One of the popular ideas being promoted today particularly on the internet is the idea that the miracle stories of Jesus were borrowed from ancient pagan myths, commonly referred to as “mystery religions.” Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy write in their book, The Laughing Jesus, “Each mystery religion taught its own version of the myth of the dying and resurrecting Godman, who was known by different names in different places. In Egypt, where the mysteries began, he was Osiris. In Greece he became Dionysus, in Asia Minor he is known as Attis, in Syria he is Adonis, in Persia he is Mithras, in Alexandria he is Serapis, to name a few.”

Proponents of this idea point out that there are several parallels between these pagan myths and the story of Jesus Christ. Parallels cited include a virgin birth, a divine Son of God, the god dying for mankind, resurrection from the dead, and more. Skeptics allege that Christianity did not present any unique teaching but instead borrowed the majority of their tenets from the mystery religions.

Some of the alleged parallels indeed appear to be quite striking. One example is the god Mithras. This myth teaches that Mithras was born of a virgin in a cave, that he was a traveling teacher with twelve disciples, that he promised his disciples eternal life, and that he sacrificed himself for the world. In addition, the Greek god Dionysius miraculously turns water into wine. The Egyptian god Osiris is killed and then resurrects from the dead.

The position that Christianity borrowed from the mystery religions was taught in the nineteenth century by the History of Religions School; however, by the mid-twentieth century, this view was shown to be false and thus abandoned even by those who believed Christianity was purely a natural religion. Ron Nash wrote, “During a period of time running roughly from about 1890 to 1940, scholars often alleged that primitive Christianity had been heavily influenced by Platonism, Stoicism, the pagan religions, or other movements in the Hellenistic world. Largely as a result of a series of scholarly books and articles written in rebuttal, allegations of early Christianity’s dependence on its Hellenistic environment began to appear much less frequently in the publications of Bible

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2 Ed Komoszewski, James Sawyer, and Daniel Wallace, Reinventing Jesus (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications: 2006), 221.
scholars and classical scholars. Today most Bible scholars regard the question as a dead issue.

Despite the fact that many of the arguments were rejected, this theory has once again emerged through the popular writings of skeptics. What makes Christianity unique among the world religions is that it is a historical faith based on the historical person of Christ who lived a miraculous life. In this essay, I will examine the alleged parallels and evaluate whether Christianity teaches a unique savior or is simply a copy of these pagan myths.

Fallacies of the Theory

An old idea has once again emerged. Critics of Christianity allege that Christianity borrowed many of its ideas from the mystery religions. This theory was popular nearly a century ago among the History of Religions School but was rejected by the scholarly community. It has once again surfaced through popular novels and the internet.

There are several flaws with this theory. New Testament scholars, Ed Komoszewski, James Sawyer, and Dan Wallace, point out several fallacies. The first is the composite fallacy. Proponents of this view lump together pagan religions as if they were one religion when making comparisons to Christianity. By combining features from various religions, an attempt is made to show strong parallels. However, when the individual myths themselves are studied, major differences are soon discovered.

A second fallacy is a fallacy of terminology. Christian terms are used to describe pagan beliefs, and it is thus concluded that there are parallel origins and meanings. However, although the terms used may be the same, there is a significant difference between the definitions used Christian practice and those stemming from pagan understanding.

A third fallacy is the chronological fallacy. Supporters of this theory incorrectly assume that Christianity borrowed many of its ideas from the mystery religions when, in fact, the evidence reveals it was actually the other way around. There is no archaeological evidence to support that there were mystery religions in Palestine in first century A.D. Jews and early Christians loathed syncretism with other religions. Moreover, Jews and Christians were uncompromisingly monotheistic while Greeks were polytheistic. Christians also strongly defended the uniqueness of Christ as the only Son of God and the only way to eternal life (Acts 4:12). Although Christians encountered pagan religions, they opposed any adopting of foreign beliefs. Ron Nash states, “The


5 Ibid., 224-6.

6 Ibid., 231-234.
uncompromising monotheism and the exclusiveness that the early church preached and practiced make the possibility of any pagan inroads... unlikely if not impossible.”

Fourth, there is the intentional fallacy. Christianity has a linear view of history in which history is moving in a purposeful direction. There is a purpose for mankind’s existence, and history is moving in a direction to fulfill God’s plan for the ages. In contrast, the mystery religions have a cyclical view of history. History continues in a never-ending cycle of repetition often linked with the vegetation cycle. The Christian view offers purpose and meaning in life for the individual and mankind while the mystery religions look at life as a repeating circular cycle leading nowhere. It offers no real purpose either for an individual's life or that of mankind as a whole.

In sum, Christianity has Judaism, not Greek mythology, as its source. Jesus, Paul, and the Apostles appeal to the Old Testament, and there are direct teachings and fulfillments from the Old Testament. Teachings such as one God, blood atonement for sin, salvation by grace, sinfulness of mankind, and bodily resurrection are rooted in Judaism and are completely foreign to Greek mythology. In fact, the idea of resurrection was not taught in any Greek mythological work prior to the late second century A.D.

Legends of the Mystery Religions

Did Christianity borrow its ideas from the mystery religions? Critics of Christianity point to several parallels between Christianity and the myths of these religions. However, a brief study of the legends soon reveals that there are few, if any, parallels to the life of Jesus Christ. Historians acknowledge that there are several variations to many of these myths and that they also evolved and changed first under the influence of Roman culture then Christianity. Historical research indicates that it was not until the third century A.D. that Christianity and the mystery religions came into real contact with one another. A brief overview of some of the most popular myths reveals their lack of resemblance with Christianity.

Resurrection Accounts

There are major differences between Christianity and pagan myths when describing a resurrection. First, none of the resurrections in these myths involve the God of the universe dying a voluntary death for his creation. Only Jesus died for sins; the deaths of other gods were due to hunting accidents, emasculation, and other calamities.

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8 Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, 221.


10 Nash, 129.
The gods in these stories die by compulsion, not by choice; sometimes they died in bitterness and despair rather than in self-giving love.¹¹

Second, Jesus died once for all (Heb. 7:27, 9:25-28) while pagan gods repeat the death and rebirth cycle annually with the seasons. Third, unlike the Greek gods, Jesus died voluntarily for mankind. Fourth, Jesus’ death was not a defeat but a triumph. The New Testament’s mood of victory and joy (1 Cor. 15:50-57 and Col. 2:13-15) stands in contrast to pagan myths whose moods are dark and sorrowful over the fate of their gods. Finally, Jesus’ death was an actual historical event. Christianity insists upon and defends the historical credibility of the gospel accounts while the pagan cults make no such attempt to establish their historical accuracy.¹²

A popular myth that some believe parallels the resurrection of Christ is the story of Osiris. The cult of the gods Osiris and his wife Isis originates in Egypt. According to the legend, Osiris’ wicked brother Set murders him and sinks his coffin to the bottom of the Nile. Isis recovers the coffin and returns it to Egypt. However, Set discovers the body and dismembers it into fourteen pieces and tosses them into the Nile. Isis collects thirteen of the body parts and bandages the body to make the first mummy. Osiris is then transformed and becomes the ruler of the underworld in a state of semi-consciousness.

This legend hardly parallels the resurrection of Christ. Osiris is not resurrected from death to life. Instead he is changed into another form and lives in the underworld in a zombie state. In contrast, Christ physically rose from the grave, conquering sin and death. The physical body that was on the cross was raised in glory.

There is also a belief that the story of Mithra contains a death and resurrection. The cult of Mithra began in the present day country of Iran and was spread throughout the Roman Empire by Roman soldiers on military expeditions to Iran and present day Iraq. However, there is no teaching in early Mithraism of either his death or his resurrection. Nash states, “Mithraism had no concept of the death and resurrection of its god and no place for any concept of rebirth—at least during its early stages. . . . Moreover, Mithraism was basically a military cult. Therefore, one must be skeptical about suggestions that it appealed to nonmilitary people like the early Christians.”¹³

Moreover, Mithraism flowered after, not before, Christianity, so Christianity could not have copied from Mithraism. The timing is incorrect for Mithraism to have influenced the development of first-century Christianity. Much more likely is the reverse in which Christianity influenced Mithraism. Edwin Yamauchi, one of the foremost scholars on ancient Persia and Mithraism, states, “The earliest mithraea are dated to the early second century. There are a handful of inscriptions that date to the early second century, but the vast majority of texts are dated after A. D. 140. Most of what we have as evidence of Mithraism comes in the second, third, and fourth centuries A. D. That’s basically what’s wrong with the theories about Mithraism influencing the beginnings of Christianity.”¹⁴

¹¹Norman Anderson, Christianity and World Religions (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 53.

¹²Nash, 171-2.

¹³Nash, 143-4.

The legend of Attis was popular in the Hellenistic world. According to this legend, the mother goddess Cybele fell in love with a young Phrygian shepherd named Attis. However, he was unfaithful to her, and in revenge she caused him to go mad. In his insanity, he castrated himself and died. The great mourning of Cybele caused death to enter into the world. Cybele then preserved the dead body of Attis, allowing his hair to grow and little finger to move. In some variations, Attis returns to life in the form of an evergreen tree, but there is no bodily resurrection to life. All variations of the legend teach that Attis remained dead. Any account of a resurrection of Attis did not appear until 150 years after Christ.因此，there is little similarity between Attis’ comatose state and the resurrection of Christ.

Thus, there is little similarity between Attis’ comatose state and the resurrection of Christ. The claim that Christianity adopted its resurrection account from the pagan mystery religions is false. There are very few parallels in these mystery religions to the resurrection of Christ. The idea of a physical resurrection to glory is foreign to these pagan religions, and the stories of gods who die and rise again do not appear until after Christianity.

Myths of a Virgin Birth

In the previous section, the alleged parallel resurrection stories were studied. In fact, the supposed resurrection accounts in the mystery religions have little in common with the resurrection account of Christ. Let us now look at the alleged parallels between virgin births in the mystery religions and the virgin birth of Christ.

Parallels quickly break down when the facts are analyzed. In the pagan myths, the gods lust after women, take on human form, and enter into physical relationships. Thus, the offspring that are produced are half-human and half-divine beings. This stands in contrast to Christ who is fully human and fully divine and the creator of the universe who existed from eternity past.

The alleged parallels to the virgin birth are found in the legends of Dionysus and Mithras. Dionysus is the god of wine. In this story Zeus, while disguised as a man, has relations with Semele, and she becomes pregnant. In a jealous rage Zeus’ wife Hera attempts to burn Semele. Zeus rescues the fetus by sewing the fetus into his thigh until Dionysus was born. The birth of Dionysus is the result of a sexual union of Semele and Zeus while he came to her in the form of a man. This cannot be considered a virgin birth.

One of the popular cults of the later Roman Empire was the cult of Mithra, which originated in Persia. Mithra was supposedly born when he emerged from a rock; he was carrying a knife and torch and wearing a Phrygian cap. He battled first with the sun and then with a primeval bull. This was thought to be the first act of creation. Mithra slew the bull, which then became the ground of life for the human race. The birth of Mithra from a rock, born fully-grown, hardly parallels the virgin birth of Christ.

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15 Strobel, 177.
16 Nash, 144.
Along with the birth of pagan gods are the alleged virgin births of Greco-Roman heroes such as Perseus and Heracles. However, in the myth of Perseus, King Acrisius locks his daughter Danae away in a tower because he receives a prophecy that her son would one day kill his grandfather. Her beauty smote Zeus, and one evening he came to her as a shower of gold and had sexual relations with her. This resulted in her becoming pregnant with Perseus, the son of a god and a “virgin” mother.\textsuperscript{17}

In the myth of Heracles, his mother Alcmene was the daughter of King Tiryns. Alcmene’s brothers were killed in battle, and she refused to consummate her marriage to Amphitryon to whom she was engaged. While her betrothed husband was away in battle, Zeus appeared to her in her husband’s likeness. Through this union, she becomes pregnant. Later she becomes pregnant through her true husband and gives birth to twins: Heracles, the son of Zeus and Iphicles, the son of Amphitryon.\textsuperscript{18} As with the other accounts, this cannot be considered a virgin birth.

Alexander the Great is a historical figure, but there arose a legend that his birth was supernatural. According to legend, Zeus, in the form of a lightning bolt, struck his mother and impregnated her just before her marriage to Philip of Macedon.

What is common in all these stories is that the gods lust after mortal women and have physical relations with them. This is in stark contrast to the New Testament account of Christ’s birth. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown states that alleged virgin parallels “consistently involve a type of \textit{hieros gamos} where a divine male, in human or other form, impregnates a woman, either through normal sexual intercourse or through some substitute form of penetration. They are not really similar to non-sexual virginal conception that is at the core of the infancy narratives, a conception where there is no male deity or element to impregnate Mary.”\textsuperscript{19}

The Gospel of Luke teaches that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, and it was through the power of the Most High that she became pregnant. Mary had no physical relationship with a man or a deity who became a man. The idea of a virgin birth did not have its origins in pagan mythology but instead was prophesied by Isaiah nearly six centuries earlier. Isaiah 7:14 states that a virgin will give birth to the messiah. The word used, \textit{alma}, is translated as \textit{virgin} in the Septuagint which, in turn, was translated before the birth of Christ.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Our study of the mystery religions reveals very few parallels with Christianity. Christianity derives its foundation from the Old Testament and Judaism and opposed any syncretism with pagan religions. The major doctrines of monotheism, sinfulness of man, blood atonement for sin, and bodily resurrection are unique to Christianity and foreign to the mystery religions.

\textsuperscript{17} Komozzewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, 241.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 241.

\textsuperscript{19} Strobel, 182.
One of the most important distinctions is that Christ was a historical figure and His miraculous life, death, and resurrection are actual historical events. There is strong historical evidence that support the historicity of Christ (See my article on the Historical Reliability of the Gospels). However, the mystery religions are purely legendary and were not considered historical.

Although there are many alleged parallels between the pagan mystery religions and Christianity, when the myths are studied, there are major differences and very few parallels. For these reasons, the theory that Christianity copied its major tenets from the mystery religions should be rejected.
Peter Jennings: Some scholars think the resurrection stories were borrowed from eastern pagan cults popular throughout the Roman world at the time, called mystery religions. Professor Marvin Meyer: The conviction was in the mysteries that there is death and resurrection, just as crops go into the ground and die and come back again for a new season in a wonderful kind of way. A prevailing myth widely circulated is that the similarities between Christianity and the mystery religions are striking. Purveyors of this mythology employ Biblical language and then go to great lengths to concoct commonalities. Take, for example, the alleged similarities between Christianity and the cult of Isis. Although Christians encountered pagan religions, they opposed any adopting of foreign beliefs. Ron Nash stated, “The uncompromising monotheism and the exclusiveness that the early church preached and practiced make the possibility of any pagan inroads . . . unlikely if not impossible.” Fourth is the intentional fallacy. As noted above, critics of Christianity point to several parallels between Christianity and the myths of the mystery religions. However, a brief study of the legends reveals that there are few if any parallels to the life of Jesus Christ. Historians acknowledge that there are several variations to many of these myths and that they also evolved and changed under the influence of Roman culture and, later, Christianity.