

**Afrocentricity &
Black
Consciousness:
Challenges for
Christianity**

Part 2

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Monotheism: From Akhenaten?

The claim that Moses got his concept of monotheism from Akhenaten or at least from Egypt, is a fairly common one among Afrocentrists.¹ Probing the available historical data on Akhenaten does not support the Afrocentric claim.

Pharaoh Akhenaten who reigned from 1352-1336 BC² and also known as Amenophis/Amunhotep IV was the second son of Amenophis/Amunhotep III (1390-1352 BC) and his royal wife, Tiye. He was born towards the end of the 15th century BC or early in the 14th during the glory days of the Egyptian empire which then encompassed all the land between Karoy in the Sudan and

¹ See Yosef A.A. ben-Jochannan, *African Origins of the Major "Western Religions"*, 1970, 156, where an undocumented claim is made that Africans had "spoken of a monotheistic God in the person of RA (the Sun God)". Diop also says, "Ra is the first God, the first demiurge of history who created through the word. All other gods in history came after him...". See 311 of his *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*, 1991. Diop seems a bit contradictory in that he says at 310, "[t]his primordial matter, the *nous* or the 'primordial waters', was elevated to the level of divinity (called *Nun* in Egyptian cosmogony)." Later at 311, he writes, "...eternal matter, uncreated...ends up by becoming self-aware. The first consciousness thus emerges from the primordial *Nun*; it is God, Ra, the demiurge (Plato) who is going to complete creation."

² Dates vary from source to source. We use here the dates in Ian Shaw, op. cit., 481, that are identical to Donald Redford's in "The Monotheism of Akhenaten" in Hershel Shanks et al (eds.), *Aspects of Monotheism: How God is One*, 1997, 17.

the Euphrates in Mesopotamia.³ His wife was Neferty.

Amenophis IV took the name Akhenaten ('Servant of, or well-pleasing to, Aten') when he established his cult of the Sun-disc (the god Aten) at Amarna. He regarded the Sun-disc as the sole god—self-engendered, universal, creator of all things. He also dubbed himself "the dazzling Sun-disc".⁴ Note that two other solar gods, 'Re-Horus of the horizon' (Re-Harakhki) and Shu were identified with Aten.⁵

The ancient Egyptians were not fussy about the fine-point of the worship of one god as opposed to many gods unless that affected some practical dimension of life like the use of a temple or its associated land.⁶

After Akhenaten's death, he was regarded as a doomed rebel because he had "overthrown the socioeconomic system and had almost disrupted the running of the state. But no one back then ever called him anything like 'monotheist' (whatever lexical form that would have conjured up in the Egyptian language), and certainly no pejorative was ever hurled at him for espousing one god."⁷

The notion of a supreme god or sole god appeared before and after Akhenaten in that the sun-god was for quite a long time, before Akhenaten, regarded as being of high esteem in the theology of Heliopolis and Aten was an old name for the sun-disk.⁸ Interestingly, this high view of the Aten is reflected in a hymn written in the name of two brothers, Seth and Horus, who were architects at Thebes under Akhenaten's father

³ See Redford in Shanks, op. cit., 15.

⁴ Ibid., 19-20 and Redford's *Akhenaten: The Heretic King*, 1984, 137-142. See also Alan Millard, "Abraham, Akhenaten, Moses and Monotheism" in R.S. Hess et al (eds.), *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes From Genesis 12-50*, 1993, 121-124 and Shaw, op. cit., 273-276.

⁵ Redford in Shanks, op. cit., 23.

⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Shaw, op. cit., 275.

(Amenophis III). The hymn praises the sun under the names of Amun, Harakhti, Re, Khepri and Aten (sun disk) and says in part, "Hail to thee, sun disk [Aten] of the daytime, creator of all and maker of their living!... The sole lord, who reaches the ends of the lands every day... He who rises in heaven, [his] form being the sun..."⁹

Later than Akhenaten in the 19th dynasty (early 13th century BC), similar sentiments in praise of the sun (under different names) are expressed in Spell 15 of the *Book of Going Forth by Day*.

Hail to thee, Re at his rising, Atum at his setting... Thou art lord of sky and earth, who made the stars above and humankind below, sole God, who came into being at the beginning of time... Hail to thee, Amun-Re... Thou crossest the sky, everyone seeing thee... O my Lord, living through eternity, thou who shalt exist forever; O thou disk [Aten], lord of rays, when thou risest everyone lives. Let (me) see thee at daybreak every day.¹⁰

The ancient Egyptians regarded the supernatural as manifest in plural forms: gods, powers of heaven and earth. During the 'sophisticated Pharaonic state in the 3rd millennium BC' the pantheon of gods became highly centralized and hierarchically ranked.¹¹

Amun was the chief god of the Egyptian pantheon and Akhenaten had studiously tried to get the priests of Amun in Thebes (the Egyptian capital) to switch allegiance to Aten.¹² When he failed in his attempts he moved the capital to Amarna (located midway between Thebes and Memphis) and called the new city Akhetaten ('the horizon of Aten').¹³

⁹ James Pritchard, ANET, 367-368.

¹⁰ Cited in Jack Finegan, *Myth & Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World*, 1989, 59.

¹¹ Redford in Shanks, op. cit., 12, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³ Redford, 1984, op. cit., 142-153.

Equally studiously, but more successfully done, after Akhenaten's death, was the programme to obliterate his name and reign from the records of Egypt by a general destruction and concealment by re-use, of his monuments.¹⁴

The major written source of Akhenaten's view of the Aten comes from a hymn, in praise of the sun-god, inscribed in the tomb of Aya, his private secretary (and Pharaoh for about 4 years, 1327-1323 BC).¹⁵

When thou settest in the western horizon,
The land is in darkness, in the manner of death
They sleep in a room, with the heads wrapped up...
Every lion is come forth from his den...

At daybreak, when thou arisest on the horizon,
When thou shinest as the Aten by day,
Thou drivest away the darkness and givest thy rays...
All the world, they do their work...
O sole god, like whom there is no other!¹⁶

Beyond the common belief in one god, one has to examine the content of that belief, philosophically, because not all similar beliefs are identical and similar beliefs may command varying degrees of credibility based on details. The monotheism of the ancient Egyptians was radically different in content from that of the Old Testament.¹⁷

¹⁴ The man behind the programme was Haremhab (1323-1295 BC), Finegan, *op.cit.*, 56-57, the dates are from Redford, *op. cit.*, 17.

¹⁵ Finegan, *op. cit.*, 57.

¹⁶ Finegan, *op. cit.*, 57.

¹⁷ Egypt may be more defensibly said to have had henotheism than monotheism given the plurality of gods and the regional supremacy of particular gods like

In a symposium on 'Aspects of Monotheism' at the Smithsonian Institution on October 19, 1996, the foremost authority on Akhenaten, Donald Redford, along with three other specialists, William Dever, P. Kyle McCarter and John J. Collins presented papers and together faced the audience in a Q & A session. Several versions of questions were asked about the links between Egyptian and Israelite monotheism. Redford's answer to one such question is quite instructive and he had agreement from Dever.

Q: In your judgment, did Egyptian one-godism influence early Israelite theology?

Redford: Well, if you mean Akhenaten, I don't think it did at all. There is the fact that the traditional monotheism of Moses speaks of one god and Akhenaten makes it clear that he is dealing with a single god. But Egypt in the Iron Age and later, when Israel and Judah were coming into contact with it, was noted for the multiplicity of deities. Egypt was anything but monotheistic during the Iron Age. Moreover, the monotheism of Akhenaten is so distinct from Yahwism that I wonder why the two are compared. Really, there's very little to Akhenaten's religion. It's been pointed out, for example, that Akhenaten's religion is devoid of ethical content;¹⁸ in Mosaic monotheism, the ethical content is quite extensive. No, I don't see any link.¹⁹

Atum in Heliopolis, Ptah in Memphis, Amun and Ra/Re in Thebes. See Finegan, *op. cit.*, 51-55.

¹⁸ Egyptologist S. Quirke said, "...there is an important difference between the sun-god Aten of Akhenaten on the one hand and both the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic deity and the traditional Egyptian sun-god Ra on the other. The sun-god of Akhenaten is not engaged with humanity beyond dawning to give light and life, a task that it performs for every living being on earth as well, animal or vegetable. The course of the Aten across the sky has no moral content, and the king defends only the truth that Aten is sole god, not the moral or social order," cited in Hess *op. cit.*, 123.

¹⁹ Shanks, *op. cit.*, 113-114. There is still a raging controversy about the actual date of the exodus. The live options are 1440 BC (implied from the biblical data)

There is an acute and fundamental philosophical difference between the monotheism of the Bible and that of the Egyptians, including Akhenaten. The God-creator of the Bible is infinite and a person whereas that of the Egyptians in general and Akhenaten in particular, was the sun or matter. The philosophical difference is that biblical monotheism wields explanatory scope and power re the origin of anything/everything *including persons and mind* because God is infinite and personal whereas Egyptian concepts of god and Akhenaten's monotheism lack it because a contingent, material entity, the sun or matter, is giving rise to everything *including persons and mind*. This is a neglected problem for any alleged theory of stealing, borrowing or influence concerning Egyptian concepts of deity and the biblical one.

It is of philosophical note too that in spell 15 of the *Book of Going Forth by Day* (or the *Book of the Dead*) the sun is hailed as the sole deity and as *coming into being in time*.

Hail to you, O Re at your rising, O Atum-Horakhty...the Unwearying Stars acclaim you, the Imperishable Stars worship you when you set in the horizon of Manu...the Sole One came into existence in the sky before the plains and the mountains existed...²⁰

and a 13th century BC date (deduced from archaeological finds). If the 15th century date is correct then Moses preceded Akhenaten by about 100 years! If the 13th century date is correct then it would be difficult to prove any influence from Akhenaten on Moses (almost a hundred years later) since Akhenaten's influence in Egypt was deliberately obliterated by Haremhab who ruled approximately 13 years later. Additionally, there is not much available on Akhenaten's views except for the hymn inscribed in the tomb of Aya his private secretary.

²⁰ See the translation in James Wasserman, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 1998, plate 18. See a slightly different translation but with the same force in Finegan, *op. cit.*, 59 and quoted earlier.

The book of Genesis (1.1) opens with the words “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” including the celestial bodies and the New Testament, in several places, declares “...that a transcendent Being created the cosmos, One who operates in a reality beyond our matter, energy, space, and time.”²¹ God is said to have made decisions “before the beginning of time”²² (2 Tim. 1.2; Titus 1.2) or “before the world began” (John. 17.2, 24; Eph. 1.4; 1 Pet. 1.20).

Note as well the popularity of pictorial and carved depictions of deity in Egyptian sources and the central taboo on graven images of Yahweh in the allegedly borrowed or stolen Ten Commandments. Exodus 20.4-5 says, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them...” (New American Standard Bible).

The Ten Commandments: Revealed, Borrowed or Stolen?

Concerning the Ten Commandments, and the allegation that they were stolen or borrowed, much common-sense should prevail. The Bible states that God revealed to Moses the law code that would regulate the life of the Israelites coming out of Egypt (Ex. 19-24).

The now popular thesis of ‘stolen legacy’ and the attempt to see almost everything of worth as stolen or borrowed from Egypt is hopeless naïve. One needs to remember that there were commonalities in the Ancient Near East in cultural realities, legal codes and marriage/divorce customs but there were also national peculiarities. Additionally, the fact that document

²¹ Hugh Ross, *Beyond the Cosmos: What Recent Discoveries in Astronomy and Physics Reveal About the Nature of God*, 1996, 42.

²² This is a ‘way of speaking’ suggesting God’s non-dependence on the matter-space-time reality of our existence. For this basic idea see William Craig in *God and Time*, 2001, 131, edited by Gregory Ganssle.

A is prior to B and looks similar to B, does not mean that B was copied from A.

The usual allegation under the ‘stolen legacy’ rubric is that Moses copied the Ten Commandments from the earlier negative confessions in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.²³ What those who make the allegation fail to do is show the clear similarity or identity in content or structure—beyond generalities that one would expect in any culture—between the two documents, that provide the basis for the alleged dependence of the one on the other. Nor have such critics been able to explain the peculiarities of the Ten Commandments that have no likeness in the negative confessions, like the critical taboo on graven images and the centrality of the Sabbath.

The more serious allegation from another quarter is that Moses plagiarized the *Babylonian* code of Hammurabi (written between 2000 and 1700 BC) to come up with the Ten Commandments and other laws in the Pentateuch. Though there are structural and thematic similarities between Hammurabi’s code and sections of the laws in the Pentateuch,²⁴ the differences are very striking and there is nothing in Hammurabi that closely matches the Ten Commandments.

As Gleason Archer says,

...it should be understood, of course, that the differences between the Torah and the Code of Hammurabi are far more striking than the resemblances. But the differences proceed

²³ So ben-Jochanan, op. cit., 69-71. See the negative confessions in Wasserman, op. cit., plate 31 and page 115.

²⁴ Law codes believed to be earlier than Hammurabi’s—like the Lipit-Ishtar Code (first half of the second millennium BC) and the Laws of Eshnunna (about 200 years before Hammurabi)—reflect similarities to Hammurabi’s and the Mosaic codes as well. See Roland K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1969, 101-102 and Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Vol. 2, 1998, 66-67.

largely from the entirely different ideology to which each of the two cultures adhered...in the Hebrew laws a greater value is set upon human life, a stricter regard for the honor of womanhood is discernible, and a more humane treatment of slaves is enjoined. Moreover, the Babylonian Code has nothing in it corresponding to that twofold golden thread running through the Mosaic legislation—love to God and love to one's neighbor...²⁵

Christianity and the Mystery Religions

What really were the so-called mystery religions? There is a popular view drawn from George James' book *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy*²⁶ that there was an Egyptian Mystery System, Masonic to the core—involving worship centres and schools—which was the well-spring of Greek mystery religions. James cites the 1909 book *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*, written by a thirty-second degree Mason, the Rev. Charles H. Vail' as his principal source for ideas concerning the Egyptian Mystery System.²⁷

James, after a long quotation from Vail concludes,

I am fully convinced ...that an Egyptian Grand Lodge of Ancient Mysteries actually existed some five thousand years ago or more, on the banks of the Nile in the city of Thebes, and that it was the only Grand Lodge of the Ancient World whose ruins have been found in Egypt, and that it was the governing body which necessarily controlled the Ancient Mysteries together with the philosophical Schools and minor Lodges wherever they happened to have been organized...²⁸

²⁵ McDowell, op. cit., 65.

²⁶ 1954, see especially, 27-40.

²⁷ Ibid., 27, 28, 31, 32

²⁸ op. cit., 35.

It now appears that James was led astray by Vail, who misunderstood his prime source, Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris*.²⁹

The mystery religions were really Hellenistic religions, called 'mystery' because they involved secret ceremonies that were thought to bring their initiates some special benefits.³⁰ They were more or less based on the annual vegetation cycle of life (spring) and death (fall).

Each religion originated from different areas. From Mesopotamia – Tammuz or Dumuzi (the Sumerian version); from Egypt – the cult of Isis and Osiris (later called Serapis); from Greece – the cults of Demeter and Dionysus which later developed into the Eleusinian and Orphic mystery religions; from Phrygia in Asia Minor – the cult of Cybele and Attis; from Syria/Palestine – the cult of Adonis and from Persia (modern Iran) – the cult of Mithra (twin brother of the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda).³¹

Claims that Christianity borrowed from or was influenced by the mystery religions come not just from Afrocentrists in recent times but have been made by others going back to the late nineteenth century.³²

The more popular claims of borrowing or influence between Christianity and the mysteries pertain to the birth/death/resurrection of Jesus Christ, Holy Communion, baptism, salvation and life in the hereafter.

²⁹ See Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa*, 1996, 94-95.

³⁰ See Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks: Did the New Testament Borrow From Pagan Thought?*, 1992, 115,

³¹ See Nash, *op. cit.*, 116 and Edwin Yamauchi, "Easter — Myth, Hallucination, or History?", in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 18, No. 12, March 15, 1974, 4-7.

³² Yamauchi names James Frazer, Hugh Schönfield, A. Loisy, et al, *op. cit.*, 4, while Nash mentions Wilhelm Bousset, Richard Reitzenstein, John Glasse, et al, *op. cit.*, 117-118.

Before responding to some of the claims of borrowing or influence we point out that it is crucial to check the dates of the documents providing the evidence of borrowing or influence and the means of the borrowing or influence plus a careful look at the details of the alleged similarities.³³

The death/resurrection of Jesus is said to be drawn from the accounts of one or other of the dying/resurrected gods, Tammuz/Dumuzi, Osiris, Adonis or Attis. What is the textual evidence though?

The allegation that Tammuz/Dumuzi was resurrected by the goddess Inanna-Ishtar is an assumption because the end of the texts concerning the myth of 'The Descent of Inanna (Ishtar) is not available.³⁴ The poem 'The Death of Dumuzi' clearly says that Inanna, far from rescuing Dumuzi, sent him to the Underworld as her substitute.³⁵

Adonis (linked with Tammuz in later writers) has no evidence of a resurrection in the early texts about him or in pictorial representations of him. "...the four texts that speak of his resurrection are quite late, dating from the second to the fourth centuries A.D."³⁶

Attis, the consort of Cybele, has no textual evidence seeing him as a resurrected god until after 150 AD.³⁷ Indeed, though the cult was the first mystery to be introduced into Rome in 204 BC, "Roman citizens were forbidden to participate until the reign of Claudius (AD 41-54), who

³³ As Lefkowitz, drawing on Robert Palter, correctly said, "Borrowing is not the only possible explanation for similar practices, because even complex ideas can be developed independently," op. cit., 89. Nash, similarly, op. cit., 121.

³⁴ Yamauchi, op. cit., 4.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 5.

³⁷ Yamauchi, op. cit., 5. See also J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, 1925, 212 and Günther Wagner, *Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries*, 1967, 265.

honoured Cybele and Attis by introducing a spring festival (held from March 22 to 27).³⁸

The major resurrected god that critics claim provided the model from which Christianity borrowed, or by which it was influenced, is the Egyptian Osiris, husband of Isis.³⁹ As the myth goes, Osiris was murdered by his brother Seth who sank the coffin with Osiris' body in the Nile. Isis discovered the body and returned it to Egypt whereupon Seth found the body and cut it into fourteen pieces and scattered these widely. Isis found every piece.

Versions of the story vary from this point on. Some versions of the myth simply have Osiris as king of the Underworld. Plutarch, writing in the second century AD has the most complete version of the myth of Osiris, including a two-fold resurrection by Isis.⁴⁰

A major problem here concerning Osiris as a model for Jesus' death and resurrection, pointed out by Yamauchi,⁴¹ is that immortality for an Egyptian does not require resurrection of the body, only that aspects of his personality like his Ba and Ka⁴² continue to hover about his body. To accomplish this, the body had to be mummified (always the case with portrayals of Osiris), food put in the coffin or depiction of food on the tomb walls and magical spells buried with the body (hence the Pyramid texts, Coffin texts or *Book of the Dead* from the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms, respectively).

³⁸ Nash, *op. cit.*, 139.

³⁹ Diop says, without supporting documentation, "[Osiris] rises from the dead to save humanity (from famine!). Osiris is the god of redemption... Osiris is the god who, three thousand years before Christ, dies and rises from the dead to save men. He is humanity's god of redemption; he ascends to heaven to sit at the right hand of his father, the great god, Ra. He is the son of God", 1991, *op. cit.*, 312.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 137, also Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, 5 and Finegan, *op. cit.*, 48-49.

⁴¹ Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, 5.

⁴² According to Finegan, "The *kha* is the gross, mortal, perishable body... The *ba*, *ka*, and *akh* are subtle, immortal elements...", *op. cit.*, 45.

Nash identifies several critical differences between Jesus' death/resurrection and the death of the gods in the mysteries. We isolate two of these for mention.

1. "Jesus' death was an actual event in history. The death of the god described in the pagan cults is a mythical drama with no historical ties; its continued rehearsal celebrates the recurring death and rebirth of nature. The incontestable fact that the early church believed that its proclamation of Jesus' death and resurrection was grounded upon what actually happened in history makes absurd any attempt to derive this belief from the mythical, nonhistorical stories of the pagan cults."⁴³
2. Jesus' death is voluntary and for others, to deal with sin, whereas death overtakes the gods of the mysteries and none dies a substitutionary death.⁴⁴

Mithraism has been alleged as the source for Christian baptism and the Eucharistic notion of eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus. In the Mithraic ritual called the *taurobolium* (when a bull is used) or *criobolium* (when a ram is used), the animal is slaughtered on a grating with the initiate beneath in a pit. The initiate would be drenched in the warm blood of the animal and would also turn the head upward to drink some of the blood.⁴⁵

⁴³ Nash, *op. cit.*, 171-172. See also A.D. Nock's similar statement, "In Christianity everything is made to turn on a dated experience of a historical Person; it can be seen from 1 Cor. XV. 3 that the statement of the story early assumed the form of a statement in a Creed. There is nothing in the parallel cases which points to any attempt to give such a basis of historical evidence to belief," cited in Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, 6.

⁴⁴ Nash, *op. cit.*, 171-172.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

There is a major dating problem for alleged influences of Mithraism on Christianity. Mithraism expanded into the West quite late. Yamauchi advises,

The only dated Mithraic inscriptions from the pre-Christian period are the texts of Antiochus I of Commagene (69-34 B.C.) in eastern Asia Minor. After that there is one text possibly from the first century A.D. from Cappadocia, one from Phrygia dated to A.D. 77-78, and one from Rome dated to Trajan's reign (A.D. 98-117). All other dated Mithraic inscriptions and monuments belong to the second century (after A.D. 140), [as well as to]the third, and the fourth century A.D.⁴⁶

Günther Wagner in a thorough and comprehensive study shows the manifest weakness of seeing the taurobolium as having influenced anything in Christianity.

The taurobolium in the Attis cult is first attested in the time of Antoninus Pius for A.D. 160. As far as we can see at present it only became a personal consecration at the beginning of the third century A.D. The idea of a rebirth through the instrumentality of the taurobolium only emerges in isolated instances towards the end of the fourth century A.D.; it is not originally associated with the blood-bath.⁴⁷

Mithraism's giving a piece of bread and a cup of water to the initiate is the closest thing to holy communion but the dates would suggest a copying from Christianity, when Mithraism competed heavily with Christianity, in the third and fourth centuries AD.

⁴⁶ Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, 5, and Nash, *op. cit.*, 154-155.

⁴⁷ In his *Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries*, 1963, 266, cited in Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, 5.

Though there is no mystery religion link alleged with them it may be helpful to deal with two charges before closing this section. First, the notion that the cross in Christianity is borrowed from the Egyptian *ankh* (a symbol of life) and second, the claim that the virgin birth, or more correctly the virginal conception of Jesus Christ, has numerous parallels prior to the first century AD.

The issue of the cross can be dismissed quite simply by noting that it was the Romans and not the early Christians who chose the cross as a means of punishment. If later Christians used the symbol of the cross, they were simply using an historical symbol that remind of Jesus' sacrificial death.

Many have read or said that the biblical idea of Jesus having been born of a virgin is not only paralleled in other cultures but is drawn from one or other of these other cultures. The argument used is that since the biblical idea is *later than* a similar idea in another culture then the gospel writers borrowed the idea from that earlier source.

This claim with its line of reasoning has been extensively examined in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by several scholars, the most accessible books being, possibly, James Orr, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 1929 and J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 1958.

These two writers highlight a few things about people who make the contention and argue the way we indicated earlier.

First, they seem unaware of the fact that neither similarity of idea nor being later in time necessarily proves dependence or borrowing. Secondly, they have been unsuccessful in showing how Matthew and Luke (Jewish-Christian in worldview and thus averse to anything smacking of heathen idolatry), came to know of and be influenced by the alleged parallel from a heathen or pagan culture. Thirdly, and most critically, they have not been able to establish a real, *historical* case of virgin birth in other cultures.

James Orr says, “With respect now to my main contention, it must strike you, I know, as strange to hear that the heathen world has no proper doctrine of a Virgin Birth—so continually are you told that pagan mythology is *full* of parallels of this kind.”⁴⁸

Orr then considers “*the popular mythological conceptions of the Greeks and Romans*” such as “the fables of Hermes, of Dionysius, of Aesculapius, of Hercules, and the like” and concludes, “A god, inflamed by lust—Zeus is a chief sinner—surprises a maiden, and has a child by her, but it is by natural generation. There is nothing here analogous to the Virgin Birth of the Gospels.”⁴⁹

The central point is the absence from the literature—*mythical*, not historical—of a virgin giving birth!

Next for consideration by Orr are “*the fables set afloat about a philosopher like Plato, or rulers like Alexander or Augustus*”.⁵⁰ Apart from the fact that the fathers and mothers of these individuals were well known, the claims made for them are not so much that their mothers were virgins but that each was sired by a god.

Plutarch, (c. AD 46 – c. 120), in one of the accounts of Alexander’s special birth, has his mother saying about her son’s boast of being a child of Zeus, “Will not Alexander cease slandering me to Hera?”

Augustus promoted the idea that Apollo was his father. The claim was that his mother fell asleep in the temple of Apollo and was visited by the god in the form of a serpent.

⁴⁸ In *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 1907, 167.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

Concerning Plato, Plutarch suggests that the begetting was before marital intercourse between Plato's parents but we are not sure of the mother's premarital behaviour. Diogenes Laertius (3rd century AD), drawing on the works of three writers before his time, including Speusippos, Plato's nephew and successor at his Academy, says that they all mention a story circulating in Athens that Plato's father, Ariston, tried unsuccessfully to get his mother, Perictione, pregnant. The god Apollo succeeded.

The central point again is the absence from the literature of a virgin giving birth!

Orr then turns his attention to "*the legend of Buddha*"⁵¹, and in passing, indicates the problems concerning the dating of traditions about the birth of the Buddha.

Machen informs,

Our earliest source of information about [Gautama's] life and teaching is found in the writings of the Pali canon...In the Pali canon, nothing is said about the birth of Gautama which could by any possibility be brought into comparison with our story of the virgin birth. But in the introduction to the *Jakata* book, **which dates from the fifth century after Christ**, we have the well-known story of the white elephant that entered the body of Maya, Buddha's [married] mother, at the time when her child was conceived.⁵² (my emphasis).

Once again the central point is the absence from the stories of a virgin giving birth!

⁵¹ Orr, op. cit., 171.

⁵² In his *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 1930, 339.

Orr closes by examining the unsuccessful attempts to find virgin birth parallels in Egypt, Babylon, Arabia and Persia.⁵³ With specific reference to Egypt it must be noted that the mythical Horus, was the son of the mythical Isis and Osiris and the issue of a virgin birth for Horus does not arise in the Egyptian myth.

Craig L. Blomberg, in his written response to a published debate between William Lane Craig and Dominic Crossan said,

...I remain unconvinced that the closest parallels to the accounts of Jesus' virginal conception and other miraculous elements of the Gospels are found in pagan mythology. With respect to the virgin birth, J. Gresham Machen disproved this theory with copious evidence more than sixty years ago, and he has not been refuted.⁵⁴

Since 'virgin birth parallels' are missing, the careful reader of Matthew and Luke must deal with the virgin birth claim against the proven backdrop of the evangelists' credibility and reliability as writers of material purporting to be history.

Let me close by saying that we must welcome all ideas, theories and claims, irrespective of how uncomfortable some of them might make us feel. What is of critical importance is that we subject all ideas, theories and claims, to logical analysis as we probe the truth-content of all such ideas, theories and claims.

⁵³ Orr, *op. cit.*, 172-176.

⁵⁴ In Paul Copan (ed.), *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?*, 1998, 106.

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