

ANSWERING MORE PRIME TIME FALLACIES

By Hank Hanegraaff

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A common refrain sung by those determined to demolish the biblical Jesus in the court of public opinion is that His death, burial, and resurrection are myths borrowed from ancient pagan mystery religions. Once reverberating primarily through the bastions of private academia, this refrain is now also commonly heard in public arenas. A classic case in point is the following conversation between ABC News's Peter Jennings and Jesus Seminar fellow Marvin Meyer:

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. So also in human life we go through a kind of death and resurrection.

Peter Jennings: Now hold it. You're saying that the mystery cults had an influence on the Jesus story because people who wrote the Jesus story took an earlier story and passed it on via Jesus?

Professor Marvin Meyer: I believe so. One of the greatest difficulties that early Christians had if they were going to cope with the reality of the crucifixion of Jesus is what do you do with that? I mean, how do you keep the movement going? How do you have some hope in the face of this kind of shameful and horrible death? And one of the things I believe that early Christians did is they took the model of the mystery religions; they took that story and retold that story as the story of Jesus.¹

Within days of this television conversation, calls, letters and e-mails began arriving at the offices of the Christian Research Institute. Christians worldwide wanted to know how to respond to such prime time propaganda. Initially, we referred people to an article by Dr. Ronald Nash featured in the *Christian Research Journal*.² As requests for information continued to flood into CRI's offices, however, I realized the need for an easy-to-remember response. I've thus organized Nash's scholarly material around the memorable acronym F-A-L-S-E.

"F" in the acronym FALSE represents the fallacy of *false cause*. As Nash aptly notes, "Arguments offered to 'prove' a Christian dependence on the mysteries illustrate the logical fallacy of false cause. This fallacy is committed whenever someone reasons that just because two things exist side by side, one of them must have caused the other. As we all should know, mere coincidence does not prove causal connection. Nor does similarity prove dependence."³ Far from being dependent on mystery religions, Christianity can be correctly traced back to the life of a real flesh and bone person named Jesus⁴ as well as to Old Testament Judaism. By way of illustration, the Lord's Supper initiated by Christ has its historical roots firmly planted in the Jewish rite of Passover.

"A" will serve to remind you of *alleged similarities*. 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. The god Osiris is supposedly murdered by his brother and buried in the Nile. The goddess Isis recovers the cadaver, only to lose it once again to her brother-in-law who cuts the body into fourteen pieces and scatters them around the world. After finding the parts, Isis "baptizes" each piece in the Nile River and

Osiris is “resurrected.” Alleged similarities as well as the terminology used to communicate them are greatly exaggerated. Parallels between the “resurrection” of Osiris and the resurrection of Christ are an obvious stretch. Likewise, Nash notes that “the fate of Osiris’s coffin in the Nile is as relevant to baptism as the sinking of Atlantis.”⁵ Sadly for the mysteries, this is as good as it gets. As Nash elaborates in his book *The Gospel And The Greeks*,⁶ other parallels cited by liberal scholars are even more far-fetched.

“L” represents *liberal revisionism*. Suffice it to say that liberal scholars are frequently guilty of employing historical revisionism in an effort to parallel Christianity with the mystery religions. Take, for example, Mithraism, in which Mithra was deemed to be a powerful mediator between humanity and the forces of darkness. As Nash observes, “The flowering of Mithraism occurred after the close of the New Testament canon, much too late for it to have influenced anything that appears in the New Testament. Moreover, no monuments for the cult can be dated earlier than A.D. 90–100, and even this dating requires us to make some exceedingly generous assumptions. Chronological difficulties, then, make the possibility of Mithraic influence on early Christianity extremely improbable.”⁷ Additionally, as Bruce Metzger explains, “It must not be uncritically assumed that the Mysteries always influenced Christianity, for it is not only possible but probable that in certain cases, the influence moved in the opposite direction.”⁸

“S” will serve to remind us of *syncretism*. The mystery religions were syncretistic in that adherents not only worshipped various pagan deities but also frequently embraced aspects of competing mystery religions while continuing to worship within their own cultic constructs. Not so in Christianity. Converts to Christ singularly placed their faith in the One who said, “I am the way and the truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Says J. Gresham Machen, “A man could become initiated into the mysteries of Isis or Mithras without at all giving up his former beliefs; but if he were to be received into the Church, according to the preaching of Paul, he must forsake all other Saviors for the Lord Jesus Christ....Amid the prevailing syncretism of the Greco-Roman world, the religion of Paul, with the religion of Israel, stands absolutely alone.”⁹

“E” represents *esotericism*. The mystery religions reduced reality to a personal experience of enlightenment. Through secret ceremonies initiates experienced an esoteric transformation of consciousness that led them to believe that they were entering into a higher realm of reality. While followers of Christ were committed to essential Christian doctrines, devotees of the mysteries worked themselves into altered states of consciousness. They were committed to the notion that experience is a better teacher than words. In fact, the reason mystery religions are so named is that they directly involve secret esoteric practices and initiation rites. Far from being rooted in history and evidence, the mysteries reveled in hype and emotionalism.

Please remember that it is not enough to use the acronym F-A-L-S-E to explode the myth that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are pagan myths borrowed from mystery religions. Apologetics — the defense of the faith — has a dual purpose. On the one hand, it involves pre-evangelism. We should thus pray that God uses our well-reasoned answers as an opportunity to share the good news that Jesus can become more real to people like Jennings and the fellows of the Jesus Seminar than the very flesh upon their bones. On the other hand, apologetics involves postevangelism. During an age in which Jesus is being demeaned in both private academia and the public arena, knowing how to defend his historicity serves to strengthen our faith.

1 Peter Jennings Reporting: *The Search for Jesus*, ABC News, 26 June 2000.

2 Ronald Nash, “Was the New Testament Influenced by Pagan Religions?” *Christian Research Journal*, Winter 1994, 8–15, retrieved from www.equip.org, 3 August 2000.

3 *Ibid.*, 14.

4 For a defense of the historicity of Jesus’ death and bodily resurrection, see Hank Hanegraaff, *Resurrection* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 2000).

5 Nash., 11.

6 Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks* (Richardson, TX: Probe Books, 1992).

7 Nash, “Was the New Testament Influenced by Pagan Religions?” 12–13. Remember that the belief in the deity and bodily resurrection of Jesus can be traced through purely historical analysis to within just a few years of Jesus’ death in the early 30s A.D. (see Hanegraaff, 38–43).

8 Bruce M. Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 11; as quoted in Nash, “Was the New Testament Influenced by Pagan Religions?” 15.

9 J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 234–35; as quoted in Nash, “Was the New Testament Influenced by Pagan Religions?” 14