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# SPECIAL

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# PRE-PUBLICATION PREVIEW

WHAT YOU WILL FIND INSIDE: • The urgent need for this updated edition • The inside story of the power and significance of *Evidence* • Sneak Peek Chapter: "Is Christianity a Copycat Religion?"

The COMPLETELY UPDATED and EXPANDED CLASSIC

# EVIDENCE

# THAT DEMANDS

# A VERDICT

LIFE-CHANGING TRUTH  
FOR A SKEPTICAL WORLD

JOSH McDOWELL  
& SEAN McDOWELL, PhD





# EVIDENCE THAT DEMANDS A VERDICT

LIFE-CHANGING TRUTH  
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**FIRST LOOK SAMPLE:  
NOT FINAL – NOT FOR RESALE**

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**FROM THE PUBLISHERS** of the completely updated and expanded edition of *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*

## How to Answer Bible Skeptics Confidently with Powerful NEW Evidence of Life-Changing Truth

I'm sure you've heard it all...

“If God is so loving, why is there so much evil in the world today?”

“How can Jesus possibly be the only way to heaven?”

“I can't believe the whole Bible is true. Where's the proof?”

“Why is Jesus' resurrection so important and what difference does it make anyway?”

Yes, the world is full of skeptics about the Bible and the Christian faith—those who are ambivalent to the Gospel...those who have been misled about the life-changing truth of God's Word...and those whose hearts have been hardened and who dismiss the Bible outright.

Yet, whether they realize it or not, God is tugging at their hearts as they search for answers about the purpose and meaning of their lives.

That's why believers must *be prepared with trustworthy answers for those around us*. Because if we don't, we may miss golden opportunities to engage in conversations...to plant some seeds...and potentially lead skeptics to faith in Christ.

And that's exactly why there's such a need today for the completely updated and expanded edition of the classic *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*.

Step-by-step, *Evidence* gives you the encouraging facts and persuasive tools you need to defend your faith in an increasingly ambivalent, secularized, and skeptical world.

## Strengthening, Encouraging, Winning People to Christ for More Than 40 years

For more than 40 years, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* has encouraged and strengthened millions of people around the world.

It has helped convince skeptics about the reliability of the Old and New Testaments. It has helped believers to deepen and articulate their faith. But more significantly, it has given believers the vital facts they need to defend God's Word and to bring people to faith in Christ.

Why has *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* been so successful? Because it is based on facts gleaned from ancient scrolls, archaeological discoveries, eye-witness accounts, corroborating testimonies, and more.

Consider this: when the first edition of *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* was first published, it was able to point to some 22,000 biblical manuscripts to support the reliability of the Bible. That's powerful evidence--no other ancient work comes close to having that kind of manuscript support. But in the years since, that number has TRIPLED. We now have *more than 66,000 biblical manuscripts and scrolls* (and counting), powerfully confirming that the Bible has been faithfully and reliably passed down through the ages.

"Christianity is a mental faith—all truth starts with knowledge," says author Josh McDowell. "Instead of feelings justifying truth, truth needs to justify our feelings."

"That is why we've been so careful to document everything so you can know it is true. Feelings are valid...feelings can be a piece of evidence. But it always must be in the context of knowledge and truth. The Bible says you should know the truth (not just have a great feeling) and the truth shall set you free."

*What is the purpose for this completely updated and expanded new edition?* "Our hearts' and minds' desire is to help people to know that truth and then how to live it out," says Josh and his son, co-author Sean McDowell, PhD.

## No question is off limits...

So give *Evidence* your toughest questions...your deepest doubts...and your most puzzling questions, and you'll find the facts you're looking for. For example:

### **How do we know that Jesus was raised from the dead?**

The overwhelming evidence for Jesus' resurrection was the strongest argument for Josh on the truth of Christianity, the scriptures, and the deity of Christ. Says Josh: "After you see this expanded chapter, I guarantee you'll share it with others."

### **How do I know I can trust the Bible?**

"The evidence for the scriptures is like a tsunami—an avalanche" says Josh. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* comprehensively documents the massive number of biblical manuscripts, and provides a compelling case for the reliability of the Bible. Armed with this data, you'll be able to quickly separate fact from fiction.

### **Are there other Gospels or texts that should have been in the Bible?**

While other so-called "gospels" were written early in the church's history, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* demonstrates that there is no reason to think that they offer a better and more accurate view of the historical Jesus than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

### **What was the fate of the apostles...were they really martyrs?**

The apostles knew Jesus intimately. Who did they believe Jesus was? Were they willing to suffer and die for that conviction? Sean's new research offers a fresh look at the men closest to Jesus, and analyzes what their willingness to suffer and die means for Christian apologetics.

### **Is the Bible historically accurate?**

Was there a historical Adam? Did the patriarchs exist? Is there evidence for the exodus? Did the conquest happen? Did David really exist? Evidence shines the light of historical and archaeological evidence on the key events and people of the Old Testament.

You'll also find eye-opening evidence on such topics as:

- The Uniqueness of the Bible
- The Historical Existence of Jesus
- Old Testament Prophecies Fulfilled in Christ
- The Deity of Jesus
- Biblically Faithful Approaches to Genesis 1
- Archaeology and the Old Testament
- The Historical Adam
- Answering Skepticism
- Are Miracles Possible?
- Clearing the Fog of Top Misconceptions about Christianity
- And more—32 thoroughly documented chapters in all, plus introductory material and appendices.

## Check Out the Evidence!

Have you ever been stumped by someone's argument against Christianity or the Bible?

Has anyone ever made fun of you because the Bible sounds like a fairy tale?

Has your faith been challenged by the steady beat of anti-Christian voices?

Then the completely updated edition of *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* is just the faith-lift you need. It's been specifically created to equip Christians to know *what* they believe, *why* it is true, and *how to live it out*.

***Evidence* is now thoroughly revised and updated from previous editions in light of new historical documentation and the best modern scholarship.** That means you'll gain new insights to deepen your faith and be better able to answer the questions and objections you'll face from skeptics today.

***Evidence* brings you all-new and expanded chapters to help you defend against the latest attacks from Christianity's critics.** No matter what the topic—evidence for the Bible's authenticity...evidence of Jesus...evidence for the accuracy of the Old Testament... evidence for truth as revealed in the Bible—this new edition is the most complete go-to source for fast, accurate answers.

***Evidence* provides an expansive defense of core truths and answers to common critiques.** Topics covered include the resurrection of Christ...the alleged contradictions in the Old Testament...the historical accuracy of the New Testament... and more. Taken together, they'll deepen your own faith and help you become a more powerful witness for the Gospel.

***Evidence* is now co-authored by Josh McDowell and his son, Sean,** adding new depth and providing sharper perspective and insight to answer questions being asked today by young and old alike.



# LEARN MORE!

VISIT [READEVIDENCE.COM](http://READEVIDENCE.COM) FOR  
A SPECIAL VIDEO MESSAGE FROM  
JOSH AND SEAN MCDOWELL.



[www.ReadEvidence.com](http://www.ReadEvidence.com)  
#ReadEvidence

## A Special Note from Sean McDowell And Interview with his father, Josh McDowell

Although I have had the privilege of working with my father on a variety of projects, updating *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* is perhaps the most special of all. While he has written or co-authored more than 150 books, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* is one of his signature works.

People regularly share with me that this book helped lead them to Christ, or if they came across the book as a believer, helped them hold on to their faith during a season of doubt. And some of the most influential evangelical scholars today, such as William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, and leading pastors, such as Skip Heitzig, consider the book formative in their own faith journeys. While apologetics books have proliferated in recent years, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, *Evidence* was one of the few based on the historicity of the biblical accounts. For many it became their “go-to” reference book for evidence-based apologetics. *Evidence* has been truly groundbreaking and trendsetting.

And this does not yet even include its international influence! Since 1972, *Evidence* has been translated into forty-four languages and published world-wide. Millions of people from South America, Asia, Australia, Africa, the Middle East, and beyond have come to rely upon *Evidence* as one of the most important apologetics books of this generation.

No wonder I ventured into this project with both enthusiasm and trepidation! It was thrilling to be able to manage the update of such a significant project, trusting that God would use it again for a new generation, yet I also felt the weight of *getting it right*. After all, so many people all over the world consider *Evidence* an authoritative source of evidence for the reliability of the Bible, the historicity of the resurrection, and the reality that Jesus was really God in human flesh.

As I considered ways to introduce this new edition, I realized there could be no better re-introduction than an interview with my father, Josh. The revisions and expansions to this present edition remain fully grounded in Josh’s own story—his reasons for writing *Evidence* in the first place and the impact the book has had on his own life and the lives of those he’s ministered to over the years.

**SEAN:** Dad, why did you first write *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*?

**JOSH:** I wrote it as a result of a struggle. I began my college years with a lot of hurt, anger, and bitterness. I was mad at my father—your grandfather—for being an alcoholic and for destroying my family. I was also angry at Wayne Bailey, the man who worked on our farm, for sexually abusing me from ages six to thirteen. I was desperately seeking happiness and meaning in life, and simply didn't know where to find it. I was successful in school, business, sports, and even campus leadership. And even though I put on a smile and acted like I had it all together, my life seemed so empty. I desperately wanted to know truth.

And yet in the university I saw this small group of people, two professors and about eight students, whose lives were different. I wanted what they had, and so I asked them what made their lives different. One girl said, "Jesus Christ," and I laughed. Her answer struck me as the stupidest thing I had ever heard. But this group challenged me to examine the claims of Christ intellectually.

I am certainly not the smartest person in the world, but I am responsible to use my intellect to discover truth to the utmost. So I took up their challenge, and to my amazement came to the conclusion that God did manifest himself through the Scriptures and the person of Christ.

Once I came to this intellectual conviction, I began to strategize about how I could share the things I discovered with others. For thirteen years after becoming a Christian, I both shared my faith and continued to research. Eventually, I brought together a team of students from a variety of universities to work with me. They would research all day, and then I would collate their findings at night. Out of those years of work came *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*.

And yet no one wanted to publish it! I broke almost every principle of publishing, such as including lengthy quotes with full documentation. People told me that it wouldn't sell and that no one would read it. It took me nearly a year to type out the manuscript on an electric typewriter. I checked and double-checked footnotes and yet still made some mistakes. I finally published it on a Friday morning, and by that evening, it was already selling out. And it continued to sell at a feverish rate for years.

Now there are some incredible apologetics books by people like Ravi Zacharias, Lee Strobel, Frank Turek, J. Warner Wallace, and others. But there

was almost nothing like it when I first wrote *EVIDENCE*.

**SEAN:** What is one of your favorite stories about the impact of *Evidence*?

**JOSH:** Probably my favorite stories come from overseas—from places like the Middle East and South Korea. One year *Evidence* was chosen by secular publishers as the book of the year in South Korea. Honors like this are so exciting because they mean that the book is influencing lives by motivating people to dig deeper into the Scriptures.

A man walked into a Christian bookstore in an Arabic-speaking country. “I want your best book on the defense of Christianity.” The book store manager handed him *Evidence That Demands A Verdict* in Arabic. As the man left he exclaimed, “I’m doing my dissertation on destroying Christianity.” Six months later the storeowner baptized the student who had become a believer.

**SEAN:** How has culture changed since you first wrote *Evidence* in the early 1970s?

**JOSH:** When I first wrote *Evidence*, there was very limited access to information. Today there is an overload of truth claims. In the 1970s, people were exposed to ideas by their parents, friends, teachers in school, and then eventually professors in the university. But there wasn’t the internet, where people now have endless access to unfiltered information.

Also, when I first wrote *Evidence*, people wanted proof for their beliefs. People wanted evidence. And then it began to switch about ten to fifteen years ago. It used to be that when I made a truth claim at a university, students would say, “How do you know that’s true? Give us some proof.” But then students started saying, “What right do you have to make that claim? You are an intolerant bigot.” Culture has gravitated away from the essence of truth to the emotion of the individual. Essentially, culture has moved from valuing substance to valuing form.

**SEAN:** How do you intend *Evidence* to be used?

**JOSH:** I wrote *Evidence* as a resource book for individuals and families.

According to his wife, legendary Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry would read *Evidence* for fifteen minutes every night before bed, including the night before the Super Bowl. But he's an exception. *Evidence* is a thick book that is heavy with content. I wrote it to be a resource for individuals and families to walk through together, so they could be confident that there is a lot of evidence for Christianity and know where to find answers to common objections.

**SEAN: What is your goal for this new version?**

**JOSH:** The goal for this new version is the same as the first one: *to give people a reference book that spurs them toward truth and greater confidence in Scripture and the desire to know truth.* My hope is that *Evidence* continues to be a foundational book for pastors, teachers, parents, students, youth workers, and other Christians who want to have confidence about their own faith and be ready to give an answer for their faith.

**SEAN: What role did the evidence play in your personal journey to Christ?**

**JOSH:** My biggest objection to Christianity was that it was not true. But once I checked out the evidence firsthand, I realized that Christianity is true. Encountering the evidence was one of the biggest factors that led me to consider the claims of Christ. Through wrestling with the evidence, I learned that faith is meant to go along with evidence, not run contrary to it.

But, despite what many people think, it wasn't the evidence that brought me to Christ. What brought me to Christ was an understanding of the love of God. Jeremiah 31:3 says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you" (ESV). What brought me to Christ was the realization that if I were the only one in the world, Christ still would have died for me.

My ultimate problem wasn't intellectual—it was emotional. I had bitterness and hatred for my father because he was an alcoholic and destroyed my family. The sexual abuse I experienced for seven years from another older male in my life just compounded the hurt. Given my father's failures, it brought me no joy to hear that a heavenly Father supposedly loved me. Every time someone mentioned a "heavenly father," it didn't bring joy--it brought pain. I could

not decipher the difference between a heavenly father and an earthly father because in my world and in my experience, fathers hurt people. So I wanted nothing to do with God. I never even considered the message of Christianity until I was convinced that it was true. Evidence brought me to the point of considering how the Christian message might apply to my own life. It was the evidence that first caught my attention, but it was an understanding of the love of God, as I mentioned above, that ultimately drew me to trust and follow Christ.

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It truly was a joy and privilege to partner with my father, and dozens of students and scholars, on this project. God has used this book in remarkable ways over the past half century. My prayer is that God will continue to use it to ground believers with confidence in their faith and to help seekers discover how much God truly cares for them and desires to know them personally. I hope you find this edition faithful to the original spirit of *Evidence* but also updated for a new generation.

**Exclusive Sneak Peak Chapter:**

# IS CHRISTIANITY A COPYCAT RELIGION?

## **CHAPTER OVERVIEW:**

- I. Introduction
- II. Background: Religious Plagiarism?
- III. Nature and Features of Mystery Religions
  - A. Cyclical View of Time
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- V. Five Reasons the Mystery Religions Did Not Influence Christianity
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## Chapter 11: IS CHRISTIANITY A COPYCAT RELIGION?

### I. Introduction

As a young man growing up in a Christian home, I (Sean) had little reason to question the teachings of my parents. Christianity made sense, and I knew my parents loved me and wanted the best for me. But when I entered college, I encountered new and challenging people and ideas. One idea, which completely caught me off guard, was the idea that Christianity was borrowed from ancient pagan mystery religions. In other words, Christianity was nothing more than a patchwork of pagan and mystery religions stitched together to create a copycat religion.

This objection was one factor that spun me into a mild faith crisis. Now I can look back and see the frivolity of this objection, but at the time it was quite unsettling. And I was certainly not alone in wondering whether Christianity is really true. This same idea and ideas like it have been popularized in movies such as *Zeitgeist*, *The Da Vinci Code*, and *Religulous*. In fact, *Religulous* states it this way:

Written in 1280 BC, the Egyptian Book of the Dead describes a god, Horus. Horus is the son of the god Osiris born to a virgin mother. He was baptized in a river by Anup the Baptizer who was later beheaded. Like Jesus, Horus was tempted while alone in the desert, healed the sick, the blind, cast out demons, and walked on water. He raised Asar from the dead. “Asar” translates to “Lazarus.” Oh yeah, he also had 12 disciples. Yes, Horus was crucified first and after 3 days, two women announced Horus the savior of humanity had been resurrected.<sup>1</sup>

While it is tempting to write off these works as inconsequential, the ideas they peddle continue to have sweeping influence. The cover of Dan Brown’s book claims it has sold more than eighty million copies. Copycat arguments appear frequently on the Internet. We regularly receive questions about this objection from both students and adults. Although the “mythicist” position is almost entirely rejected

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<sup>1</sup>*Religulous*, Larry Charles, Santa Monica: Lionsgate, 2008. The text is superimposed over the film roughly between 53–57 minutes into the film. Also, to help reinforce the text, The Bangles’ “Walk Like an Egyptian” is playing in the background at this point in the film.



in academic circles, it continues to have an influence on the wider public and warrants a response.

## II. Background: Religious Plagiarism?

The regions surrounding the Mediterranean world gave birth to several mystery religions and cults. In broad terms, these religions can be divided into two groups: (1) state or civil religions, which achieved a certain level of cult status, and (2) private, or individualistic, religions. Philosopher Ronald Nash provides a quick sketch of the mystery religions:

Out of Greece came the cults of Demeter and Dionysus, as well as their later developments, the Eleusinian and Orphic mystery religions. Asia Minor (more specifically, the region known as Phrygia) gave birth to the cult of Cybele and Attis. The cult of Isis and Osiris (later Serapis) originated in Egypt, while Syria and Palestine saw the rise of the cult of Adonis. Finally, Persia (Iran) was a leading early locale for the cult of Mithras. (Nash, GG, 106)

Because these religions were practiced during the formative years of Christianity, questions arose: Did early Christians copy or borrow certain rituals and key concepts from these pagan religions and weave them into Christianity in order to make their religion more appealing to potential converts? Did Christianity plagiarize these mystery religions? Are there any aspects genuinely unique to Christianity? An exploration of these questions became a factor in the conversions to Christianity of two major figures of the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis.

The charge that Christianity plagiarized from surrounding pagan religions came to the fore in the late nineteenth century and became prominent in academic circles at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1890 Sir James G. Fraser, a cultural anthropologist, first published *The Golden Bough*, a study of the similarities among ancient religions (especially Eastern Mediterranean examples) that worshiped a mythical god who died each year at harvest along with the vegetation and then revived with the new planting of the next agricultural cycle. Ceremonies were meant to hurry and celebrate his reviving and return.

According to Fraser, among some of these pagan groups, a “fisher-king” was thought of as the incarnation of the god, so he also would decline in vitality. King, god, and the land all needed reviving. Fraser’s book raised an outcry, for it included Christianity among the dying-and-rising-god religions. Yet Fraser expanded the book in later editions (1900 and then 1906–15, when it had grown to twelve volumes), which suggests the general interest in the book and its impact upon the academic community. The publication dates reflect the new century’s confidence (in concert with Fraser) that science would eclipse religion, providing wonderful new inventions for comfort and mobility and entertainment. The thought was that cultural interests could eclipse Christianity.

Jessie Weston popularized Fraser’s study of the patterns shared by these religions with her argument that the tales of King Arthur and the Grail were the link between ancient pagan rituals and Christian teaching about the role of Christ and communion. (She declared in *From Ritual to Romance* that the Grail—the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper—had its origins in fertility symbols from these ancient religions.) So Christianity came to be viewed as a weak copycat religion to people delighted by the new century’s inventions and global empires.

World War I rocked that confidence, and the poet T. S. Eliot describes the bleak aftermath of the war in *The Waste Land*, a poem that weaves together the postwar jazz and city gossip with layers of history and echoes of these ancient myths (such as the cult of Adonis, but also adding in some Buddhist and Hindu tales). Further, he includes many fragmentary quotations from the Old and New Testaments as well as imagery that alludes to events described in Scripture, such as the Exodus and Jesus’ arrest in Gethsemane. Eliot was asking what a person might believe—and he presented the situation so vividly that students at Oxford University are said to have declaimed on the street memorized passages of the poem soon after it was published.

Five years later, Eliot was baptized as a Christian. Since that fascination a century ago, the idea that Christianity has plagiarized from surrounding pagan religions has been largely rejected by the academic community but it still hangs around as a vague idea in popular culture.

Ronald Nash observes:

During a period of time running roughly from about 1890–1940, scholars often alleged that primitive Christianity had been influenced by Platonism,

Stoicism, the pagan mystery 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 scholars and classical authors. Today most Bible scholars see the question as a dead issue. (Nash, GG, 1)

### III. Nature and Features of Mystery Religions

We have limited information about the mystery religions, partly because of a vow of secrecy imposed upon the initiates. Their beliefs and practices also varied from place to place and from time to time. What follows is an overview of what is known about those mythologies. We highlight three key features of the mystery religions and then contrast them with Christianity, demonstrating enormous worldview differences between the two.

#### A. Cyclical View of Time

Mystery religions were based on a cyclical view of time. Nash notes,

Central to the mysteries was their use of the annual vegetation cycle, in which life renewed each spring and dies each fall. Followers of the mystery cults found deep symbolic significance in the natural process of growth, death, decay, and rebirth. (Nash, GG, 113)

The mystery deities were tightly bound up in and correlated to the annual vegetation cycle, so this was a repetitive, yearly process. N. T. Wright observes, "These multifarious and sophisticated cults enacted the god's death and resurrection as a *metaphor*, whose concrete referent was the cycle of seed-time and harvest, of human reproduction and fertility." (Wright, RSG, 80)

#### B. Secret Ceremonies

The inner workings of the mystery religions are not well documented and available in the public domain. Both the rites they participated in and the knowledge

they passed to their initiates were closely guarded, accessible only to those who were accepted into the group. Outsiders had little to no knowledge of what transpired. According to Nash,

[Each] mystery religion made important use of secret ceremonies, often in connection with an initiation rite. The mystery rites tied the initiates together at the same time they separated them from outsiders... Whatever place particular mysteries allowed knowledge to have in their cult, it was a secret, or esoteric, knowledge, attainable only by the initiated and never revealed to those outside the circle of the religion. While several cults did stress the role of knowledge in achieving redemption, the term referred not so much to the cognizance of a set of truths as to a 'higher knowledge' associated with their secret ceremonies. (Nash, GG, 113)

Samuel Angus, former professor of New Testament and church history at St. Andrews College, University of Sydney, notes that every mystery religion "imparted a 'secret,' a special knowledge of the life of the deity and the means of union with that deity. There was a sacred tradition of ritual and cult usages expounded by [interpreters] and handed down by a succession of priests or teachers." (Angus, MR, 53)

### **C. Doctrine Minimized**

Mystery religions did not place a high premium on intellect, truth, or doctrinal soundness. They were less concerned about having correct teaching (orthodoxy) and intellectual rigor than about feeding and exciting the emotions of their initiates and followers. According to Angus,

Thus the Mysteries, with the exception of the Hermetic theology and Orphism, were never conspicuously doctrinal or dogmatic: they were weak intellectually and theologically. (Angus, MR, 61)

Angus also observes, "Speaking generally, the Mysteries made their appeal not to the intellect, but through eye, ear, and imagination to the emotions." (Angus, MR, 59)

Nash concurs:

The mysteries had little if any use for doctrine or correct belief. They were primarily concerned with the emotional state of their followers... The mysteries used many different means to affect the emotions and imaginations of their followers in order to quicken their union with the god: processions, fasting, a play, acts of purification, blazing lights, and esoteric liturgies. (Nash, GG, 114)

Once the followers achieved union with their god through trumped-up emotions, two other goals became the focus of the mystery religions: salvation (or redemption) and immortality.

The immediate goal of the initiates was a mystical experience that led them to feel that they had achieved union with their god. But beyond this quest for a mystical union were two more ultimate goals: some kind of redemption, or salvation, and immortality. The initiation ceremony was supposed to end the alienation of the *mystes* (initiate) from his god, making possible communion with the deity and eventual triumph over death. (Nash, GG, 114)

Angus goes a little more in depth on this point:

A Mystery-Religion was a religion of Redemption which professed to remove estrangement between man and God, to procure forgiveness of sins, to furnish mediation. Means of purification and formulae of access to God, and acclamations of confidence and victory were part of the apparatus of every Mystery....These redemption-religions thus promised salvation and provided the worshiper with a patron deity in life and death. This salvation consisted in release from the tyranny of Fate, alleviation from the burdens and limitations of existence, comfort in the sorrows of man's lot, a real identification with his god guaranteeing *palingenesia* (rebirth), and hope beyond. (Angus, MR, 50, 52)

Angus' analysis of the salvation offered in these religions makes clear their appeal to people who were otherwise helpless before an implacable Fate and the erratic

will of often capricious gods. Angus’s analysis also identifies something that T. S. Eliot recognized as a truth evident in tragic drama but missing in various religions—the horrifying realization of objective morality, that is, of the tragic flaw of sin in human life and the need for the conclusive work of a redeemer. (Both the New Testament and Aristotle in his writing about the Greek tragedies use the same Greek word for sin and error: *hamartia*.)<sup>2</sup>

## IV. Contrast with Christianity

The mystery religions promoted a cyclical view of time, held secret ceremonies, and placed little emphasis on doctrine. In sharp contrast, Christianity is a

historically based religion, with public proclamations; it places emphasis on true belief and biblically virtuous behavior. We will now consider each of these points in turn.

### A. Historically Based

None of the other so-called resurrected gods of the mystery religions is a genuine historical figure. In contrast, Jesus is depicted in the Bible as a real historical person. The Gospel accounts contain many anchors that hold in place, so to speak, vessels full of evidential treasures for anyone to examine, especially for those who wonder about the truth of Christianity.

Ed Komoszewski, James Sawyer, and Daniel Wallace observe,

What makes Christianity unique ... is that it is grounded in history. More specifically, the Christian faith rests on the person of Jesus Christ as a real, historical man. The notion that God became man in space-time history, that he lived among us, that he died on a Roman cross and rose from the dead is the core of the Christian proclamation. Indeed, one implication of the Incarnation—of God becoming man—is that the Incarnation invites us and even requires us to examine its historical credibility. The Gospels

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<sup>2</sup>Cleo McNelly Kearns writes in *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions* about Eliot’s response to his doctoral studies in Eastern religions (for which Eliot learned to read Sanskrit): “Eliot’s fundamental objection to Indic religion was what he saw as its failure to understand the fundamental reality of human sin.” (Kearns, TSEAIT, 138) This lack of hope seems to be the reason that Hindu thought, like the mystery religions, perceives time as an endlessly repeated cycle. V. S. Naipaul has suggested in *The Wounded Civilization* that this frame of thought lies behind much of the suffering in India. In contrast, the New Testament book of Hebrews proclaims the finality of Christ’s sacrifice as the answer to repeated cycles of sacrifice (Heb. 7:26–28).

go to great lengths to speak to the where, who, and when of Jesus' ministry. They practically beg the reader to check out the data, to see if these things are so. (Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, RJ, 220)

For instance, consider a few passages that clearly indicate the historical nature of the biblical account:

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

Luke 3:1–3 ESV

*And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.*

1 Corinthians 15:14–17 ESV

## **B. Public Proclamation**

While the early Christians were known for certain “insider” rituals like baptism, the Eucharist, and prayers, these were not practiced solely in secret but were performed and proclaimed in public. (In the early church, inquirers were welcome to attend the preaching portion of the service as learners, but they did not take part in the communion (Eucharist or Lord’s Supper) until after their baptism.) This public proclamation of Christianity is made clear in several passages of Scripture.

*Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that 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. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.*

Acts 2:22–24 ESV

*So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.*

Matthew 10:32, 33 ESV

*For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.*

2 Peter 1:16 ESV

Christianity was a very public religion, and oftentimes its being a public religion got its adherents into serious trouble. For instance, the apostles were threatened, beaten, and put in prison for publicly proclaiming the gospel (see Acts 4:1–3; 5:17–42).

### **C. Doctrine Matters**

While the mystery religions emphasized emotional experiences over doctrine, the Christian Scriptures emphasize teaching and believing:

*You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul.... You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth. For if you will be careful to do all this commandment that I command you to do, loving the Lord your God, walking in all his ways, and holding*



*fast to him, then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations greater and mightier than you.*

Deuteronomy 11:18–23 ESV

*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

Matthew 28:18–20 ESV

*He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*

Titus 1:9 ESV

## **V. Five Reasons the Mystery Religions Did Not Influence Christianity**

### **A. Reason #1: True to its Jewish roots, Christianity did not accept other gods.**

#### *1. Jews were committed to an exclusive faith.*

Unlike the Gentiles of that era, Jews refused to blend their religion with other religions (syncretism). Mystery religions were *inclusive*, but Judaism and Christianity were *exclusive*. Generally speaking, Jews intensely resisted pagan ideas. In his *Antiquity of the Jews*, first-century Jewish historian Josephus relays the following story of the Romans attempting to enforce Roman standards on the Jews and their response to Pilate and his troops:

But now Pilate, the procurator of Judea, removed the army from Cesarea to Jerusalem, to take their winter quarters there, in order to abolish the Jewish laws. So he introduced Caesar’s effigies, which were upon the ensigns, and brought them into the city; whereas our law forbids us the very making of images; on which account the former procurators were wont to make their entry into the city with such ensigns as had not those ornaments. Pilate was the first who brought those images to Jerusalem, and set them up there; which was done without the knowledge of the people, because it was done in the nighttime; but as soon as they

knew it, they came in multitudes to Cesarea, and interceded with Pilate many days, that he would remove the images; and when he would not grant their requests, because it would tend to the injury of Caesar, while yet they persevered in their request, on the sixth day he ordered his soldiers to have their weapons privately, while he came and sat upon his judgment seat, which seat was so prepared in the open place of the city, that it concealed the army that lay ready to oppress them; and when the Jews petitioned him again, he gave a signal to the soldiers to encompass them round, and threatened that their punishment should be no less than immediate death, unless they would leave off disturbing him, and go their ways home. But they threw themselves upon the ground, and laid their necks bare, and said they would take their death very willingly, rather than the wisdom of their laws should be transgressed; upon which Pilate was deeply affected with their firm resolution to keep their laws inviolable, and presently commanded the images to be carried back from Jerusalem to Cesarea. (Josephus, WFJ, 18:55–59)

Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace observe:

The first-century Jewish mind-set loathed syncretism. Unlike the Gentiles of this era, Jews refused to blend their religion with other religions. Gentile religions were not exclusive; one could be a follower of several different gods at one time. But Judaism was strictly monotheistic, as was Christianity. As the gospel spread beyond the borders of Israel, the apostles not only found themselves introducing people to the strange idea of a man risen from the dead; they also came face-to-face with a polytheistic culture. But they made no accommodation on this front. (Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, RJ, 233)

2. *Paul maintained and taught devotion to the one true God both before and after his dramatic conversion.*

Paul, trained as an orthodox Jew, would have been unwilling to compromise orthodoxy with pagan mythology.

*Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

Philippians 3:5–7 ESV

*And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.*

Galatians 1:14 ESV

Significantly, Paul in these passages and in his defense when on trial describes his strict training by the Pharisees—but explains that he was transformed only when and because he realized that the risen Christ was indeed the promised Messiah (Phil. 3:8–10; Gal. 1:15, 22, 23; Acts 24:14, 15; 26:5–23).

**B. Reason #2: The differences between Christianity and mystery religions are greater than the similarities.**

In *The Jesus Legend*, Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd write:

[As] soon as we become critical of reading parallels into the evidence, we discover that the differences between Christianity and the mystery religions are far more pronounced than any similarities. While there are certainly parallel *terms* used in early Christianity and the mystery religions, there is little evidence for parallel *concepts*. For example... both Christianity and the mystery religions spoke of salvation—as do many religions throughout history. But what early Christians meant by this term had little in common with what devotees of mystery religions meant by it. To site just one difference, there was in the mystery religions nothing similar to Paul’s idea that disciples participate in the death and resurrection of their Savior and are adopted as God’s children by placing their trust in him. (Boyd and Eddy, JL, 142)

J. Gresham Machen describes the myth of Cybele and Attis:

According to the [myth’s] most characteristic form, the youthful Attis,

beloved by Cybele, is struck with madness by the jealous goddess, deprives himself of his virility, dies through his own mad act, and is mourned by the goddess. The myth contains no account of a resurrection; all that Cybele is able to obtain is that the body of Attis should be preserved, that his hair should continue to grow, and that his little finger should move. (Machen, OPR, 227–228)

Osiris is another figure often considered a “dying and rising god.” In reality, the earliest accounts have him leading a life beyond the tomb that nearly replicates earthly life. He actually rules over the land of the dead and will never again be among the living. And perhaps most significantly, Egyptians did not believe in bodily resurrection. (Yamauchi, LDA, 22, 27) It is quite a stretch to conclude that Christians could have borrowed from this tradition in formulating their first doctrines of Jesus.

### **C. Reason #3: Parallels comparing the two prove nothing.**

What if we told you about a British ocean liner that was about eight hundred feet long, weighed more than sixty thousand tons, and could carry about three thousand passengers? The ship had a top cruising speed of twenty-four knots, had three propellers, and about twenty lifeboats. What if I told you that this ocean liner hit an iceberg on its maiden voyage in the month of April, tearing an opening in the starboard side, forward portion of the ship, sinking it along with about two thousand passengers? Would you recognize the event from history? You might say, “Hey, that’s the *Titanic!*” Well, believe it or not, you would be wrong. It’s the *Titan*, a fictional ship described in Morgan Robertson’s 1898 book called *The Wreck of the Titan: or Futility*. This book was written fourteen years before the disaster took place, and several years before construction began on the *Titanic!* (Robertson, WT, website)

Here is the point: just as the fictional account of the *Titan* does not undermine the reality of the sinking of the *Titanic*, fictional accounts of dying and rising gods would not undermine the historical reality of the life, death, and resurrection

of Jesus. The presence of parallels alone proves nothing about borrowing or the historicity of Jesus.

**D. Reason #4: Mystery religions seem to be influenced by Christianity, not the other way around.**

Eddy and Boyd tackle the “parallel” claim by investigating the dating:

A second obstacle to any attempt to understand first-century Christianity in light of ancient Greco-Roman mystery religions is that virtually all of our evidence for these religions comes from the second to fourth centuries.... Trying to explain a first-century religious movement by appealing to evidence for a “parallel” phenomenon a century or more later is questionable, to say the least. True, it is not unreasonable to assume that there were first-century precursors to the mystery cults of the second century and beyond. But this is an argument from silence, and in any case we are left with nothing conclusive about these precursor movements. Hence, any argument that Christianity was influenced by, let alone modeled after, these precursors must be judged as unwarranted speculation grounded in anachronism. (Boyd and Eddy, JL, 139–140)

Nash tells us about a ritual called the “taurobolium,” Christian rituals likely influenced the cult of Cybele, one of the mystery religions. During this ritual,

initiates would stand or recline in a pit as a bull was slaughtered on a platform above them. The initiate would then be bathed in the warm blood of the dying animal. The taurobolium has been alleged to be a source for Christian language about being washed in the blood of the lamb (Rev.7:14) or sprinkled with the blood of Jesus (1 Peter 1:2). (Nash, GG, 143)

Could this pagan ritual have influenced the biblical writers? The core problem is the dating of the ritual, which first appeared in the West in the second century *after* the emergence of Christian teaching. Nash continues: “All of the extant evidence points to a chronology that makes it impossible for the taurobolium to have influenced first-century Christianity. Moreover, the evidence supports the

hypothesis that the later changes in the blood bath reflect a Christian influence. It is clear, then, that the New Testament emphasis on the shedding of blood should not be traced to any pagan source. The New Testament teaching should be viewed in the context of its Old Testament background—the Passover and temple sacrifices.” (Nash, GG, 146)

Fielding the question of who might have influenced whom, Eddy and Boyd conclude:

The crucial point here is that if there was any line of influence, it would seem more reasonable to argue that it was from Christianity to the mystery religions rather than the other way around. (Boyd and Eddy, JL, 140)

Finally, T. N. D. Mettinger, a senior Swedish scholar and professor at Lund University, wrote in *The Riddle of Resurrection* that there is near universal consensus that there were no dying and rising gods that predated Christianity (although he personally believes there may have been some exceptions):

There is, as far as I am aware, no *prima facie* evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct, drawing on the myths and rites of the dying and rising gods of the surrounding world. While studied with profit against the background of Jewish resurrection belief, the faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus retains its unique character in the history of religions. The riddle remains. (Mettinger, RR, 221)

## **E. Reason #5: The death of Jesus is unique.**

The death of Jesus is strikingly different from the deaths of various gods of the mystery religions. (see Nash, GG, 160–161)

### *1. The deaths of pagan gods were not sacrificial.*

According to Christianity, Jesus’ death was sacrificial. His death literally substituted his righteousness for the sins of each individual who has put his or her faith in Jesus. He takes on their sin and shields them from punishment so that they will not have to bear it (see John 10:11; 15:13; 1 John 3:16).

With regard to the mystery religions, Nash writes: “None of the so-called savior-gods died for someone else. The notion of the Son of God dying in place of His creatures is unique to Christianity.” (Nash, GG, 160)

*2. Jesus died for the sins of everyone.*

Jesus did far more than just die on behalf of his friends. He specifically died for the sins of his friends and followers and all those who would believe in him in the future (see Rom. 3:23–26; 1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:14, 15, 17–19, 21; Gal. 1:3, 4). Nash provides the contrast: “Only Jesus died for sin. It is never claimed that any of the pagan deities died for sin.” (Nash, GG, 160)

*3. Jesus died only once.*

The deaths of the mystery religion gods were cyclical in nature, but Jesus is never represented in Scripture as dying, rising, dying, rising, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*, that is, the nauseous recoil comes from a despair that there is no hope of escaping the repetition of the yearly cycle in which vegetation dies, kings decline and die, and people live toward death. The biblical pattern is that Jesus died once for all and came to give life abundant (see Heb. 7:27; 9:25–28; 10:10–14; John 10:10). However, the “mystery gods were vegetation deities whose repeated death and resuscitation depicted the annual cycle of nature.” (Nash, GG, 161)

*4. Jesus' death was a historical event.*

The death of Jesus was not some made-up tale told by his followers in order to start a new religious movement. His death is grounded in history, supported by strong historical evidence (see Acts 2:22, 23; 1 Cor. 15:14, 17; 2 Peter 1:16). Chapter 10 of *Evidence* examines this understanding.

Nash's following statement supports this point:

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 pagan cults. (Nash, GG, 161)

### *5. Jesus' death was voluntary.*

Jesus made it plain that he would lay down his life at a time of his own choosing. (John 12:20–33) Although the gospel accounts tell us that the religious leaders attempted to arrest and kill Jesus, he always slipped away from them and thwarted their plans because it was not yet the right time (see John 7:30; 10:17, 18; 19:10, 11). But when he knew the time had come, he quietly submitted to being arrested in the garden of Gethsemane (John 13:1; Luke 22:47–53).

Ronald Nash comments: “Unlike the mystery gods, Jesus died voluntarily. Nothing like the voluntary death of Jesus can be found in the mystery cults.” (Nash, GG, 161)

Machen contrasts the death of Jesus with the “dying and rising” mystery gods:

One difference, of course, is perfectly obvious and is indeed generally recognized—the Pauline Christ is represented as dying voluntarily, and dying for the sake of men. He “loves me,” says Paul, “and gave himself for me.” There is absolutely nothing like that conception in the case of the pagan religions. Osiris, Adonis, and Attis were overtaken by their fate; Jesus gave His life freely away. The difference is stupendous; it involves the very heart of the religion of Paul. (Machen, OPR, 315)

### *6. Jesus' death ended in victory, not defeat.*

The historical record regarding Jesus does not end on a bloody cross or in a rock cut tomb. It ends with an empty tomb on an early Sunday morning and his ascension. The resurrection provides hope and the promise of eternal life. The end is triumph, not tragedy (see 1 Cor. 15:54, 55).

Contrasting Christ's death and resurrection with the mystery religions and their dying gods, Nash writes:

And finally, Jesus' death was not a defeat but a triumph. Christianity stands entirely apart from the pagan mysteries in that its report of Jesus' death is a message of triumph. Even as Jesus was experiencing the pain and humiliation of the cross, He was the victor. The New Testament's mood of exultation contrasts sharply with that of the mystery religions, whose followers wept and mourned for the terrible fate that overtook their gods. (Nash, GG, 161)



## VI. Conclusion: Myth Becomes Fact

The resurrection of Jesus, as we have seen, was a unique event in world history. There is no compelling reason to think the first Christians borrowed concepts from the mystery religions to concoct the Christian faith.

Nevertheless, there are vague hints of gods who visit humankind, die, and rise to bring them to victory. Humphrey Carpenter, in *The Inklings*, relates this vital conversation about the vague hints in these old religions, despite their errors: On Saturday night, September 19, 1931, in Oxford, England, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis went walking with a friend (Hugo Dyson) and discussed these myths when “a sudden rush of wind” prompted Tolkien to remark that the trees and the stars revealed how people once imagined a world that was alive, “myth-woven.”

Lewis, not yet a Christian but no longer an atheist, responded that myths are lies, powerfully written and crucial to the history of language and literature, but not for believing. Tolkien argued that even when humans lie, our human thoughts and imaginations must reflect something of our Creator— that the myth-making storyteller is “fulfilling God’s purpose, and reflecting a splintered fragment of the true light.” That led to a conversation on Christianity. Lewis knew well the mythical emphasis on sacrifice and blood, and “indeed he had examined the historicity of the gospels” enough to be “nearly certain that it really happened” and to recognize that the New Testament centered on words such as “sacrifice” and “the blood of the Lamb.” But, he wondered, “What was the point of it all? How could the death and resurrection of Christ” have ‘saved the world?’”

Tolkien’s response was that the old pagan stories of a dying god provided a clue: They were in fact “God using the images of their ‘mythopoeia’ [story-making] to express fragments of his eternal truth.” But with Christianity, “the enormous difference [was] that the poet who invented it was God Himself, and the images he used were real men and actual history.... Here is the real Dying God, with a precise location in history and definite historical consequences. The old myth has become a fact.” Within two weeks, Lewis wrote, “I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ—in Christianity....My long night talk with Dyson and Tolkien has a good deal to do with it.” (Carpenter, TI, 42–45, emphasis in original)

Despite the enormous difference between these pagan mystery religions and the New Testament, C. S. Lewis makes an important observation:

We should, therefore, expect to find in the imagination of the great Pagan teachers and myth makers some glimpse of that theme which we believe to be the very plot of the whole cosmic story—the theme of incarnation, death, and rebirth. And the differences between the Pagan Christs (Balder, Osiris, etc.) and the Christ Himself is much what we should expect to find. The Pagan stories are all about someone dying and rising, either every year, or else nobody knows where and nobody knows when. The Christian story is about a historical personage, whose execution can be dated pretty accurately, under a named Roman magistrate, and with whom the society that He founded is in a continuous relation down to the present day. It is not the difference between falsehood and truth. It is the difference between a real event on the one hand and dim dreams or premonitions of that same event on the other. (Lewis, ITP, 128–129)



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