and brought to Zeus by Athena; Dionysus was born again--swallowed by Zeus and begotten on Semele.** Zeus was angry with the Titans and destroyed them with his thunder and lightning; **but from their ashes humankind was born.**" [[HI:CMY6:223](#); this looks like a real birth and death, but not a 'resurrection'--going 'back out' as Zeus' seed into Semele is a stretch for the phase 'born again'...]

The Zagreus myth shows up in 'regular' Dionysusian and in 'Orphic' Dionysosian cults, in which one *possible* ritual act--the tearing apart a live animal and eating its raw flesh--is interpreted differently:

"Little is known of the actual mysteries of Dionysos, but presumably they were as diverse as the manifestations of the god. It seems likely that the Dionysian mysteries usually included eating and drinking. At least in the archaic and savage mysteries of Dionysos, as portrayed in Euripides' play *The Bacchae*, the initiates were said to tear animals to pieces (*sparagmos*) and eat the flesh raw (*omophagia*) as a way of

assimilating the Dionysian power embodied within the animal. In more serene Bacchic rites, such as those of the *lobacchoi* in Athens, the meal was a banquet." [TAM:63]

But the more savage of the rituals were eliminated early in the cult history, but some traces of these show up in pre-Roman times [HI:CM3:276]:

"The presence of a crowd of witnesses fostered the experience of Dionysian ecstasy, as suggested in myth by the band of followers who always surround the god, the maenads and satyrs. Continuous dancing to the beating of drums and the playing of flutes, and the consumption of wine, led devotees to direct experience of the god. So did the communal tearing apart of an animal (*sparagmos*) and the eating of its raw flesh (*omophagia*). In prehistoric times this practice may have taken a cannibalistic form, with human beings as victims. In the myths, Pentheus is torn limb from limb (although not actually eaten) by the god's crazed followers, Ino boils her son in a pot, and the Minyads eat their own children. The myths no doubt exaggerate the more sensational forms of the cult; **cannibalism and human sacrifice were abhorrent by the Archaic and Classical periods**. Still, we have inscriptional evidence that Dionysus' followers really **did practice the "eating of raw flesh" as late as the Hellenistic Period**.

"Greek and Roman religions in general lacked creeds and claimed little moral authority, but they did develop local priesthoods, which eventually became integral parts of the institutions of the state. **In this way the savage features of Dionysiac religion disappeared from the festivals of the Classical Period**. Nevertheless, on several occasions the worship of Dionysus was felt to be a political threat. In Rome his cult grew to such proportions during the long and painful war with Carthage that in 186 B.C. an alarmed senate, after many executions, brought it under severe restrictions.

[The Orphics are sometimes classified as a mystery religion, under the category of Dionysus, but it is less certain that it constituted a group back then:

"The name of Orphism is sometimes used to describe the beliefs and practices of those who took part in mystery cults based on the poems attributed to Orpheus, or who engaged in ascetic practices. However, **it is uncertain to what extent Orphism can be thought of as a unified spiritual movement**." [HI:COCCCL, s.v. "Orpheus"]

They did, however, have an opposite interpretation of the flesh-eating of Dionysus (arguing that it was not consistently understood as 'union with the god!'):

"About the Orphic mysteries of Dionysos we know somewhat more. Named after their founder Orpheus, whose myths depict him as a Thracian singer who tried to liberate his departed Eurydice from death and who was torn to pieces by Bacchantes (women maddened by Dionysos), **the Orphics laid special claim to the god Dionysos, but did so in a peculiar manner.** For the Orphics the Dionysian practice of *omophagia* became **the original transgression, and they recounted the myth of Dionysos Zagreus in order to show the enormity of the sin of omophagia.** According to the myth of Zagreus, it was the evil Titans who consumed Dionysos. Yet after Zeus incinerated the Titans for their wicked deed, human beings were created from the ashes. Thus, human beings are bipartite, according to the Orphics: they are composed of a Titanic nature (the fleshly body) and a Dionysian nature (the immortal soul). Although the Dionysian soul is imprisoned in a Titanic body (the *soma*, or body, is termed a *sema*, or tomb, by the Orphics), the soul may be delivered from its shackles by means of a life devoted to purity and realize its true Dionysian destiny. [[TAM:64f](#)]

But in any event, Dionysos career doesn't reveal "numerous, complex, and detailed" parallels with that of Jesus.

.....
Pushback: "Hey, man, are you gonna completely skip over Jesus' imitation of Dionysus at the Wedding in Cana?! Just like you Christians to destroy almost all the evidence, and ignore the evidence we **DO** have...amazing!"

Actually, you are too late...the world has once again 'moved on'...so WBC places this event against its Jewish background, as opposed to some pagan one (note the comments about no *real* parallels):

"Some scholars view the glory of Jesus here set over against that claimed for **Dionysus**, the provider of wine, and the fullness of life experienced in intoxication. Various stories were told of this provision, such as the placing of three empty basins at night in the temple at Elis and finding them to be full of wine the next day; or of the spring of wine that flowed in the temple of Bacchus in Andros on the festal day known as Theodosia (see Dodd, *Historical Tradition*, 224–25). **An exhaustive examination of the evidence relating to such parallels was made by H. Noetzel (*Christus und Dionysus*); he has convinced most scholars that the parallels are insufficient to support the claims made for them.** In particular the motif of *changing* water to wine is **not present in the Dionysus legends**; the jugs of Elis, for example, were not filled with water but were empty, and the fount of wine in Andros did not replace one of water. To suggest that the Evangelist or his source wished to demonstrate through the Cana miracle that a greater than Dionysus has appeared is a **speculation without warrant.** [[WBC](#)]

"Most writers acknowledge that in the Johannine narrative there is an implicit contrast between water used for Jewish purificatory rites and the wine given by Jesus; the former is characteristic of the old order, the latter of the new. There can be little doubt that the change of which the miracle is a sign is the coming of the kingdom of God in and through Jesus. The picture of the kingdom of God as a feast is prominent in Judaism and in the synoptic teaching (see, e.g., Matt 5:6; 8:11–12; Mark 2:19; Luke 22:15–18, 29–30a), and abundance of wine is a feature of the feast (e.g. Isa 25:6). The glory of Jesus, manifest in Cana was a sign of his mediating the grace of the kingdom of God in his total ministry. The glory of God is seen precisely in God's bestowal of life in his kingdom, and this he gives through the Son. [\[WBC\]](#)

"Older attempts to interpret this sign as a Christianized version of the Dionysus myth (Dionysus was the Greek god of wine, the one who supplied the abundance of life and joy associated with inebriation) or of related stories **have largely been abandoned in the light of evidence that the alleged parallels are wholly inadequate.** " [D. A. Carson, *John*, Eerdmans:1991]

"Indeed, in the ancient literature Plutarch says that there was a spring at Haliartus with clear, sparkling, wine-colored, very pleasant-tasting water in which the newly born Dionysus was bathed . Also, Pliny says that at Andros, on the festival known as Theodosia, a spring in the temple of Bacchus flowed with wine. Pausanias says that at Elis the priests of Dionysus placed three large empty cauldrons in a sealed room to find them filled with wine when they returned the next day. And Ovid says that Liber, the Italian god identified with Bacchus, gave the daughters of the Delian king Anius the power to turn things into wine, a story associated with Dionysus...However, from these references it is obvious that there are significant differences between the Dionysus legend and the story in John 2: the spring at Haliartus flowed with water, and the one at Andros flowed with wine, not water that had once been wine; and the empty cauldrons in the Elis temple were filled with wine rather than water subsequently changed into wine, key elements in John's story. **These differences have convinced most scholars that John or his tradition is not dependent on the Dionysus legend for this story.**" [\[NT:JMW:192\]](#)

The MR of [Mithras](#).

This is a strange one, and one that is under considerable re-assessment in the scholarly community. Earlier scholars in the field followed the 1903 standard by Cumont in which the Mithra of the Roman MR's was connected with the Iranian and Persian deities of the name Mithra/Mitra. This position has been under radical and critical fire for some 25 years, since the only connection between the Middle Eastern cult and the Roman MR was the name. And the bull-ceremony, in which Mithra kills a bull, does not occur in the Iranian/Persian versions. Recent leaders in the fields, such as [David Ulansey](#)

have argued for a strictly Roman origin for this MR, based exclusively on the zodiacal orientation of the period (cf. [\[HI:OMMU\]](#))

If we accept Ulansey's view [as well as others who interpret the 'slaying of the bull' as astrological], then there is essentially **no DARG content in the Roman "Mithra" MR**; most of it would have been in the Persian/Iranian versions (if at all, see below). And its ties to the East are almost nil: "Mithraism's ties with the east amount to so little that they can be denied entirely" (MacMullen, [\[HI:PTRE:119\]](#)). Accordingly, there is nothing to be 'similar to' and the identification fails. We have noted earlier that there is no 'suffering god' in the Roman version of this cult, and it is the Roman version that would have been in ascendency at the time of NT formation.

So, the "Roman" Mithras MR--without a 'suffering god' at all--has no bearing on our subject here, since we are essentially trying to find 'striking' parallels between the figures of Jesus and other deity/hero figures. We obviously don't know much about the 'Roman' version, but we have already seen that specialists in the field do not consider Mithras a 'suffering god' and correspondingly, not a 'dying and rising god' either. And even many/most of the alleged *ritual* parallels are now suspect:

1. The sacrament meal or "communion":

"Francis comments: "Cumont's systematic description of Mithraic liturgy in Christian terms is now seen to be misleading, not to say mischievous. In particular, his description of the Mithraic meal as 'communion' has been called in question." After a detailed examination of the subject, Kane concluded: But once again I remind the reader that in all this we have not yet found a cult meal, a meal in which all the initiates can participate.... On the other hand I have **found no support for a "haoma ceremony," the existence of which is the basic assumption of Cumont's theory of a sacramental Mithraic meal. Nor can I find any support for Vermaseren's assumption that Mithraic initiates ate the flesh of a bull and drank its blood so as to be born again**, whether from Mithraic iconography and archaeology, Avestan texts, or the Greek and Graeco-Roman milieu." [cited at [OT:PAB:517](#)]

2. The "saved us by eternal blood" inscription: "Beck therefore concludes that **this text**, 'which has perhaps been the principal warrant for the interpretation of Mithras' bull-killing as a salvific act effective because it transcends time, **can no longer carry the weight placed upon it**'" [cited at [OT:PAB:512](#)]

3. Identification of the slain bull with Mithras himself: "The blood is without doubt the blood of the slain bull. Following a suggestion of Alfred Loisy--who was influenced by Christian soterology--Vermaseren entertained **the suggestion** that the bull was an incarnation

of Mithras himself, although **he correctly notes there is no evidence for this identification.**" [cited at [OT:PAB:512](#)]

So, if the Roman one doesn't fit the bill, does the Iranian/Indian version offer us a DARG?

The Iranian version has a background in Vedic India as well (as 'Mitra')...

1. The vedic version of Mitra is not very emphasised (as compared to his dualistic-twin, Varuna). He is a personification of "contract", thence 'friend'. He "appears as basically benevolent, the god who regulates the tiller folk" [[WR:CM:48](#)]

2. He has some solar characteristics, but would not be considered a solar deity at the Vedic stage: "Apart from the obvious circle of Dyaus-descended divine characters discussed above, **a vague tinge of "solarity"** attaches to a number of deities (including Mitra)." [[WR:CM:62](#)]

3. In Iran, immediately before Zarathustra, Mithra becomes a little more associated with the sun: "Much as in India the rather faded Mitra took on some solar characteristics and later came to be an appellative 'friend', in Modern Persian *mih*r, *meh*r still means both 'sun' and 'friendship'. Mithra is one of the most important Old Iranian divinities" [[WR:CM:99](#)]

4. When he emerges in Iran--during Zarathustra's 'revolt'--he is suppressed at first, then given expanded 'responsibilities':

"Zarathustra's exaltation of Ahura and onomastic suppression of Mithra were symptomatic of his henotheistic fervor that did not survive the reformer. It looks as if Mithra was fleetingly demonized by the prophet's reductionist and abstractionist zeal but reemerged once the religious revolution had run its course. Outside the onomastic formulas, the conjunction/contrast Mithra and Ahura had of course collapsed, for Ahura was now a kind of pantheonic board chairman increasingly frozen in his polarized stance vis-a-vis Angra Mainyu, while it was left to Mithra to do the mythical dirty work. His roles have in fact expanded: on top of guarding human settlements and social compacts, he employs spies like Varuna and punishes perjurers and contract breakers, champions warriors, wields the thunderbolt and makes the rain fall (largely by default of the demonized Indara), and generally evolves toward a **solar-tinged warrior-god** not without connotations of cattle and fertility" [[WR:CM:100](#)]

5. His relationship to nature was as a 'weather god' and to cattle as 'lord of the wide places' (a frequent epithet of his):

"This particular god, the contract-god, was considered to be both **a protector and a judge** over all living things, especially humans. Since he controlled the cosmic order he could punish those who turned against the truth and

rightness.... In the Rigveda, Mithra was a continuous companion of Varuna. Based on these connections and Mithra's name which can be translated as 'covenant, contract, treaty' and 'friendship', one can see the focus on **the honorable, ethical and just aspects of his divine persona** which can reflect the importance of covenant and stability of contracts and structural divisions among the nomadic societies of Eurasia. As such an important concept, Mithra may have been 'transplanted' to the Middle East with the arrival of Indo-European nomadic tribes or groups such as the Hittites and the Persians. This argument about Mithra's 'arrival' might be strengthened by **his warrior qualities** (a mighty warrior on a chariot killing covenant violators with a mace) and his ability **to replenish earthly waters by releasing both rivers and rain**. The combination of all the above features **may** have earned him the title of the **Anatolian weather-god** whose qualities he obviously represented and it might be for this reason that his memory was carried on by the Hittite pantheon in addition to the Rigveda and the Avesta." [[OT:CSME:110](#)]

6. The original Indian Mitra was a sky-god (and therefore, somewhat connected to the sun):

"Mithra is the same as Mitra, the **Vedic sky-god**, and we have already seen him in the Mihir Yasht where, **closely connected but not yet identical with the sun...Later** Mithra was identified with the Semitic sun-god, Shamash..." [[MM:103](#)]

"In *Yasht* 10 (*Mihir Yasht*) there is a series of hymns of praise **addressed to Mithra as the god of heavenly light**, whose victorious **power is manifest in the sun...**The hymn names Mithra and begins: 'Who first of the heavenly gods reaches over the Hara, before the **undying**, swift-horsed **sun...**' (emphasis mine; note that the sun is called 'undying', as opposed to 'dying and rising'...) [[MM:74](#)]

7. He is not known as a 'dying' god, but as a beneficent--but harsh--victorious warrior and protector deity:

"[In the Avesta] he is depicted as an omniscient warrior god, who blessed his followers but who also inflicted horrible calamities on his foes. The Avestan Mithra was associated with the sun, but was not identified with it. He was especially known as 'the lord of wide pastures,' a phrase that occurs 111 times." [[OT:PAB:494](#)]

8. In fact, his relationship with the sun is **related to knowledge**, instead of identity with it (note: 'solar deities' are not generally considered 'dying and rising gods' either, cf. Apollo or Sol Invictus of Rome):

"He facilitates agreements between men and makes them honor their engagements. **The sun is his eye** (Taitt. Brah. 3.1.5.1); **all-seeing, nothing escapes him.**" [[WR:HRI:204](#)]

9. He is specifically NOT a 'vegetation god' in the sense normally used:

"Such promises explain the adjective that is frequently coupled with his name: *vourugauyaoiti*, 'possessing vast pastures.' **Not that Mithra is an agrarian deity** to whom one should pray so that crops may grow, but **rather that he is a fighting god**

who brings the victory that makes it possible for the *aryas* to get control of new territories." [[WR:MYB:2:892](#)]

In other words, we don't have any reason to suspect that the pre-Roman Mithra/Mitra had **any** DARG characteristics, either.

[BTW, scholars don't know how the Iranian Mithra got 'transmuted into' the Roman Mithra, but some believe the change was somehow connected with Tarsus, a major center for the cult of Perseus, and of course, Asia Minor was the hotbed/home of many of the cults favored by the later Roman emperors (cf. Ulansey, chapter 4 in [[HI:OMMU](#)], "The Perseus Cult of Tarsus")]

So, with the Mystery Religions, we once again come up *without* "numerous, complex, detailed" parallels with parallel "underlying ideas and structure"...

.....

Pushback: "WHOA, WHOA, WHOA--wait a minute, glenn! Did you just say "TARSUS" was a major center for Mithras, and for other mystery cults?! As in the "Tarsus, where Paul was born?!"...You mean the Apostle Paul grew up in a place teeming with the kinda stuff we have been talking about here? And you weren't gonna say anything about it, were you, O Deceitful Apologist?! Amazing!...but if Paul did grow up there, then that explains EVERYTHING--I can see now why his epistles are TEEMING with MR images: of Jesus being born from a rock, of Jesus slaying a bull, of Jesus partnering with the Sun God, of the Great Mother's lions and the required castration of all church leaders, of Dionysus' giant phallus festivals, of all the zodiacal celebrations in caves, of the seven grades of initiation, of Jesus being killed by a boar and turning into a flower--Wow, it all makes so much sense, now! ...And to think, I almost believed all this junk you had written so far..."

Wow, what can I say to that?--other than "you caught me"...*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maximus culpa*...?

Well, all the data we have indicates:

1. That Paul was born there, but didn't grow up there:

"I am a Jew, **born** in Tarsus of Cilicia, **but brought up in this city [Jerusalem]**. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. [Acts 22.3]

2. His letters suggest that he was NOT raised there at all (or at least that he didn't get

his Greek education there):

"Here, however, for once people have been ready to believe Luke, because if Paul came from Tarsus it was possible to connect him broadly with Hellenistic education and culture and with the syncretistic practices of Syria and Asia Minor from his earliest youth. For it was the verdict of Strabo that in the capital of Cilicia 'there was so much zeal for philosophy and all the other aspects of education generally among the inhabitants that in this respect they surpassed even Alexandria, Athens, and any other place'. However, it is an open question whether and how far the young Paul in Tarsus acquired any of this 'general education' that flourished there, in contrast to his older contemporary Philo of Alexandria, whose nature was so different. Certainly in Paul's letters we meet a few maxims and commonplaces from the popular philosophers, but these go with the style of missionary and apologetic preaching in the synagogues; by contrast, we find virtually none of the knowledge of the classical Greek literature which formed part of the general canon of education in his letters. It is completely uncertain whether he had ever seen a Greek tragedy or a mime. The most popular drama of the Hellenistic period was Euripides' *Bacchae* - an abomination to strict Jews, certainly, and the same went for the lascivious mime. The pious Pharisaic Jew rejected the pagan theatre hardly any less bitterly than the orator and Christian Tertullian in his *De Spectaculis*." At best one might perhaps assume that Paul had occasionally heard one of the recitations of poetry which were popular at the time. However, there are no references to this in his letters. His language shows no trace of any knowledge of Greek poetry, i.e. of epics, drama and poetry. The only lyric which he quotes, in I Corinthians 15.33, comes from Menander's Thais and - like many other verses of the comic poet - had long since become a detached saying. The language of Homer and the Greek tragedians is as alien to Paul as the imitation of the Attic orators or the purity of classical language. Nor does the pseudo-classical verse of the Jews play any part in his argumentation. It only became significant again a century later, for the Christian apologists, through whom early Christianity deliberately made its way into the world of Greek education .

"Strabo concludes his hymn of praise to Tarsus by saying that the city also had 'all kinds of schools of the rhetorical arts', and intrinsically it would be conceivable that the young Saul also mastered literary Greek at a very early stage, so thoroughly, that for him, 'the true master of the speech, to whom ideas came in an overwhelming flood', it became 'an appropriate instrument'." **The only question is how long he lived in Tarsus.**

"I doubt whether Paul was trained in one of the usual schools of rhetoric, since a clear distinction must be made between the Greek elementary school and instruction in rhetoric. Even the question where he received his Greek elementary education must remain open. Both Jerusalem and Tarsus are possibilities, since in Paul it is impossible to separate Greek education from Jewish. **Even in Greek garb he remains a Jew through and through.**

"Although to outward appearance Paul is a 'wanderer between two worlds' his theological thinking displays a quite astonishing unity. That will already have been the case with the Jew Saul, and the two periods of his life, the Jewish and the Christian, are closely interlocked. This makes it clear that faith in the Messiah Jesus was not something alien to the Jew, something which came from outside.

"Today hardly anyone argues that the later Paul, as HJ.Schoeps and L.Goppelt conjecture, was at least indirectly influenced in his christology by impressions from his youth, going back to the public cult of the vegetation god Sardon-Heracles worshipped in Tarsus, or to titles used in the Hellenistic-Roman ruler cult; this is extremely improbable. Traces of a Cilician 'syncretism', or even a syncretism from Asia Minor and Syria, are simply not to be found in the Pauline letters that have come down to us."
[\[NT:PCP:2-4\]](#)

3. We have already seen that **he didn't act very syncretistic when he was preaching/teaching in Asia Minor**--and he was **constantly** around these various cults (and countless more). We saw above the numerous opportunities he had for syncretism (to win an audience and 'further his cause'), **but** it seems in every situation he "stubbornly continued" with his exclusivistic proclamation of Jesus, and **his abject denunciation of his hearers' gods as 'not-gods' or even 'demons'**...So, *even if* he had been 'raised in this pagan stuff', he must have been a very poor student...

4. We have already seen that recent scholarship has seen **Judaism as the background for the various images** in Pauline literature (and the gospel literature, for that matter), instead of these cults anyway. So, *even if* he had been 'raised in this pagan stuff', he apparently liked his other education in Jerusalem better...

But I do appreciate you trying to keep me honest...(smile)

.....

Third, there are the more "major players" (e.g. Buddha, Krishna)

To what extent are the lives of Jesus, Buddha, Krishna "almost identical" enough to justify suspicion of borrowing?

Let's do **Buddha** first...

Let's use the list from the original (submitted) website. These are the only suggested parallels in that document:

1. Buddha was born of the virgin Maya.
2. He performed miracles and wonders.

3. He crushed a serpent's head.
4. He abolished idolatry.
5. He ascended to Nirvana or "heaven."
6. He was considered the "Good Shepherd."

Now, there are two main questions hiding in here: (1) did the Buddha legend include these legends in the way portrayed--"elements in common with Jesus Christ"; and (2) are these sufficient to conclude "almost identical" or even "material similarity"?

The second is relatively easy to answer, given the above discussions. These elements--even IF accurate--would not even be close enough to implicate borrowing. Let's go back through them.

- o Buddha was born of the virgin Maya. [We have already seen the radical differences here, and the data that his mom was married before his conception counts against the factuality of this. There ARE later traditions, however, that assert that she had taken vows of abstinence even during her marriage, but it can be understood (so in EOR) to refer only to the time of that midsummer festival. The first and finest biography of the Buddha, written by Ashvaghosha in the 1st century, called the *Buddhacarita* ("acts of the buddha") gives a rather strong indication of her non-virgin status in canto 1:

"He [the king of the Shakyas] had a wife, splendid, beautiful, and steadfast, who was called the Great Maya, from her resemblance to Maya the Goddess. These two tasted of love's delights, and one day she conceived the fruit of her womb, but without any defilement, in the same way in which knowledge joined to trance bears fruit. Just before her conception she had a dream." ([WR:BS:35](#)).

"The oldest accounts of Buddha's ancestry appear to presuppose nothing abnormal about his birth, and merely speak of his being well born both on his mother's end and father's side for seven generations back. According to the later legend he is born not as other human beings, but in the same way as a universal king he descends from the Tusita heaven by his own choice, and with this his father is not concerned. **This is not properly a virgin birth, but it may be called parthogenetic**, that is, Suddhodana was not his progenitor." [WR:LBLH:36](#)]

- He performed miracles and wonders. [We have already seen how this is expected, not surprising.]
- He crushed a serpent's head. [Strangely enough, even though this is commonly associated with the Messianic figure in the OT from Genesis 3, there is no point of contact with the NT portrayal of Jesus. The history-of-religions field, however, argues that this pervasive theme could be related to some primeval religious revelation/insight.]
- He abolished idolatry. [Not only is this HIGHLY questionable, given the various deities/tantric deities/manifestations in many of the forms of Buddhism(!), but it can also be pointed out that Jesus never did this. Idolatry as a heresy was *legally* abolished in the Law of Moses, but was *practically* eradicated in the Exile. Some of buddhism is atheistic; some of it has thousands of spirits/deities. Indeed, the 1st-century buddhist biographer cited above from WR:BS, in canto 21 ("Parinirvana"), in describing the events that happened at the death of the

Buddha, says this: "But, well established in the practice of the supreme Dharma, the gathering of the gods round king Vaishravana was not grieved and shed no tears, so great was their attachment to the Dharma. The Gods of the Pure Abode, though they had great reverence for the Great Seer, remained composed, and their minds were unaffected; for they hold the things of this world in the utmost contempt."]

- He ascended to Nirvana or "heaven." [This is a misunderstanding of the Buddhist teaching on Nirvana. It is not a 'place' nor is 'ascension' (especially BODILY, VISIBLE, and HISTORICAL ascension as in the life of Christ) a relevant concept. This is another example of imprecise and misleading language. The Buddha is said to have traversed (on his death-couch) all nine of the trance levels--twice, and then his body was cremated ([WR:BS:64-65](#); [WR:BIG:42](#))].

- He was considered the "Good Shepherd." [Again, this is expected and common, especially in pastoral-based cultures; not a cause to suspect borrowing]

These 'similarities' turn out to be either superficial, misunderstood, or simply irrelevant. As in most of the cases we will look at in this paper, it is the differences that are the most striking.

Just to cite a few:

- Buddha did not in any sense suffer a voluntary, sacrificial, and **substitutionary** death--he most likely died of indigestion at 80 years of age [[WR:Eliade:27](#)].
- Buddha said "there is no savior"; Jesus said "I have come to seek and to save the lost" and "I came not to judge the world but to save it".
- Buddha did not experience a bodily resurrection from physical death; Jesus did.
- The single alleged prophecy of Buddha's coming applied only to a FUTURE Buddha (Maitreya), NOT the historical one ([WR:BS:237ff](#)); the prophetic stream from which Jesus stepped is rich, varied, prior to Him, and established BEFORE His arrival.

Now, to be complete (and fair), I should mention that when the History-of-Religions school was in full bloom, there **were** scholarly works that identified possible parallels between Buddha and Jesus, and these were to be evaluated and investigated for possible borrowing by the historian. In [WR:LBLH](#), Edwards lists/discusses several that were discussed in the literature in the first half of the twentieth century:

1. Simeon in the temple
2. The visit to Jerusalem (Luke 2)
3. The Baptism
4. The Temptation
5. Praise by Kisa Gotami (Luke 11.27)
6. The widow's mite
7. Peter walking on the sea
8. The samaritan woman
9. The end of the world
10. The Annunciation
11. Choosing the disciples
12. Nathaniel
13. The Prodigal Son

14. The man that was born blind
15. The Transfiguration
16. Miracle of loaves and fishes

Edwards then notes that the number of 'alleged parallels' advanced is "inversely proportional" to how much a scholar knows about the Buddhist literature(!):

"If scholars could come to an agreement on what instances are 'cogent parallels' or cases of actual borrowing, we should then have the data of a problem for the historians to decide. But **so far this hope is illusory**. Seydel's **fifty** instances are **reduced** by van den Bergh **to nine**. **In proportion to the investigator's direct knowledge of the Buddhist sources the number seems to decrease**. E. W. Hopkins discusses **five** 'cogent parallels', **but does not consider any of them very probable**. Garbe assumes direct borrowing **in four cases**, Simeon, the Temptation, Peter walking on the sea, and the Miracle of the loaves and fishes. Charpentier considers **Simeon the only unobjectionable example**. **Other scholars reject all connexion**." [WR:LBLH:247f]

And concludes that the comparison fails, due to lack of "strong parallels" in the important (central) areas:

"In any case the chief events of the life--birth, renunciation, enlightenment, and death, the very items which might give strength to the comparison--disappear from the question" [op cit]

.....

Now, **Horus...**

Again, the list from the (submitted) website:

1. Horus was born of a virgin on December 25th.
2. He had 12 disciples.
3. He was buried in a tomb and resurrected.
4. He was also the Way, the Truth, the Light, the Messiah, God's Anointed Son, the Good Shepherd, etc.
5. He performed miracles and rose one man, El-Azar-us, from the dead.
6. Horus' personal epithet was "Iusa," the "ever becoming son" of "Ptah," the "Father."
7. Horus was called "the KRST," or "Anointed One," long before the Christians duplicated the story

Let's look at these:

1. Horus was born of a virgin on December 25th. [We have already seen that Horus was NOT born of a virgin at all. Indeed, one ancient Egyptian relief depicts this conception by showing his mother Isis in a falcon form, hovering over an erect phallus of a dead

and prone Osiris in the Underworld (EOR, s.v. "Phallus"). And the Dec 25 issue is of no relevance to us--nowhere does the NT associate this date with Jesus' birth at all.

Indeed, the description of the conception of Horus will show exactly **the sexual elements that characterize pagan 'miracle births'**, as noted by the scholars earlier:

"But after she [i.e., Isis] had brought it [i.e. Osiris' body] back to Egypt, 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 tht 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 Osisis 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..." [CANE:2:1702; emphasis mine] [BTW, the Hebrew word 'satan' is not a 'cognate' of the name 'seth' by any means: "The root *STN is not evidenced in any of the cognate languages in texts that are prior to or contemporary with its occurrences in the Hebrew Bible" DDD, s.v. 1369f]

2. He had 12 disciples. [This would be so incidental as to be of no consequence--even if I could verify this fact!

But again, my research in the academic literature does not surface this fact. I can find references to FOUR "disciples"--variously called the semi-divine HERU-SHEMSU ("Followers of Horus") [GOE:1.491]. I can find references to SIXTEEN human followers (GOE:1.196). And I can find reference to an UNNUMBERED group of followers called *mesniu/mesnitu* ("blacksmiths") who accompanied Horus in some of his battles [GOE:1.475f; although these might be identified with the HERU-SHEMSU in GOE:1.84]. But I cannot find TWELVE anywhere... Horus is NOT the sun-god (that's Re), so we cannot use the 'all solar gods have twelve disciples--in the Zodiac' routine here.]

3. He was buried in a tomb and resurrected. [We have already seen that the DARG pattern simply cannot be demonstrated in ANY case. And the data is against this "fact" even being true. I can find no references to Horus EVER dying, until he later becomes "merged" with Re the Sun god, after which he 'dies' and is 'reborn' every single day as the sun rises. And even in this 'death', there is no reference to a tomb anywhere...The massive difference between this metaphor of life/death, and the claims of the apostolic band about the real death and bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth should illustrate why the 'numerous, complex, and detailed' and 'non-superficial' criteria have to be

insisted on by scholars in this field...]

4. He was also the Way, the Truth, the Light, the Messiah, God's Anointed Son, the Good Shepherd, etc. [We saw above that the commonality of religious terms means almost nothing.]
5. He performed miracles and rose one man, El-Azar-us, from the dead. [Miracle stories abound, even among religious groups that could not possibly have influenced one another, such as Latin American groups (e.g. Aztecs) and Roman MR's, so this 'similarity' carries no force. The reference to this specific resurrection I cannot find ANYWHERE in the scholarly literature. I have looked under all forms of the name to no avail. The fact that something so striking is not even mentioned in modern works of Egyptology indicates its questionable status. It simply cannot be adduced as data without SOME real substantiation. The closest thing to it I can find is in Horus' official funerary role, in which he "introduces" the newly dead to Osiris and his underworld kingdom. In the *Book of the Dead*, for example, Horus introduces the newly departed Ani to Osiris, and asks Osiris to accept and care for Ani (GOE:1.490).]
6. Horus' personal epithet was "Iusa," the "ever becoming son" of "Ptah," the "Father." [Again, a case of religious epithets without any force for this argument.]

This fact has likewise escaped me and my research. I have looked at probably 50 epithets of the various Horus deities, and most major indices of the standard Egyptology reference works and come up virtually empty-handed. I can find a city named "Iusaas" [GOE:1.85], a pre-Islamic Arab deity by the name of "Iusaas", thought by some to be the same as the Egyptian god Tehuti/Thoth [GOE:2.289], and a female counterpart to Tem, named "Iusaaset" [GOE:1.354]. But no reference to Horus as being "Iusa"...]

7. Horus was called "the KRST," or "Anointed One," long before the Christians duplicated the story [This is still yet another religious name or symbol, without import for our topic. Anointing of religious figures was a common motif in ANE and AME religion anyway. I cannot find this anywhere either.]

Most of the above 'similarities' simply vanish, become irrelevant, or contribute nothing to the argument for some alleged 'identical lives' assertion for Horus and Jesus. To further highlight this, let's look at the thumbnail sketch of Horus' life given in *Encyclopedia of Religions*, s.v. "Horus":

"In ancient Egypt there were originally several gods known by the name Horus, but the best known and most important from the beginning of the historic period was the son of Osiris and Isis who was identified with the king of Egypt. According to myth, Osiris, who assumed the rulership of the earth shortly after its creation, was slain by his jealous brother, Seth. The sister-wife of Osiris, Isis, who collected the pieces of her dismembered husband and revived him, also conceived his son and avenger, Horus. Horus fought with Seth, and, despite the loss of one eye in the contest, was successful in avenging the death of his father and in becoming his legitimate successor. Osiris then became king of the dead and Horus king of the living,

this transfer being renewed at every change of earthly rule. The myth of divine kingship probably elevated the position of the god as much as it did that of the king. In the fourth dynasty, the king, the living god, may have been one of the greatest gods as well, but by the fifth dynasty the supremacy of the cult of Re, the sun god, was accepted even by the kings. The Horus-king was now also "son of Re." This was made possible mythologically by personifying the entire older genealogy of Horus (the Heliopolitan ennead) as the goddess Hathor, "house of Horus," who was also the spouse of Re and mother of Horus.

"Horus was usually represented as a falcon, and one view of him was as a great sky god whose outstretched wings filled the heavens; his sound eye was the sun and his injured eye the moon. Another portrayal of him particularly popular in the Late Period, was as a human child suckling at the breast of his mother, Isis. The two principal cult centers for the worship of Horus were at Bekhdet in the north, where very little survives, and at Idfu in the south, which has a very large and well- preserved temple dating from the Ptolemaic period. The earlier myths involving Horus, as well as the ritual performed there, are recorded at Idfu."

Notice how "almost identical lives" Horus and Jesus had (smile):

- There is no mention of the more striking claims of similarity made by the CopyCat authors (such as resurrection of El-Azar-us), even though such items would surely be noteworthy in books in the Western world(!);
- This sketch does not even REMOTELY look 'almost identical' to the life of Jesus Christ! To look at this and make claims of 'majority overlap' would be ridiculous in the extreme.
- The alleged similarities (which much MUST be present to even START the argument about borrowing, remember) are so weak and so dwarfed by the differences between the two figures, as to leave us wondering why anyone brought this argument up in the first place...

.....

And finally, **Krishna**....

(Again, the list from the (submitted) website):

1. Krishna was born of the Virgin Devaki ("Divine One")
2. He is called the Shepherd God.
3. He is the second person of the Trinity.
4. He was persecuted by a tyrant who ordered the slaughter of thousands of infants.
5. He worked miracles and wonders.
6. In some traditions he died on a tree.
7. He ascended to heaven.

Looking a little more closely,

1. Krishna was born of the Virgin Devaki ("Divine One") [We have already seen how these 'virgin birth' parallels are not close enough to constitute a 'compelling similarity', but this one is particularly inappropriate. The facts are simply otherwise--cf. Joseph Campbell, *Occidental Mythology*, p. 342:

"In India a like tale is told of the beloved savior Krishna, whose terrible uncle, Kansa, was, in that case, the tyrant-king. The savior's mother, Devaki, was of royal lineage, the tyrant's niece, and at the time when she was married the wicked monarch heard a voice, mysteriously, which let him know that her eighth child would be his slayer. He therefore confined both her and her husband, the saintly nobleman Vasudeva, in a closely guarded prison, where he murdered **their first six infants as they came**. (emphasis mine).

According to the story, the mother had six normal children before the 7th and 8th 'special' kids--a rather clear indication that the mom was not a virgin when she conceived Krishna [remember, this is not an issue of 'special births', but of 'virgin' ones].

2. He is called the Shepherd God. [So he was a cow-herd...so what?...Simply a common religious title, not a 'compelling similarity'...and we noted above that even this was different when applied to Jesus.]
3. He is the second person of the Trinity. [This is a misunderstanding of the Hindu pantheon/s. The Hindu pantheon differs from the Christian trinity substantially (e.g., one's a pantheon and one isn't...). The biggest problem with the assertion, however, is that it is simply wrong. Although the Hindu pantheon has changed considerably over over time, Krsna has NEVER been the 'second person of a 3-in-1'. In the oldest layers of Hindu tradition--the *Rig Veda*--the dominant three were Agni, Ushas (goddess), and Indra, although there were a number of other important deities [WS:SW:84]. After the Vedic period (before 1000 bc), and before the Epic period (400 bc - 400 ad) is the period in which a DIFFERENT "trinity" emerged. So [WR:RT:105](#):

"Traces of the original indigenous religion are plain in the later phases of the history of Hinduism. In the course of time, large shifts occur in the world of the gods. Some gods lose significance while others move into the foreground, until at last the 'Hindu trinity' emerges: Brahma, Visnu, and Siva..."

Krishna was **one** of the *avatars* (manifestation, incarnation, theophany) of Visnu. As such, Krishna only appeared on the scene during the Epic period, and most of the legendary materials about him show up in the *Harivamsa*, or Genealogy of Visnu (fourth century a.d.) and in the Puranas (written between 300-1200 a.d.). **He is one of TEN avatars of Visnu** (what does that do to a trinity?). [[WR:Eliade:133](#); [WR:SW:91f](#); [WR:RT:105f](#)].

This is another exampe of someone 'loosely' using Christian terminology to describe non-Christian phenomena, and then being surprised by the similarity.

4. He was persecuted by a tyrant who ordered the slaughter of thousands of infants. [Now, this is interesting. The only event in the life of Krsna I can find that is close to this kind of event is the story cited above at his birth, involving only 6 infants. How this person would turn that into "thousands" is beyond me (and probably beyond responsible writing as well). And, this motif of a king attempting to kill a supposed

'infant rival' is common to royal settings--not just divine ones. Hence, one can find this plot-line--a common one throughout human history--in the lives of Gilgamesh, Sargon, Cyrus, Perseus, and Romulous and Remus.([BM:227](#)) This, of course, has **nothing to do with mythology**--it is simply a historical tendency of vicious kings...Herod's killing of some dozen or two children in Bethlehem is a matter of predictable aggression, not some 'mythic motif'...human monsters can be at least as grotesque as divine ones...)

5. He worked miracles and wonders. [Surprise, surprise--another religious leader is credited with miracles...Hmm, did Krishna 'borrow' from Buddha or from Thor? From Horus or from...?]
6. In some traditions he died on a tree.[The tree in India would in no way have the despicable connotations of the Roman cross of execution, even if this were true/known.]

From the standpoint of accuracy, let me mention that I cannot find any reference to him dying **on** a tree. The records (not from iconographic sources, btw) I have on his death run something like this :

"Krishna was accidentally slain by the hunter Jaras...when he was mistaken for a deer and shot in the foot, his vulnerable spot." (WR:SDFML, s.v. "krishna")

"One lance-like (poisonous, cursed) reed was eaten by a fish and then caught by a hunter. In a drinking bout, Krishna, Balarama, and the Yadavas picked the reeds, killing each other. As Krishna sat lost in thought, the hunter, mistaking him for a deer, shot him in the foot with the reed he had found in the fish, and killed him."

[\[WR:DWM\]](#)

"Just after the war, Krsna dies, as he predicted he would, when, **in a position of meditation**, he is struck in the heel by a hunter's arrow." [WR:DAMY; was he meditating 'on a tree'?]

Perhaps he died *sitting under a tree*, but would that constitute a non-superficial parallel?

7. He ascended to heaven. [This is a misunderstanding of Hindu thought. "Heaven" is not actually a place in Hindu thought, for 'bodies to go', nor does one 'ascend' to it--especially not 'bodily' as did Jesus.

"At Balarama's death Krsna sat meditating; a hunter, Jara, pierced Krsna's feet by mistake, but afterwards, recognizing the hero, repented. **Krsna left his body** and entered heaven where he was greeted by the gods." [The Indian Theogony, Sukumari Bhattacharji, Cambridge:1970, p.305; note the difference between this and a 'bodily ascension of Jesus']

These similarities just don't seem to illustrate 'numerous, complex, detailed' parallels--of the type needed to suggest borrowing. And the differences between Jesus Christ and the Krishna of the legends is considerable. The earlier warrior-images of Krishna are those of a worthy and noble hero-type, but the later child/young man legends stand in stark contrast to Jesus. Krishnaic legends portray his playfulness and mischief in positive terms, but his consistent thievery (he stole cheese ROUTINELY from the villagers and lied about it to his mom--he was nicknamed the 'butter-thief' in the literature), his erotic adventures with all the cow-maidens of the village, his tricking the people into idolatrous worship of a mountain--just to irritate the god Indra, and the hiding of the clothes of the village women while they were bathing, and then forcing them to walk naked in front of him before he would give the clothes back--these all draw a line between him and the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. [These stories can be found in the *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhist* reference above, as well as in many summaries of his legend.] The adult images of Krishna were considerably more 'worthy' and he came to be worshipped as a supreme deity. But his overall life (above) and his death as a hunting accident are so completely dissimilar to the life and voluntary crucifixion of the Son of God on earth. The similarities are paltry; the differences are staggering.

.....

Finally are the figures that are allegedly linked by broader motifs such as 'miracle worker', 'savior' or 'virgin born'--along the line of the "divine man" or hero image in later times, without an explicit death/resurrection notion (e.g. Indra, Thor, Horus?)

These generally do not carry the force of the above categories, and so the borrowing/dependence claim is much weaker here. These 'overlaps' are simply explained:

- Most of the overlapping traits are too generic to carry any force (e.g. miracle worker, savior, divine king)
- Many of the overlapping traits are errors of equivocation (e.g. 'virgin births', sacrificial death--a martyr is not a sacrificial substitute)
- Most of the overlapping traits and titles fall into the category of the general expression of ALL religion, and do not require a borrowing/dependence theory at all.
- Most of the overlapping traits are dwarfed by the radical differences between Jesus and the figure in question. For example, the myth of Indra's 'miraculous' birth is given thus:

"His birth, like that of many great warriors and heroes, is unnatural: kept against his will inside his mother's womb for many years, he burst forth out of her side and kills his own father" (*Rig Veda* 4.18, as discussed in *EOR*, s.v. "Indra")

This cannot be remotely correlated with the birth of Christ, as neither can Indra's subsequent life as an immoral womanizer, a criminal punished by castration, and a

declining failure to the end.

- Even the older category of "Divine man" (*theos aner*) which was used to describe these figures, is a questionable construct for impacting the NT [[NT:DictJG](#), s.v. "Divine man/theios aner"]:

"In NT scholarship the term Divine Man, or its Greek form *Theios Aner*, designates an alleged type of religio-philosophical hero, legendary or historical, which was more or less indigenous to Greece or at least Hellenism and whose representatives were characterized by moral virtue, wisdom and/or miraculous power so that they were held to be divine. As commonly used, the term excludes the traditional Greek gods (except Asclepius, who was believed to have lived a human-like existence on earth before his death and apotheosis). Rather, it encompasses figures who in spite of their divinity were still regarded as humans.

"Early on, for example, scholars pointed to Diaspora or Hellenistic Judaism as the cultural/religious medium through which the *Theios Aner* type came to influence the early church's presentation of Jesus. Hellenistic-Jewish Christians, so the argument runs, found it natural to portray Jesus as a *Theios Aner* in their attempt to defend and advance their new faith, since previously they had used precisely the same strategy in their efforts to promote OT heroes, especially Moses. This hypothesis, however, was carefully reviewed by C. Holladay, who analyzed three representatives of Hellenistic Judaism—Josephus, Philo and Artapanus—in order to observe how these authors presented Jewish heroes in their apologetic and propagandistic efforts. He concluded that, at least in the sources he studied, **there is no evidence that in order to glorify Judaism or win converts Hellenized Jews tended to divinize their heroes or to amplify their thaumaturgical activities.** Holladay's work has forced a major reassessment of the theory that the *Theios Aner* concept was mediated to early Christianity via Hellenistic Judaism, and in fact has resulted in **dampened enthusiasm for *Theios Aner* as an interpretative tool.**

"**Up until about thirty years ago**, those who employed the *Theios Aneas* as an analytic tool in Gospel studies believed that the Evangelists essentially synthesized the portrait of Jesus as a *Theios Aner* found in the miracle traditions with the perspective found in the sayings source Q and the passion and resurrection narratives. However, T. Weeden, anticipated by others, argued that Mark was actually a polemic against interlopers in the Markan community who brought with them a *Theios Aner* christology and the traditions which expressed it, principally the miracle stories. According to Weeden, such stories, which of course figure prominently in the first half of Mark, only appear to promote a *Theios Aner* interpretation of Jesus: "The *Theios Aner* position is set up only to be discredited by Jesus once the disciples confess to that position" (164). Now the way was clear to compare Mark with Paul, who himself, according to the prior research of D. Georgi, had done battle with earlier proponents of a *Theios Aner* christology at Corinth (see especially 2 Cor

10–13)...Initially, Weeden's work engendered considerable support, particularly in North America. But by the early 1980s J. D. Kingsbury was able to chronicle a growing disenchantment with it. **Increasing doubt about the viability of the *Theios Aner* concept and its relationship to the Son of God title**, a growing tendency in Gospel studies **to give priority to literary criticism rather than tradition-critical or history-of-religions considerations**, and the sheer mass of miracles present in Mark (including several in the second half) have converged to under mine Weeden's thesis."

One of the most interesting (and striking) of parallels is *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, written by one Flavius Philostratus. [DSG:203](#) summarizes the background and dating:

"One of the most famous in this succession of Pythagorean philosophers was a man named Apollonius, of the Greek city of Tyana in the Province of Cappadocia, in what is today eastern Turkey. Although he lived in the second half of the first century A.D., we have little direct information about Apollonius, except for this biography by Philostratus of Lemnos, **written much later, i.e., around A.D. 218**.

"When the emperor Caracalla was on his way to capture the territories to the East, he stopped at Tyana to pay tribute to 'the divine Apollonius,' even donating the funds to build a temple to him there. And Caracalla's mother, Julia Domna, commissioned one of the professional writers in her entourage to publish a fitting account of Apollonius' life. "

The incredible thing about this piece, though, is its **strange similarities to some of the events in the gospel literature** (but NOT necessarily to the life of Christ--BLOM:85,86). So [DSG:203f](#):

"This conjunction of events suggests that the title of Philostratus' work might best be translated: 'In Honor of Apollonius of Tyana,' for the entire account from beginning to end consists of carefully constructed praise, using every device known to this well-trained writer. In other words, just as Caracalla's architects built a shrine for Apollonius out of marble, one of his court rhetoricians built a temple out of words--for the same purpose, i.e., to celebrate Apollonius' God-like nature and inspire reverence for him. Thus, Philostratus' narrative is a virtual catalogue of every rhetorical device known to the professional sophistic writers of that time: sudden supernatural omens, mini-dialogues on the favorite topics of the day, colorful bits of archeological lore, plenty of magic, rapid action scenes, amazing descriptions of fabled, far-off lands, occasional touches of naughty eroticism, and a whole series of favorite "philosophical" scenes: the Philosopher lectures his disciples on being willing to die for truth; the Philosopher is abandoned by his cowardly disciples; the Philosopher confronts the tyrant; the brave Philosopher is alone in prison unafraid; the Philosopher victoriously defends himself in the court, and so on. On the other hand, Philostratus included enough accurate historical details to give his writing the ring of genuine truth. But mixed in with the real people and places are all sorts of imaginary "official"

letters, inscriptions, decrees, and edicts, the whole bound together by an "eyewitness" diary. Finally, to give it the proper supernatural flavor, he has included numerous miraculous and supernatural occurrences: dreams, pre-vision, teleportation, exorcism and finally, vanishing from earth only to reappear later from Heaven to convince a doubting disciple of the soul's immortality.

"Guiding Philostratus at each point in constructing his narrative was the reputation of Apollonius as a divine/human Savior God."

What is interesting here is that **reverse-copying seems to be going on**. Philostratus is setting out to 'honor' Apollonius and creates a rhetorical hodge-podge of praise. But some are convinced that Philostratus had the NT in front of him (esp. since he wrote the piece 150 years later than it). Elizabeth Haight observed:

"[Philostratus] wrote **with full knowledge of** Xenophon's romantic biography of Cyrus the Great as the ideal ruler, of the Greek novels of war and adventure, of the Greek love romances...and of **the Christian Acts** with a saint for a hero. [In view of all these possibilities] Philostratus chose to present a *theos aner*, a divine sage, a Pythagorean philosopher, as the center of his story. To make the life of his hero interesting and to promulgate his philosophy, he used every device of the Greek and Latin novels of the second and third centuries." (*More Essays on Greek Romances*, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1945, p. 111f; cited in [DSG:205-206](#)).

Other scholars also are convinced that Philostratus drew from the NT documents :

"In the case of the phrase 'divine man,' scholars cannot point to one clear and coherent concept--or collection of concepts--connected with the phrase 'divine man' that was current in Greco-Roman literature before or during the time of Jesus. To construct their concept of a 'divine man,' scholars of the 20th century have culled ideas from a vast array of Greek and Roman works from Homer up until the writings of the late Roman Empire. While the vague constant in the phrase "divine man" is divine power as revealed or embodied in some human being, the exact human referent ranges widely over priest-kings of Asia Minor and Egypt (including kingly magicians and law-givers), monarchs whose vast power on earth was believed to extend over nature itself (especially the Roman Emperors), and various kinds of prophetic philosophers (including ecstasies, magicians, miracle-workers, apostles, hero-sages, founders and leaders of religious groups, shamans, and charlatans). In many of the reconstructions, scholars rely heavily on works like *The Death of Peregrinus* and *Alexander or the False Prophet* by Lucian, the satirist of the 2d century A.D., and *The Life of Apollonius* by Philostratus, the rhetorician of the 3d century A.D. Lucian almost certainly knew the Christian Gospels, and **Philostratus probably did as well.**"
[\[MJ:2.596\]](#)

"There is also another factor which should be taken into consideration as one assesses Philostratus' *Vita*: **the possibility that at some points the portrait of Apollonius has been influenced by the Gospels**. In spite of the doubts of G. Petzke, there is reason to believe that such may have occurred. The strength of the Christian movement in the empire is amply attested by Celsus' *True Discourse*, written at the beginning of the last quarter of the second century. **That Philostratus may have intended his work, at**

least to some degree, as anti-Christian polemic would also cohere well with the recent research of J. Buchli, who has made a cogent case for dating Poimandres around the middle of the third century (thus just a few years after the composition of the *Vita Apollonii*), and has argued that it "zeigt...sehr weitgehende christliche Einflüsse," [**shows very pervasive Christian influences**] and should be regarded as a "paganisiertes Evangelium" ['pagan gospel']. One should therefore approach the Philostratean work in question with the acknowledgment that **Christian influences may well have also been at work here.**" [X02:TAMMT:75]

"Why should Philostratus not have launched a new genre of pagan hagiography **with an eye on the Gospels?**" [[HI:AREPJC:194](#)]

Philostratus' work would become a focal point for anti-Christian polemic relative to Jesus:

"During the third and fourth centuries, and at least in one case as a direct result of Philostratus' portrait, Apollonius became a focal point of pagan reaction to Christianity. Special prominence was given to him shortly before the Great Persecution of Diocletian and Galerius in 303. The *vicarius Orientis* Sossianus Hierocles used Apollonius as the basis of a work comparing the sage with Jesus, in order to demonstrate Apollonius' superiority...An Egyptian poet named Soterichus, who wrote an encomium of Diocletian, is known also to have written a Life of Apollonius of Tyana, presumably with similar anti-Christian aims." [[HI:AREPJC:176f](#)]

"The earliest of Eusebius' apologetical works was *Against Hierocles*...Eusebius composed it shortly before 303, after the army had been purged of Christians but apparently before Diocletian issued persecuting edicts which affected Christian civilians. Sossianus Hierocles (it is known from other evidence) was governor of a province, probably of Augusta Libanensis, *vicarius* of a diocese, *praeses* of Bithynia in 303, and prefect of Egypt seven years later. Eusebius twice alludes to his adversary's official post in a way which implies that Hierocles was *vicarius Orientis* at the time of writing--and hence that before 303 he had already circulated his attack on Christianity in the East. After persecution began, Hierocles also published his polemic in the imperial capital of Nicomedia, this time in two books." [[CAE:164f](#)]

And we don't know how much of his own story Philostratus actually believed (or expected others to believe):

"There is certainly no need to suppose that everything in Apollonius was believed by Philostratus or intended to be believed. On occasion he excuses himself in Herodotean style by claiming that he has been obliged to set out such and such a story." [[HI:AREPJC:179](#)]

Certainly by that time the events of the life of Jesus were well known to pagan elites--Celsus had really gone into detail in his attack on the faith--and the *Vita* reflects a mix of miracles, some from Jesus and some from Pythagoras' life (the actual model used by Philostratus for Apollonius in the *Vita*). But there is no mention of Christianity in the *Vita*, so why would he have 'borrowed' (or 'modeled') any of the narrative events from/on Jesus' life?

Some have actually suggested that Philostratus was trying to 'merge' some of the elements of Jesus with his ideas of what Hellenistic thought should look like::

"It has been suggested recently that Philostratus made a major new contribution to religious life by legitimating the idea of ascetic living through the person of Apollonius. The idea that Philostratus rehabilitated Apollonius--the very opposite of Eusebius' reading--goes back in its modern form to the great nineteenth-century Church historian Baur, who saw Philostratus as a 'doubtful syncretistic mediator' who used a sanitized Apollonius **to seek an accommodation with Christianity.**" To find parallels (healings, exorcisms, doubting followers, ascension, the whole idea of mission) between Apollonius and Jesus and his disciples is not absurd [under this scenario]."
[\[HI:AREPJC:193f\]](#)

But the *Vita* looks more like what Swain calls an 'apology for Hellenism', and was written to combat all forms of anti-Hellenism (including, but not limited to, Christianity). And the reason for the need had only just surfaced in the empire:

- **In the cultural arena:** "During the third century, however, there were a number of decisive changes in the cultural -political makeup of the Greek world. By its end, significant numbers of the educated were Christian, and **the distinctive features of pagan culture in the Greek East were under serious threat. The heavyweight anti-Christian tracts of Plotinus and Porphyry show clearly that Christianity could not be ignored.** There is no way of telling when it became clear that the new religion constituted a major problem. But if we look at the third century as a whole, Apollonius, which was written in the 220s or 230s, begins to look extremely important. For here we have for the first time **a celebration and justification for society at large** of a Hellenism which is defined primarily through a combination of religion and philosophy, rather than through the general cultural and political inheritance. This **looks like a response to change** at some level. Moreover, the work contains a lengthy technical apologia for philosophy as a spiritual system of personal living, and this amounts to **a serious defense of fundamentals.** That is enough to merit the work's inclusion in a volume on the phenomenon of apologetic discourse. [158]
- **In the political arena:** "Philostratus reminds readers at the start of Apollonius that the work has been commissioned by the late Julia Domna, who was the wife of the new dynasty's founder, Septimius Severus. Here and elsewhere she

is presented as a paragon of Hellenist virtue. But her nieces, the dominating mothers of the emperors Elagabal and Severus Alexander, were by no means fully committed to orthodox Hellenism, **precisely in the sensitive matter of religion**. Thus for the first time since the Hellenic revival in the time of Augustus, not everything could be taken for granted. **An apology for the Greek way of life and a telling affirmation of its value were not at all beside the point.**" [[HI:AREPJC:159f](#)]

As such a defense, it has to combat two 'enemies' of non-Hellenism: the eastern Oriental cults (cf. Elagabal!) and Christianity. But it has to do this in a way not likely to offend the royal court (see 'In the political arena' above...). One obvious way to do this is to build 'one composite pythagorean sage-hero out of two widely recognized sage-heroes'...

At any rate, the *Vita* does look like it has 'numerous, complex, and detailed' parallels to the NT literature (although not all agree on this point, I should add--several see the parallels as too different), and that some of these parallels are understood by scholars as Philostratus borrowing from the NT source. And, as we noted in our discussion of the 'the later church did it, so why wouldn't the early church do it too?', the fact that Philostratus *did* it, has **no logical bearing** on whether the NT authors *did or not*...there is always a gap between "would/could" and "was/did", and this gap must be filled in with evidence, not allegations and speculation.

What this means for us, is that one of the better examples of a candidate for 'borrowing' is **in the wrong direction**. And since the *hero* and the *divine man* concepts are either too general, too insignificant, or too 'late' to make a good case for the CopyCat theorist, we are back where we started--the uniqueness of Jesus the Christ and His life, death, and resurrection.

Thus, it is difficult to make a case for "material, significant, and pervasive" borrowing between Jesus and the plenitude of other religious deities of the world.

.....

The Net of the allegation of material, significant, and pervasive borrowing:

1. For alleged parallels to be considered 'strong enough' for evaluation, the parallels must be numerous, complex, detailed, non-superficial, 'striking'/uncommon, difficult to explain except by borrowing, central to the belief/text, sharing the same underlying ideas and related by system or structure.
2. The history-of-religions school, which saw the background of Paul's 'dying and rising with Christ' theology in the Mystery Religions (e.g., taurobolium ritual) has been essentially abandoned, due to the insufficiency of the parallels and the better explanatory power of newer theories, based on better data (e.g., DSS, unofficial Judaism at the time of Jesus)
3. The background for the New Testament is now seen to be in Judaism and the OT, instead of the cults of the Roman Empire.

4. The details of the Cybele-oriented taurobolium ceremony are vastly different in practice, purpose, and belief-content.
5. By scholarly criteria, there are no known very-close-parallels to the virgin conception as recorded in the New Testament.
6. Only data relevant to New Testament formation can count as evidence for 'creation' or 'modification' of some 'original' Jesus from pagan sources--not later church actions.
7. Any alleged syncretism by the later church does not in itself constitute data or evidence that the same process occurred in NT times.
8. The 'stealing' of Christmas (as it is sometimes represented) is not a clear case of culpable syncretism; indeed, as an 'oppositional feast' it is the OPPOSITE of a syncretistic action.
9. All the data we have about Paul and the early church indicates that they were 'violently' anti-syncretistic, and exceptionally exclusivistic, and therefore pre-disposed to NOT accept anything 'tainted' by pagan theology.
10. The pagans in this period were not confused about the Church's exclusivity--they called the Christians 'atheists' because of their fundamental unwillingness to compromise or syncretize.
11. Long after the NT was finished, the church was thrust into a difficult situation when it became the "State Religion". The practical difficulties of trying to help immense numbers of new 'converts' created situations in which some reclaiming of traditional pagan elements had to be undertaken, albeit reluctantly and with all attempts to avoid confusing the folk.
12. But even through these semi-adaptations occurred in later church history, the central creed of the faith remained the same during that time.
13. Another example sometimes advanced as a case of borrowing is the symbol of the Cross, but this was not used symbolically in the New Testament at all.
14. The religious language used in the New Testament was part of the shared vocabulary of the ancient world, and not the property of the cults. As such, these terms didn't have to be 'borrowed' from anyone, since no one 'owned them' exclusively.
15. Religious terms for religious leaders are examples of common, shared linguistic stock (often very general and arising all over the world) and not items that have to be 'borrowed'.
16. This usage of language was effective for the young church, for even her critics such as Celsus could see clearly how her doctrines of Christ and of the resurrection were different from pagan concepts.
17. The Frazerian concept of Dying and Rising gods (as set out in the Golden Bough) has been discredited and abandoned by modern scholarship.
18. There is no ambiguous data in antiquity--especially in records indigenous to each cult--to support the belief that DARGs existed (and/or are a meaningful conceptual construct for understanding the history of religion).
19. There is, therefore, no 'model' or 'models' from which the NT authors could have gotten this concept.
20. The various gods surveyed--Adonis, Baal, Attis, Marduk, Osiris, Tammuz and Melqart--do not conform to the Frazerian "pattern" of DARGs; they either don't really die, don't really rise after death, or both/neither...
21. Even in those cases in which the god dies or is 'raised', the parallels to Jesus are still quite superficial, and do not fit the criteria of 'numerous, complex, detailed, etc'.
22. The data from the later church fathers--seemingly disagreeing with the scholars--are too easily understood as Christian paranoia, Christian (mis)interpretation, or actual

reports of actual imitative adaptations by the cults to the rising influence of Christianity.

23. There is evidence that the cults/empire did imitate aspects of the Christian community/belief system/praxis.
24. Justin Martyr's comments on the virgin birth do not offer strong support for the view that Christians believed that their set of miracles were 'same as' pagan ones.
25. Even the practices of the more general Mystery Religions are very different--especially at the underlying concept and structural level--than those used by the early church, in spite of some common elements (e.g., washing, common meals).
26. The MR's differed substantially from Christianity in areas of : initiation, baptism, "communion", salvation, the afterlife, rebirth, resurrection.
27. The death of Jesus was uniquely substitutionary, voluntary, purposeful.
28. The Christian difference in worldview, ethics, compassion, and social action was conspicuous to the church's enemies and to those who longed for hope.
29. It is not at all clear as to what extent the pagans even believed their own myths.
30. The more general MR's of Isis/Serapis and Dionysos/Bacchus offer very few possible parallels even for consideration, and these are too general to have much force.
31. Jesus' turning water into wine is not believed to have been 'based on' the various miraculous traditions in the Dionysos cult (but rather on the Judaic background).
32. Neither the Roman nor the Indian/Iranian versions of the Mithras cults offer a DARG or even 'striking parallels' in matters of practice. The parallels accepted by scholars some 30 years ago have all either been abandoned or come under serious doubt recently.
33. Paul's being born in Tarsus--a hotbed of MR cult activity--does not seem to influence him. His writing style and missionary style show no influence of his background in Tarsus.
34. Alleged parallels between Jesus and Buddha--at a numerous, complex, and detailed level--are not recognized by scholars deeply familiar with both traditions.
35. Horus is particularly 'unlike' Jesus of Nazareth.
36. Alleged parallels between Jesus and Krishna--at a numerous, complex, and detailed level--do not exist.
37. The category of Divine Man--once thought to be a concept useful in explaining the origin of some of Jesus' literary characteristics--has lost its following in scholarship over the past 30 years.
38. Philostratus, in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, seems to be dependent on the New Testament literature--and not vice versa.

That these similarities are of such a nature to either *require borrowing*, or be *best explained by borrowing*;

This point is rather moot--we do not have anything to explain.

But, for the sake of argument and completeness...let's move on to the issue of...

- That we can come up with a historically plausible explanation of *HOW* the borrowing occurred;

Additional resource(s) used:

[X02:TAMMT] Theios Aner and the Markan Miracle Traditions: A Critique of the Theios Aner Concept as an Interpretive Background of the Miracle Traditions Used by Mark. Barry Blackburn. Tübingen: Mohr, 1991. (revision of Ph.D thesis of 1986 for Univ. of Aberdeen)

We have already seen in [Jesus the Copycat?](#) that if the NT authors were influenced by pagan religions of the day, then they did not show it very well! The image painted of Jesus of Nazareth does not seem similar enough to the other possible religious figures to prompt us to suspect 'borrowing' or 'dependence'.

But to continue this study, I want to look now at the NT authors and ask the basic question of influences.

- Question One: How would they have come in contact with these religions?
- Question Two: Why might they have accepted some of these religious ideas (and correspondingly, interpreted Jesus in those categories)?
- Question Three: What factors would have retarded their acceptance of these foreign-to-Judaism notions?
- Question Four: Where there any public 'checks and balances' that would have hindered publication of these views by the early Christian community, even if a lone NT author would have accepted them?
- Question Five: What does the literature and/or history they produced tell us about the views they accepted?

We will look at seven major authors in the NT: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter. (I will be using the position of the early church on authorship--I judge their "closer-to-the-data" testimony (and the Mss. Testimony) to be more likely to be true than our "modern" judgments based on 'internal factors'.) I will also examine two related issues: (1) were there Jewish "legends" that might have influenced these writers (such as miracle-working holymen); and (2) did the gospel writers write 'legendizing' midrash?

Matthew

.....
Question One: How would he have come in contact with these religions?

What do we know about Matthew/Levi?

He was a tax-collector (customs official) in the small town of Capernum, in the country of Galilee.

So, what do we know about tax-collectors, Capernaum, and Galilee, with regard to foreign influences?

- Tax-collectors.

In the time frame we are concerned with (basically, the lifespan of each reputed NT author prior to meeting Jesus--probably 15 BC To 30 AD), there were several different kinds of taxes levied in the different parts of Palestine. There were the Roman taxes on property and people (e.g. the poll-tax), there were the import/export customs on trade, there were regional/ municipal levies, and there were religious taxes, such as the temple-tax.

The Roman taxes were the responsibility of the head of state in each country, and the religious taxes were the responsibility of local groups throughout the world [JPB:52, 84,156]. However, customs taxes were auctioned/leased out to the highest bidder, and administered through a network [HJP:1.2.17, p.71ff]. In the case of Matthew, he was a lower level customs collector, probably from Capernaum, who reported up through a chain of command to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, who lived in the city of Tiberias. The proceeds from the toll went into Antipas' pockets, not Rome's--with the collectors pocketing a good bit of the overcharge themselves.

Matthew would have had a toll-both on the major thoroughfare into Gaulanitis (Golan Heights) [SHJ:136]. Capernaum was connected via the Wadi Beth ha-Kerem to Acco-Ptolemais [NTSE:93], *αὐτὸς ἦν ἀπὸ τῆς Τύρου καὶ τῆς Συρίας* to/from Tyre and the regions east of the Sea of Galilee--Philip's territory and the Decapolis [GLA:16].

Tax-collectors were a wealthy lot, although they were ostracized by the local populace (probably) and religious authorities of Judaism (definitely). They had social connections with other tax-collectors (e.g. Mt 9:10: "*While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' came and ate with him and his disciples.*"), and would have had enough wide linguistic skills to maintain social contacts with other 'outcasts' such as Gentiles, certain types of herdsmen, and usurers.

On the other hand they were both despised by the locals and altogether rejected by the religious establishment of Jewry. Since they levied tariffs on even the basic necessities of life needed by the peasantry, they were despised by the locals [HFJ:229].

But it is the religious and civic rejection that is most striking in this case. The later Rabbinic writings (seeming to agree with the general picture of the Gospels) portray the religious establishment as rendering the tax-collector as almost impossible to save. Jeremias, in discussing the "despised trade lists" in the literature [JTT:chapter 14], shows the almost irredeemable nature of tax-collectors [p. 310-311]:

"In the same way experience had shown that tax-collectors and publicans, whose post went to the highest bidder, together with their subordinates, almost always abused their position to enrich themselves by dishonesty. 'For herdsmen, tax collectors and publicans is repentance hard', it was once said (b. B.K. 94b Bar.). The reason was that they could never know every person they had injured or cheated, and to whom they must make amends."

E.P. Sanders points out that this judgment was based on the conviction that these trades were usurious [HJ:34-35], and a radical violation of Leviticus 25.36-38.

But it gets worse...The literature about tax-collectors (of all types, by the way) is almost unanimous in painting tax-collectors as greedy and dishonest, with only one exception by Josephus [HFJ:228-229]. In fact, in the Rabbinic material (*Nedarim* iii.4) it was okay for the common Jew to lie to one about his property (!), and beggars and merchants were not even supposed to take money from their cash-box (*Baba kamma* 10.1,2) [for discussion, see Schurer, HJP:1.2.17, p. 71, note 108].

But it gets worse yet...If the later rabbinic traditions DO have a substantial measure of applicability to the earlier setting we are discussing, then Jeremias' discussion of 'official' viewpoints of tax-collectors points to abject civil rejection as well [JTJ:311-312]:

"Characteristically, linguistic custom associates tax-collectors and thieves (M. Toh. vii.6), publicans and robbers (M.B.K. x.2; b. Shebu. 39a Bar.; cf. Luke 18.II; M. Ned. iii.4; *Derek eres* 2); tax-collectors, robbers, money-changers and publicans (*Derek eres* 2); publicans and sinners (Mark 2.I5f; Matt. 9.10f.; Luke 5.30; Matt. 11.19 par. Luke 7.34; Luke 15.If) ; publicans and Gentiles (Matt. 18.17); publicans and harlots (Matt. 21.31f); extortioners, impostors, adulterers and publicans (Luke 18.11); murderers, robbers and taxgatherers (M. Ned. iii.4); indeed 'publican' was generally almost a synonym for 'sinner' (Luke 19.7). It was forbidden to accept alms for the poor or to use money for exchange, from 'the counter of excisemen or from the wallet of tax-gatherers', for such money was tainted. If tax-collectors and publicans had belonged to a Pharisaic community before taking on the office, they were expelled and could not be reinstated until they had given up the posts (T. Dem. iii.4, 49; j. Dem. ii.3, 23a.10)."

"But men who followed the trades in list IV were not only despised, nay hated, by the people; they were *de jure* and officially deprived of rights and ostracized. Anyone engaging in such trades could never be a judge, and his inadmissibility as a witness put him on the same footing as a gentile slave (M.R. Sh. i.8). In other words he was deprived of civil and political rights to which every Israelite had claim, even those such as bastards who were of seriously blemished descent. This makes us realize the enormity of Jesus' act in calling a publican to be one of his intimate disciples (Matt. 9.9 par.; 10.3), and announcing the Good News to publicans and 'sinners' by sitting down to eat with them."

On the other hand, we have no way of knowing to what extent these rabbinic admonitions and perspectives would have been shared by the populace of Capernaum--although, as Galileans they were certainly in conflict with other rabbinic traditions in other settings. Although only 5% of the Palestinian populace of the day was even associated with a "party" (i.e. Pharisee, Sadducee, Zealot, Essene) [NTE:90], the Pharisees played a very important part in public life, due largely to their close connection with country, lay-run synagogues [NTE:80, 85-86].

But overall, we get a view of Matthew as a wealthy, unpopular, ostracized Jew in the town of Capernaum. His employer would have been Herod Antipas (not as bad as his predecessors, but not really popular at the time--see below). He would have not had

access to the traditional Jewish cultic rituals that presupposed Jerusalem or official sanction (e.g. public feasts). As a highly literate individual (and probably selected for the post in part due to that), and as probably a Jew, he would have had perhaps better-than-average access to the biblical materials as well. His social circles would have been with "outcasts" (many wealthy and/or aristocratic and/or official personages).

- Capernaum.

What do we know about Capernaum at the time?

1. Population: Estimates range from "a thousand at most" [[AHS:114](#)], to the standard estimate of 12-15K [[SHJ:136](#)], up to 20K [[GLA:27](#)]. It is understood to have been one of the most densely populated areas in the Roman world [[SHJ:136](#)]. This would have been a mixture of Jew and Gentile--but predominately Jewish-- so Matthew presumably would have had access to gentiles as well [[NTSE:83](#)].
2. Economics: The economic conditions at the time were mixed. There was growth in the economy due to the economic expansion programs of Herod Antipas, but this would have also had a negative impact due to increased taxation. The principal export of the city was salted fish, with some grain and vegetable trade as well [[SHJ:136](#)]. The family of James and John, recruited by Jesus there, was apparently a large enough operation as to warrant hired help (Mark 1.19-20). As noted above, however, it was also a major boundary city between the various areas of the region, and as such, would have had an economy also influenced by distribution and export/import.
3. Organization: There are several indications of the internal organization and administration of the city.
 - The presence of a Roman military detachment. In Matthew 8.5ff, we read :

*When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a **centurion** came to him, asking for help. 6 "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering." 7 Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him." 8 The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9 For I myself am a man under authority, **with soldiers under me**. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." 10 When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.*

This soldier would not actually have been a *Roman* centurion, but an *auxilliary* centurion, likely chosen from the surrounding areas of Caesarea and the Decapolis [[RLRS:124](#); [GLA:104](#)], perhaps even commanding a group of Hellenistic-Jewish soldiers [[EBC](#), in. loc. Matt 8.5] in service to Herod. On a border town, especially a major trade route, they would be a 'peacekeeping' force. There was a Roman road there, which typically had soldiers stationed there for police activities

(e.g. retarding bandits and brigands) [*Atlas of the Roman World*, Facts on File:1982, p. 156-157].

This centurion is painted in glowing terms by Luke (in his parallel account), in virtue of his attitude toward the Jews of the city, with the additional historical detail (Luke 7.2f): *The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. 4 When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, 5 because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." 6 So Jesus went with them. .*

There is an interesting piece of archaeological data that illuminates this [[BAFCSP:203-204](#)]:

"Perhaps archaeology also has something to contribute. The splendid limestone synagogue visible today in Capernaum is to be dated to the end of the 4th century AD. But underneath the assembly hall lies a basalt building of the same ground plan. By means of the ceramics below the walls that earlier building was dated by S. Loffreda to the 3rd century AD. Exactly under the central nave of the two later buildings is located a pavement of basalt stones dating back to the 1st century AD. According to Loffreda we have here the remains of the centurion's synagogue. Nearby, but separated by an uninhabited piece of land, V. Tsiferis found other houses of the 1st century AD. They were built in a better fashion than the houses of the main settlement, and one of them was a typical Roman bathhouse. We may think of the centurion living here, separated as a pagan mercenary (cf. Lk 7.6) from the Jewish village."

Although in normal circumstances one could expect the Roman soldiers to be "missionaries" for the imperial cult (and in a century or two later, for the cult of Mithras), in the case of local militia/mercenaries, this would not typically be the case. Instead, they would be 'carriers' for the local religions of THEIR source of origin. In this case we have a centurion who was obviously impressed with the beauty and strength of the core Jewish faith.

- A local administrator of Herod's was there. In John 4.46ff we have the following account:

*Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain **royal official** whose son lay sick at Capernaum. 47 When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death. 48 "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe." 49 The royal official said, "Sir, come down before my child dies." 50 Jesus replied, "You may go. Your son will live." The man took Jesus at his word and departed. 51 While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. 52 When he inquired as to the time*

when his son got better, they said to him, "The fever left him yesterday at the seventh hour." 53 Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he and all his household believed.

The term 'royal official' probably refers to an officer of Herods (so Morris, NICNT: in.loc.). He was probably the local representative in Capernaum, overseeing the town and reporting up through the *toparch* intermediary (see below). He could very easily have been a Jew, but there is no indication one way or another in the passage. That he is called "royal" indicates a close connection with Herodian authority.

- There was a synagogue there. Although early synagogues functioned both as religious centers and as "town halls" [[AHSG:chapter 6](#)], their presence is typically indicative of the influence of Pharisaism at his time. This would suggest that Jerusalem also had considerable influence and authority in the city.
 - There was Matthew, a customs official. This in itself indicated a large enough and important enough city to warrant a paid-employee of the hierarchy. This would have been true for any border town with significant enough trade routes to warrant a military presence.
 - There would have been a local village council, probably presided over by the royal official, to maintain order, taxation, judicial functions of a minor nature [[GLA:67](#)].
4. Jesus used it as a base of operations (Mk 1.29; 2.1; 7.17; 9.33--the home of Simon and Andrew). From this point, He made his travels into Galilean villages, Tyre and Sidon, the Greek free cities in the Decapolis, the Hellenistic cities in Philip's region (e.g. Bethsaida), and Caesarea Philippi.
- Galilee?

So, what do we know about Galilee?

- The population was concentrated in small towns, rather than the big cities. "The vast majority of Jews in Jesus' lifetime in Galilee, Transjordan, and Judea lived in small towns, not in the large cities such as Tiberias and Jerusalem" [[NTSE:83](#)].
- The populace would have been predominately Jewish in religion. The Maccabees (c. mid 1st century BC) forced all the Gentiles in Palestine to either leave or convert to Judaism. The result was a predominantly Jewish cast to the culture, in most of the land [[NTSE:82](#)].
- The Jews in the villages were generally alienated from the Jews living in the cities: "It remains true, however, that the Jews living in the towns of Capernaum and Tarichaea were alienated from the Jews in the Greek cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias" [[NTSE:104](#); [SHJ:109, 118](#)], with this being not altogether unrelieved [[GLA:71](#)].

- Galilee had 204 villages, organized into 5 regions called *toparchies*, which reported into Herod Antipas, whose headquarters were in the city of Tiberias [BSNT:43ff]. The region was densely populated [GLA:55].
- The capital of Galilee was Tiberias, although the only other large city--Sepphoris--constantly battled with it for the place of administrative preeminence [GLA:67]. They were both being either rebuilt or refurbished, adding to the tax burden of the area [SHJ:104].
- The capital cities were predominately Jewish in population, but were thoroughly Hellenistic [SHJ:84; GLA:17; NTSE:90] in organization and administration. Herod built Tiberias on a graveyard and used animal figures as decorations--both practices were anathema to strict Jews--and forced Jews to live there (but compensated them with land grants) [SHJ:86, 89, 108f; GLA:17]. Sepphoris was a few miles northwest of Nazareth had all the features of a Hellenistic city--"including a theater, hippodrome, and temples" [GLA:15], although it was a "priestly city, populated by wealthy Jewish landowners who favored the Romans during the Jewish wars" [NTSE:92].
- Galilee was surrounded by Hellenism: "As Hengel points out, Galilee was completely surrounded by Hellenistic culture, with Acco-Ptolemais, Tyre and Sidon in the west and north-west, Pnias-Caesarea Philippi, Hippos and Gadara in the north-east, east and south-east, and Scythopolis and Gaba in the south" [SHJ:135].
- Hellenism had made considerable impact on Galilean trade, political organization, language, and commerce [SHJ:105; NTSE:89], but in matters of religion, the regular pilgrimage of Galileans to Jerusalem "demonstrates the religious and cultural loyalty of Galilean Jews to the Temple of Jerusalem" [NTSE:94]. Their loyalty to Jerusalem did NOT imply their acceptance of the full range of Pharisaic demands--for example, the rural populace simply did NOT observe their purity laws [NTSE:103]. So Martin [NTF:91]:

"The common people were alienated from official religion. No matter how much they admired the zeal of the Pharisees and were impressed by the grandeur of the temple ritual, accepting the religious regimen was, for the mass of them, an invitation to assume a heavy yoke."

- Exports were mainly the salted fish of Taricheae [SHJ:110], pottery from Kefar Hanania [SHJ:111], and oil [SHJ:82].
- Imports typically came through Acco-Ptolemais, and originated in such regions as Babylon (beer), Egypt (barley beer, smoked fish, lentils, parchment, papyrus, jewelry), Bythina (cheese), Spain (mackerel), Lydia (wines, asses), and Tyre (dye).

Given this background, which religious ideas would he have come in contact with?

Well, what are the possibilities?

Most historical reference works on this period/area do not mention the religions of the Far East as plausible candidates for 'influence'. So John Ferguson, in his book *The Religions of the Roman Empire* [Cornell:1970] does not even list or discuss these religions as players. The only references to India and China are Post-Jesus (Apollonius, p. 51; and Basilides, p. 131). Likewise, NTSE surveys the practical options, describing three basic options in the core NT setting: Olympian deities (Greek/Roman gods), the Imperial Cult ("Emperor" worship), Mystery Religions (MR's)--both Greek and Oriental--but does NOT list other 'candidates' such as Buddhism or Hinduism. And most of the references to 'influence' are too late for our period. So Frensdorff, mentions Buddhist influences on Mani (early 3rd century AD heretic) and on Clement of Alexandria (same time period) [FRC:315ff; 372]. His quote about Clement shows that this situation was a novel one for the West, and one that by its time-frame, would not have been operative in NT times [p.372]:

"Nonetheless, Clement's ideal would not have been unacceptable to his Gnostic opponents and seemed even to be more Buddhist than Christian. His knowledge of Indian religion, shown by his numerous if critical references to Indian customs and the correct distinction he made between the Brahmins and Sarmanians, may be more relevant to his outlook than is sometimes admitted. The early third century saw strong links being made between the Roman Empire and India and these links affected thought as well as trade."
The Silk and Spice routes flourished in the 1st few centuries AD (largely through Egypt) [Atlas of the Greek World, Facts on File, page 186].

The interplay between the Greek/Roman empires and the regions/religions of the Far East is a very, very complex one.

The situation for China is perhaps the easiest to understand [RW:304]:

"Until the opening of the Silk Road in the first century B.C., communication across the land and sea spaces between China and western Asia was too slight to leave traces at either end." The situation with Indian thought is a bit more complex but may be summarized under the following ideas:

1. Greek colonies are known to have existed in India at least since the time of the Buddha in the 6th century B.C. The Buddha actually refers to the Greeks in a discourse in the *Middle Length Sayings*, as he is trying to convince someone against a fixed caste system [WR:AW:3].
2. Prior to Alexander the Great's invasion of northern India in 327 BC, what little exchanges had occurred between East and Mid-East was confined to the Indus Valley, and was probably trade-based [RW:298-9].
3. Alexander's invasion brought Hellenism to India during the rise of the brilliant Mauryan empire (322-185bc) in Northern India, and had significant impact on the upper class and urban segments. So, McNeill [RW:298]:

"On the whole, diffracted elements of Hellenistic civilization attracted a larger share of favorable attention than did the achievements of any of the other cultures of the world between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. The history of art gives the clearest evidence for this; for both Indian and Chinese art styles of the period were profoundly affected by Greek sculpture. In religion and in science, a parallel, though less striking, process may be detected. Mahayana Buddhism, for example, shows influence of Hellenistic religious conceptions, while Indian and Chinese astronomy and astrology appropriated

numerous Hellenistic elements, though important local differences of course remained."

and again [\[RW:304\]](#):

"To sum up: India's development to the time of Alexander's invasion appears to have pursued lines laid down at the beginning of the fifth century or before. With the new intimacy between India and the hellenistic world that resulted from Alexander's venture, and with the rise of the 'philhellenic' Mauryan dynasty within India itself, new, though still comparatively superficial, foreign influences upon Indian society became apparent. The royal court patronized a westernizing art style, and perhaps promulgated Greco-Iranian patterns of administration and political theory. "

We know, for example, of an early Buddhist sculptor in Gandhara (now Pakistan) who copied in stone a scene from a sub-Homeric epic showing the wooden horse at the fall of Troy--which he used as a miracle of the Buddha. Similarly, we have a silver cup from Tibet "of the finest post-Greek workmanship" with a scene on it which began life as an illustration to Euripides [*Atlas of the Greek World*, p. 189].

4. Although the most significant cultural impact was eastward, from the Greeks to the Indians, there was also a brief spurt of *knowledge flow* that went from India to Greece in the subsequent period.

After Alexander died, his empire divided into several pieces--one of which was called the Seleucid dynasty. In spite of the fact that the Seleucid and Mauryan dynasties were border-competitors, they still had a great deal of friendly interchange between them, and the first two kings of the Mauryan dynasty are referred to in Greek sources. The peace treaty between them in 303 BC included a marriage alliance, and Seleucus' ambassador Megasthenes lived for 10 years and traveled extensively in the Mauryan empire [\[WR:HI:71\]](#) during the reign of the founding king Chandragupta (Sandrocottos in the greek). Megasthenes gathered huge amounts of information about India and wrote a book (which is lost), many parts/information of which are preserved in the writings of Strabo, Arrian, and Diodorus [\[HSC:197\]](#).

There were two other greek-oriented contacts made with that empire--the 2nd Seleucid ambassador Deimarchos, and Dionysios an envoy from Ptolemaios Philadelphos--but neither of these left any writings [\[HSC:198\]](#). Any information about religious practices of India at this point would have been concerning the brahmanical system. So Bachelor in [WR:AW:7-8](#):

"Megasthenes lived for an entire decade in the heartland of the Buddha's dispensation, less than two hundred years after the Buddha's death--but there is no mention in the *Indika* of Buddhist monks. At the time of Megasthenes, Buddhism was a small sect with no influential followers. Chandragupta, a staunch upholder of brahmanical values, was certainly no Buddhist. And Kautilya, Chandragupta's chief minister, fails to even mention Buddhism in his famous book on statecraft, the *Arthashastra*.

"Yet within fifty years of Megasthenes' departure from India Buddhism had exploded across the subcontinent as the imperial philosophy of Chandragupta's grandson

Ashoka. Europe, however, was to wait another fifteen hundred years (until 1255) before it received a first-hand report of Buddhism and its practices."

The most famous of the three kings was the last--Ashoka. He was originally Hindu, but converted to Buddhist while on the throne. Although he is not mentioned in any Greek sources, he "records having sent missions from India bearing his message of the victory of the Dharma [i.e. Buddhism in his life] to the Greek kings Antiochus II of Syria, Ptolemy II (Philadelphus) of Egypt, Antigonus Gonatas of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrene and Alexander of Epirus... There is no mention in Western sources, however, of the arrival of any such missions." [WR:AW:9]. Until his death in 232 BC, he maintained frequent communications with the south and the west [WR:HI:73], even sending missionaries to Ceylon (definitely) and to the West (probably) [HSC:204].

As the data and quotes above show, there was some, but very sporadic and limited information about the religious content of proto-Hinduism transmitted to the West, and even less about Buddhism.

5. At this point in time, the window of exchange simply closes. The last two centuries B.C. saw the rise of the Parthian empire, which quickly became a barrier to cultural exchange. So [HSC:521-2](#):

"The essential difference between the Parthian empire and the Seleucid one which it partly replaced lies in the fact that the Seleucid rulers were of Greek origin and the main champions of Hellenism in Asia, while the Arsacids were Scythians or Asiatics, who were not at all hypnotized by Greek culture."

"All considered, it would seem that the Parthian empire was (at least in pre-Christian times) a barrier to the Hellenization of the East and the Orientalization of the West, rather than a channel for them. It was not a solid barrier, however, but a kind of grille or trellis permitting a little silk, as well as peaches and apricots, to move westward and pomegranates to go east."

6. Most of our information about East-West exchanges after this comes from post-Christian times [[HSC:523](#)]. The transmission of information about the East at this point came through traveling merchants, many of whom passed through Egypt and Alexandria. Bachelard describes some of these [[WR:AW:25](#)]:

"Commerce between Asia and the Roman Empire increased; luxury goods were imported from China; a community of Indian merchants was settled in Alexandria; an Indian holy man immolated himself in public in Athens; and a Ceylonese embassy reached the court of Claudius in Rome."

These are, of course, all post-NT situations and the first mentions in the West of the Buddha were 2nd and 3rd century AD figures such as Clement and Basilides of Alexandria [[WR:AW:27ff](#)].

In summary, the influence and dissemination of Hindu and Buddhist thought from India far enough west to make a difference simply had not occurred by the time of the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth on the scene.

So that basically leaves us with the three options of [NTSE](#):

- **Olympian deities:** These were the Greek gods (and Roman versions of them) that were honored by leading families in Roman cities. As a tax-collector, Matthew would have been in the hire of the cities, WITHOUT the responsibility to collect Roman taxes (e.g. poll tax and property tax). Rural Galilee, *per se*, was Hellenized only in areas of economy, city organization, and language. There is virtually no Hellenistic influence on religious praxis in the smaller cities and villages. Capernaum's only exposure to these deities would be through the frequent local traveler (who generally would not stay long enough to do any serious evangelism work!) on his way through or to the Roman administrative centers at Caesarea or Sepphoris. There was also a strongly pharisaic element at Capernaum, which having lost its political power under the persecutions of Herod, became a distinctly religious force in "urban" parts of Galille [\[NTSE:101\]](#). This tended to discourage the public display or discussion relative to foreign cults. [Local indigenous cults had been virtually destroyed in the 'forced conversion' to Judaism enforced by the Hasmoneans 142-63 bc.] So, there would have been little chance for substantial exposure to these ideas in Capernaum.
- **The imperial cult (or ruler cult):** This was the worship of the emperor, involving traditional elements--images, shrines, temples, sacrifices, prayers, etc. This tended to exist among the wealthy, Roman families, and occasionally among aristocratic families in the cities--families that would have had ties to Rome. It would have also been manifest in Roman soldiers, although not in the case of local auxiliary militia (as in Capernaum). In the case of Capernaum, the number of aristocratic families that would have strong ties to Rome would be few indeed. Actually, the Jews of these smaller Galilean towns had little respect for those aristocratic Jews. So [NTSE:104](#):

"It remains true, however, that the Jews living in the towns of Capernum and Tarichaea were alienated from the Jews in the Greek cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias."

Presumably, Matthew would have seen aspects of this in scattered contacts with magistrates and soldiers, but the absence of any regular center of the cult in Capernaum reduces the probability of influence considerably.

- **The Mystery Cults** (both Greek and Oriental): We have seen earlier that there are some chronological problems with having these be a major influence ANYWHERE in the early 1st century AD, but this is specifically acute in regards to areas outside of Greece and Asia Minor. The MR's were originally local-only cults of various agricultural and nature deities, and hence were largely confined to their specific locality [\[NTSE:132ff\]](#). At this time in history, they would not have been a presence in lower Galilee, including Capernaum. Again, however, we would have the possibility of some traveling merchant, bring his god with him (as was done often in cases of colonists and migration--cf. [NTSE:41-42](#)). Since these are systems with rather elaborate ritual and paraphernalia, they are not quite as 'portable' as others--they require some level of critical mass to take root. Again, this would entail very minimal exposure for Matthew.

Question Two: Why might they (i.e. Matthew) have accepted some of these religious ideas

(and correspondingly, interpreted Jesus in those categories)?

.....

It is difficult to construct a plausible scenario in which Matthew would find any foreign ideas more attractive than the rudimentary Jewish faith that he no doubt originally had as a local resident.

One can easily see why Matthew would be disenchanted with official Judaism (since it would have radically marginalized and excluded him from specific forms of community ritual), but it is difficult to see how he would have abandoned a more basic form of personal faith in favor of the elaborate trappings of the foreign cults. The simple fact that he responded positively to a Galilean messianic figure so easily (Matt 9.9: *As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.*) indicates at least some adherence to aspects of messianic Judaism. The most plausible scenario would have him as an aware, but non-practicing Jew, and not rather as a practicing member of the imperial cult (e.g. emperor worship) nor of any of the more exotic Olympian deities.

We do know that he did have a social circle constituted by other 'sinners', which would have included other of the despised trades (e.g. gamblers, camel drivers, bath attendants, select types of merchants). These would have been local Jews as well, at various levels of non-practice. How much social interaction he had with the higher-ups in the Hellenistic cities is unclear, but even the hierarchy in which he was positioned was generally filled with Jews. For example, the one good example of a tax collector was a Jew in Caesarea, and the 'bad' examples scorned by Josephus and Philo of Alexandria were also from large cities. His "social pressures" would have been still that of non-practicing or culturally-hellenized Judaism--NOT the pagan religions with which we are concerned here.

Given the infrequent contact that he would have had with any foreign religion (he would not have been at his 'post' ALL the time, plus he probably shared some of his duties with others--cf. Mt 9.10), it is likewise difficult to see how he would have been persuaded by any foreign "savior" figures or motifs, nor would he accrue any social and/or membership advantages of such religions.

In short, there does not seem to be any compelling reason (or even opportunity) for Matthew to adopt foreign religious theologies/praxis, and we actually have data that indicates his more basic Jewish faith.

.....
Question Three: What factors would have retarded their acceptance of these foreign-to-Judaism notions?

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Here we want to look at the opposite--what 'influences' would be operating on Matthew AGAINST adoption of foreign cults?

There are some factors in this category, which are mostly community and social.

- The local communities of Galilee did not "take kindly" to defilement of the land by foreign idols. Cultic practices involving pagan temples/shrines (as all of the 'candidate'

cults would have had) were seen as affecting the very community, and NOT simply the individual. There would have been a strong negative pressure on Matthew to avoid adopting (or at least to avoid displaying) such practices.

- There was actually a small social force on him from the Centurion who loved the Jewish people. As an authority figure, this would have exerted exemplar-force (i.e. "the foreign gods must not be really any better than the Jewish God, or this fellow would not have 'converted'").
- The sheer wealth-addiction issue would have militated against Matthew/Levi from adopting ANY vigorous religion--irrespective of land of origin.
- There is a distinct possibility that many of the foreign cults would have been somewhat incomprehensible to him. Some of the proto-Gnostic notions in some early MR's, for example, require an understanding of Greek metaphysics of spirit/matter. Although Matthew would have been fluent in Greek, the probability that he was versed in Greek philosophy to the degree required to understand some of the subtleties of the oriental cults/MR's is extremely minute.
- There would have been a political force from Antipas that would have retarded adoption of pagan deities. Herod Antipas had built Tiberias in defiance of Jewish scruples, but in deference to them had not put images on his coinage [SHJ:86]. He had learned from his father's mistakes and made genuine attempts at compromise around Jewish religious sensibilities. This policy of limited-agitation would have frowned upon overtly antagonistic practices (esp. practice of pagan religions in the rural areas--the main source of rebels!) by those in the employ of Herod (i.e. Matthew).

In the aggregate, the forces/influences on him NOT to adopt foreign practices are probably much stronger than the forces/influences on him TO adopt foreign practices.

.....
Question Four: Where there any public 'checks and balances' that would have hindered publication of these views by the early Christian community, even if a lone NT author would have accepted them?
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This question is a fascinating one, and the data indicates a STRONG 'check and balance' environment This data falls into three categories: (1) indication that the NT documents are mostly **group products**; (2) indications of close interactions/associations among the authors; and (3) indications of relatively close apostolic oversight of the spread of the gospel content.

1. **Indications that the NT documents are mostly GROUP products:**

- To state this in summary form is Ellis in [GAG:46](#):

"Although the (synoptic) evangelists are probably identified correctly by the second-century sources, their individual role may be overstated there and indeed, with the possible exception of Luke, it is difficult to assess with any precision. In some of these sources, however, Matthew, Mark, and John are presented as arrangers of gospel traditions whose work, in the case of Mark and John, is then **ratified by others**. That is, they are participants in a corporate enterprise"

- Matthew was said by Papias to have 'collected the sayings' (Eusebius, *HE*, 3.39.16)
- Papias also recounted the tradition that Mark "became Peter's expositor/interpreter and wrote...Peter **ratified** (*kurosai*) the writing for study" (Eusebius, *HE*, 3.39.15; 2.14f).
- The Muratorian Canon has this comment: "When (John was) exhorted by his fellow disciples and bishops (to write)...it was revealed to Andrew, one of the apostles, that John was to write all things in his own name, and **they were all to certify**"
- Ellis points out that Luke's "mention of the 'many' who drew up a narrative possibly refers to the corporate composition of **one** document, as the singular may suggest, rather than the individual composition of many narratives" [[GAG:46](#)].
- The usage of prior sources by the evangelists points to at least one dimension of collegial effort. Mark certainly used sources--esp. the pre-Markan passion narrative [Pesch, in [GAG:106ff](#)]--and Matthew uses "special exegetical traditions that appear to reflect the work of a circle of highly skilled prophets and/or teachers" [[GAG:47](#)] Since "prior documents" would be kept in official places, this appears to be activity that takes place in a scribal/school setting.
- John actually indicates (or at least hints) that collaboration was involved in his gospel:

*Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. 35 **The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.** (John 19.34-35)*

*This is **the disciple who testifies** to these things and **who wrote** them down. **We know that his testimony is true.** (John 21.24)*

- Stendahl in the classic *The School of St. Matthew* argues that Matthew 13.52 (*He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."*) indicates a scribal school setting.
- The letters of the NT consistently manifest group-construction data. The usage of amanuenses (dictation scribes) is well attested: Rom 16.22; I Cor 16.21; Col 4.18; 2 Thess 3.17; Phlm 19. These co-writers often influenced the wording, which in the case of the gifted individuals used by Paul, would be expected.
- Another more important piece on the epistles is the use of a "co-sender" which would have had considerable impact on the content. For example, we have these in I Cor 1.1 (Sosthenes); 2 Cor 1.1 (Timothy); Gal 1.2 ("all the brothers with me"); Phil 1.1 (Timothy). So, [PLW](#):

"Such contemporary data suggests that the mention of those associated with Paul in the address should be explained in terms of the letter; that is, he selected them to play a role in the creation of the epistle as coauthors. It seems obvious that the recipients of such letters would have taken the 'we' at face value as referring to the senders." (p. 19)

"How did coauthorship work in practice? In light of what Pliny the Younger has said about his working habits (*Letters* 9.36)..., we might reasonably assume that, whereas Pliny communed with himself, Paul consulted his companions and, as the lead, did the actual dictation. Within this broad framework, however, circumstances influenced the exact procedure in each letter...At the time of the composition of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul was still a neophyte both as a leader and a writer. The committee of three (note: Paul, Silas, Timothy) produced the letters, and Paul kept his personal comments to the minimum. As the one dictating, however, he could interject without difficulty...The circumstances of 1 Corinthians were different." (p. 33)

- The epistle of Peter manifests this as well--I Pet 5.12 cites Silas as co-author.
- Indeed, Wenham suggests as the best explanation for the basic order in the synoptic material, that:

"The canonical gospels, especially Matthew and Luke, were major works, written by leaders of great competence, and it is unlikely that knowledge of their projected books was kept secret. Rather, we would expect one evangelist to be glad of another's help while preparing his own work." [RMML:10].

- In the case of Paul, the "corporate" nature of his letters extends to his mission as well. So Gamble, [BREC:99](#):

"It was Paul's custom to name others together with himself as cosenders of his letters. This was probably not a formality but a reflection of the involvement of his associates in the conception, if not in the composition, of many of the letters. The evidence **strongly suggests that Paul's missionary enterprise had a corporate structure** and a school dimension..."

2. This stream of data strongly suggests that "the same apostolic circles were involved in the formation and/or transmission of both gospel and epistolary traditions" (E. Earle Ellis, in [GAG:52](#)). The fact that the NT literature was a group-effort or collaborative in nature would have acted as a significant barrier to the individual writers "smuggling in" pagan and/or foreign images of Jesus.
3. **Indications of close interactions/associations among the authors:**

It is quite easy to demonstrate that the various writers/sources of NT documents were in constant communication and collaborative work. Some of the data are as follows:

- The letters of James, I Peter, and the Pauline letters were written by apostles who--according to Paul and his sometime companion Luke--worked together. The data is extensive: Gal 1.18; 2.1, 9; I cor 3.22-4.1; 9.5; 11.16, 23ff; 14.33ff; 15.3-7; Rom 15.25; Acts 11.29f; 12.25; 15.6-35; 21.17f; cf. 2 Pet 3.15f; Jude 17f with I Tim 4.1).
- The letters and the Book of Acts connect their authors with the synoptic authors:
 - Peter and Paul with Mark (Col 4.10f; 2 Tim 4.11; Phlm 24; I Pet 5.13; Acts 12.12-25; 13.5, 13; 15.37ff).

- Paul and James with Luke (Paul: Col 4.14; 2 Tim 4.11; Phlm 24; Acts 16.10-17; 20.5-21.17; 27.1-28.16 ["we"]; James: Acts 21.17f ["we"]).
 - Acts puts James and Matthew together in Jerusalem (Acts 1.13f with 12.12-17, 25)
- The epistles reveal that Paul and Peter and James know a number of synoptic traditions [GAG:44]
 1. Paul: I Cor 7.10; 9.14 (I Tim 5.18); I Cor 11.23; 15.3; cf. Col 2.8; see GP:II:345-375 for a substantial list of Pauline overlaps with the Synoptic Apocalypse.
 2. Peter: I Pet 1.10ff (Luke 10.24=Matt 13.17); 2.7 (Mark 12:10); 2.12 (Matt 5.16); 4.13f (Matt 5.11f=Luke 6.22f).
 3. James shows special affinities to Matthew: 1:5,6, 22f; 2:5, 13; 4.10; 5.12.
 - Peter was apparently the source of much information for Paul--Gal 1.18.

The NT writers were in constant communication and collaboration with each other, and demonstrate this in their writings. It would have been difficult if not impossible for one of this group to have held to foreign, pagan notions without it becoming widely known. We even know of disagreements within the early church, and that they are surfaced quite visibly(!)--such as Peter vs. Paul in Galatians and the circumcision issue in Acts 14-15. All the indications along these lines are well within Jewish-Christian thought, and foreign notions do not start to show up until after the NT era at the earliest.

4. **Indications of relatively close apostolic oversight of the spread of the gospel content:**

1. The early church had a center (Jerusalem) and leaders (apostles).
2. When the church expanded into Samaria, there was interaction with the leaders of the founding church (Acts 8.14): "When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them". [By all accounts, Peter and John would have been closest to ANY information about Jesus' acts/words.]
3. When the church expanded into Antioch, we see the same pattern occur (Act 11:22): "News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch."
4. When the issue of circumcision came up, the church in Antioch appointed Paul and Barnabas "to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question" (Acts 15.2)
5. The first church council was held at Jerusalem (Act 15:23-29)
6. The reference in Acts 15:24--"*We have heard that some went out from us **without our authorization** and disturbed you...*"--is a STRONG indication of a 'sense of control'!
7. ...as is 16.6: "*As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.* .
8. Paul accepted the importance of the Jerusalem center (Gal 2.1-2): "Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus

along also. I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain."

9. Davids points out how significant this was [[GP:I:87f](#)]:

"Confirmation of the picture in Acts comes from the fact that even Paul felt the power and authority of the Jerusalem church and the apostles. While Paul insists that his legitimacy as an apostle comes directly from Christ, he still reports that he found it necessary to go to Jerusalem at least twice and on one occasion to seek formal approval of his gospel from the apostles (Gal. 2.1-10). This would be most astounding if Paul did not feel that the apostles had at least some type of authority over the content of the tradition. Thus although Paul refuses to become dependent upon Jerusalem, he has the highest respect for the role of the community as a stronghold of pure doctrine and tradition".

10. At Jrs. Paul was welcomed and sent to the Gentiles (Gal 2.9f): "James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do."

11. Paul (a native of Tarsus!) returned to Jerusalem after EACH missionary journey.
12. Even Peter is subject to the apostles as a group (Acts 8.4).
13. The leading apostles and evangelists had traveling ministries, bringing them into contact with churches and believers everywhere.
14. The early churches did NOT live in a vacuum. They corresponded with each other (cf. I Clement, a letter from Rome to Corinth, a.d. 95, see [ATNT:48-49](#)) and exchanged NT documents (cf. Col. 4.16).
15. Bauckham summarizes the authority succinctly [[BAFCSPS:450](#)]:

"The Jerusalem council presupposes the authority of Jerusalem to decide the issue of Gentile Christians' obedience to the Law (Acts 15). Its decision binds not only Antioch and its daughter churches (15.22-31) but also the churches founded by Paul and Barnabas (16.4). When James recalls the decision in 21.25, the effect is to imply that Paul's Gentile mission is still subject to it."

5. This controlling group of apostles and elders would have been a serious 'check and balance' against any foreign notions, held by any individual or minority.

The "Net" of this is clear: there were CONSIDERABLE 'checks and balances' in place during this early period, which would have prohibited the introduction of individual foreign elements into the content of the NT. The NT literature was generally a group-product, the authors were in frequent communication/co-work with each other, and the original apostolic community oversaw the development and transmission of the gospel content. Even novel elements that could be produced by the pneumatic and prophetic ministries of the Spirit were to be 'judged' by the core content and authoritative followers of Jesus (cf. I Cor 14.29; I Thess 5.19-21; I John 4.1-3).

.....
Question Five: What does the literature they produced, and/or post-Easter history tell us about the views they accepted?
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In the case of Matthew, the issue of **post-Easter history** is easy--we have very, very little information about him. By far and away the most consistent data we have has to do with his authorship of the Gospel! Early tradition is unanimous in stating that Matthew wrote his gospel in Hebrew and for Hebrews. Wenham discusses these witnesses in RMML, chapter 5 (i.e. Papias, Irenaeus, Pantaenus, Origen, Eusibius, Epiphanius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome, Gregory of Nazianzus, Chrysostom, Augustine, et. al.!).

The issue of **literature** is a bit more straightforward:

1. It is widely agreed (as well as obvious to the most casual reader!) that Matthew is the most "Jewish" of the gospels (see NT Wright's discussion in [NTPG:384ff](#), and standard commentaries).
2. We have seen already in Part A of this study that pagan elements do not manifest themselves in Matthew's portrayal of Christ.
3. It would have been evangelistic 'suicide' to have appealed to the Jewish population in 1st century Roman-occupied Palestine on behalf of a Jesus colored by pagan associations (transmitted by gentile merchants or slaves) or the imperial cult (transmitted by Roman soldiers or the oppressive Hellenistic/Roman elite)!!!
4. The very argumentation content and methods of Matthew reflect the basic milieu of the Jewish community--not the argument forms of pagan theologies [[BEAP:140-152](#)].
5. Matthew's argument for the Messianic status of Jesus is NOT from his 'divine powers', but from His fulfillment of OT scriptures--the opposite approach of pagan deities.
6. Jesus appears in a number of non-Jewish or Hellenistic cities (e.g. Phoenicia, Decapolis, Caesarea Philippi), but there is NO hint that Matthew (or Jesus) tries to 'relate' to the pagan theological figures/concepts that were present in those areas. This would have been the perfect setting for Matthew to "smuggle" those associations into the narrative.
7. Likewise, the visit of the pagan Magi in Matthew 2.1-12 would have been a great place to insert something about Persian and/or Iranian legends, but he didn't.

In short, not only do we have no indication of pagan notions in Matthew, but the ABSENCE of such notions in places in the text which would have been perfect places to insert those notions counts heavily against his carrying these in his belief system.

.....
Conclusion
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We have seen that:

1. Matthew had minimal contact with outside religions.
2. Matthew had minimal forces on him to adopt such outside religious ideas.

3. Matthew had non-trivial forces upon him to *avoid* adopting outside religious ideas.
4. Production of the NT literature (including Matthew's gospel) would have been largely a group effort, in constant review/feedback with apostolic figures, and under the authority of the 'keepers of the tradition' in Jerusalem.
5. The very character of Matthew's literary production demonstrates a strong argument that he did not maintain foreign religious ideas.

We have seen in Part A that Matthew's portrait of Jesus is unique, and not a mere copy of pagan religious motifs; in this study we can understand part of why that was the case.

[The Christian ThinkTank...](http://www.Christian-thinktank.com)[<http://www.Christian-thinktank.com>] ([Reference Abbreviations](#))