

JESUS CHRIST—UNIQUE SAVIOR OR AVERAGE FRAUD? [PART I]

Kyle Butt, M.A. and Bert Thompson, Ph.D.

The freshman college student walked into his first class of *Comparative Religions 101*. He had come to the university prepared—or so he thought—for whatever college might throw at him. After all, he was a faithful Christian, and had been reared by dedicated Christian parents who, throughout his upbringing, had taught him about the unique, heaven-sent, virgin-born, miracle-working, resurrected-from-the-dead Son of God that he revered, served, and loved. His Bible class teachers, and the ministers to whose sermons he had listened for the past eighteen years, similarly had reinforced in his mind the concept that there was **no one** in the entire history of the world quite like Jesus Christ. In fact, truth be told, the young student had grown up thinking that no one even came close to resembling, or imitating, the carpenter's son from Nazareth.

This young student, however, was about to receive the shock of his life. Practically the first day of class, the professor began to recite a slew of similar stories about various “saviors” of other religions from the past—many of whom, supposedly, also were born of virgins, were able to perform miracles, were crucified to save mankind, and were resurrected after their deaths. This freshman was ill prepared to hear his professor suggest that **the story of Jesus Christ as the Savior of mankind is not totally unique**. In fact, he was completely astonished as he watched the professor document the fact that stories with similar heroes had circulated decades—and even centuries—before Jesus of Nazareth was born.

As he saw what he believed to be the uniqueness of His Lord essentially evaporate before his very eyes, the young man began to wonder: Had he been taught incorrectly? Was Jesus **really** the unique Son of God, or was He simply one among many characters of the past who **claimed** to be a unique, personal savior but who, in the end, was not? Who were these other allegedly “unique saviors”? Were they as distinctive as they, or their followers, claimed? And how do such claims impact the Bible's teachings about, and a person's individual faith in, Jesus Christ as the Son of God?

During his struggle to cope with the new information that was being presented so eloquently (and so forcefully!) by his professor, this young man encountered what is known as “cognitive dissonance”—the confusion one experiences when presented with new information that contradicts what he or she believes to be true. As he struggled for consistency, the young man realized that he either had to abandon what he believed to be true, or somehow disprove (and thereby discount) the new, challenging information.

The more he pored over the matter, the more likely—and unsettling—the first option seemed to become. And the more impossible the second seemed to appear. Left unchecked, his struggle would reach the level of full-blown doubt, and his confidence in the singular uniqueness of the Savior he had loved and obeyed for so long would disappear completely. How could he be helped—or could he? Was the material to which he

was being exposed trustworthy? Or could it be refuted—thus leaving his personal faith in Christ intact? The answers to these questions form the basis of this two-part series of articles on “Jesus Christ—Unique Savior or Average Fraud?”

WHO ARE THESE OTHER “UNIQUE SAVIORS”?

History is filled with examples of those whose lives—real or imagined—share certain traits with the well-documented life of Jesus of Nazareth. Such accounts often compose a portion of the curriculum in college-level comparative religion courses, and provide a fine starting point for any study about the uniqueness of Jesus.

Consider, for example, Dionysus, a well-known, mythological god. The usual story of his birth relates that he was the offspring of Zeus, the immortal leader of the Greek gods who impregnated a human female by the name of Semele, the daughter of Cadmus, King of Thebes (see Graves, 1960, p. 56). Dionysus is said to have descended to the underworld and conquered death, ultimately bringing his dead mother back to the land of the living. He also is said to have died and been raised again. His followers called him *Lysios* or *Redeemer*, and grape juice commonly was used to symbolize his blood. Philip J. Brown noted: “Many Christians would be horrified to think that Jesus is in some way a manifestation of Dionysus, but the parallels are complex and deep.... Like Jesus, Dionysus is a god whose tragic passion is re-enacted by eating his flesh and drinking his blood”

CONTENTS

ARTICLES

- Jesus Christ—Unique Savior
Or Average Fraud?*
Kyle Butt and Bert Thompson 9

DEPARTMENTS

- Speaking Schedules 13

Note from the Editor

- Announcing: Creation Compromises
—The Second Edition*
Bert Thompson 16

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Editor:

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.*
(*Microbiology, Texas A&M University)

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(2000). The Dionysus cult reached Rome in 496 B.C., but had been around long before that. The similarities in the accounts of Dionysus and Jesus [as well as in that of Osiris, the Egyptian god of fertility and ruler of the underworld, discussed below]—from their unique births, to their resurrections, to their lives being commemorated in a similar fashion by their followers—are striking indeed. In fact, in their 1999 book, *The Jesus Mysteries*, Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy discussed at length such similarities in support of the idea that the Jesus of Christianity never existed, but in fact was little more than a mythological character of antiquity. They wrote:

The more we studied the various versions of the myth of Osiris-Dionysus, the more it became obvious that the story of Jesus had all the characteristics of this perennial tale. Event by event, we found we were able to construct Jesus' supposed biography from mythic motifs previously related to Osiris-Dionysus:

Osiris-Dionysus is God made flesh, the savior and "Son of God."

His father is God and his mother is a mortal virgin.

He is born in a cave or humble cowshed on December 25 before three shepherds.

He offers his followers the chance to be born again through the rites of baptism.

He miraculously turns water into wine at a marriage ceremony.

He rides triumphantly into town on a donkey while people wave palm leaves to honor him.

He dies at Eastertime as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

After his death he descends to hell, then on the third day he rises from the dead and ascends to heaven in glory.

His followers await his return as the judge during the Last Days.

His death and resurrection are celebrated by a ritual meal of bread and wine, which symbolize his body and blood.

These are just some of the motifs shared between the tales of Osiris-Dionysus and the biography of Jesus. Why are these remarkable similarities not common knowledge? (p. 5).

However, Dionysus hardly is the only character from the past whose life parallels that of Jesus. Prometheus is another legendary, mythological god who experienced a death similar to that of Christ. The following poem describes his purported death.

"Lo! Streaming from the fatal
tree,
His all atoning blood.
Is this the Infinite?—Yes, 'tis he,
Prometheus, and a God!
Well might the sun in darkness
hide,
And veil his glories in,
When God, the great
Prometheus, died
For man the creature's sin."

(Graves, 1875, p. 124)

The fact that Prometheus is called "God" who died for "man the creature's sin" is similar enough to the New Testament account about Christ's atoning visit to Earth to raise eyebrows. But the fact that the story first circulated around 547 B.C. could well cast a shadow of a doubt on the claim that Christ is the unique, one-of-a-kind Savior-God.

Or, consider Krishna, the ancient Hindu deity who is alleged to have shared a doom similar to Christ's. He has been portrayed as hanging on a cross, with holes through his hands and his feet. His title?—"Our Lord and Savior." Krishna supposedly "rose from the dead" and then "ascended bodily into heaven" (Doane, 1882, p. 215). He even is purported to have said: "Do good for its own sake, and expect not your reward for it on Earth" (Graves, 1875, p. 112). Christ employed the same idea in Matthew 6. But Krishna's story dates to 1200 B.C.

The parallels continue. In the Egyptian *Papyrus of Ankh* (also known as *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*), which is dated between 1450 and 1400 B.C. (see Budge, 1960, p. 220), the god Osiris commands the titles of King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and Prince of Princes (Budge, p. 352). In his intriguing book, *Bible Myths and Their Parallels in Other Religions*, T.W. Doane observed: "Osiris, the Egyptian Saviour, after being put to death, **rose from the dead**, and bore the title of **'The Resurrected One'**" (p. 221, emp. in orig.). Osiris' scribe, Ani, is described as one "whose word is truth" (Budge, p. 384). In the latter part of the papyrus, a specific creed is provided that supposedly is capable of providing justification for the person who recites it upon his or her entrance into eternity. That creed reads as follows: "I have given bread to the hungry man, and water to him that was athirst, and apparel to the naked man, and a ferry-boat to him that had no boat" (Budge, p. 587). The writer of this papyrus could have copied the

words of Jesus as found in Matthew 25:31-46—except for one small fact: the *Papyrus of Ani* dates to 1400 B.C.—over a thousand years **before** Christ made His earthly appearance.

Furthermore, in 550 B.C., Confucius said: “Do not to another what you would not want done to yourself.” Christ uttered an almost identical statement approximately 600 years **after** Confucius when He said: “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise” (Luke 6:31).

Similarities also exist between the stories of Buddha and Jesus. In the cover story article he authored for the March 27, 2000 issue of *Newsweek* on “The Other Jesus,” Kenneth L. Woodward commented that “the life stories of Jesus and Buddha are strikingly similar,” and then went on to note that both of these religious leaders challenged the religious teachings of their day, allegedly were born of virgins, and were supposed to have worked miracles (135[13]:58-59).

Some Bible critics have suggested that it would be a simple matter to cite stories with similarities such as these by the dozen. In fact, in a public debate with theist Norman Geisler (held at Columbus College in Columbus, Georgia on March 29, 1994), Farrell Till, a former-Christian-turned-skeptic, stated exactly that when he said to the audience:

People, I want you to stop and think seriously for just a moment. I know how much emotionalism is involved in this, but please understand this. Crucified, resurrected savior-gods, who had been born of virgins, were a dime a dozen at this time (1994).

Stephen Franklin—although an avid defender of Christ’s uniqueness—corroborated Till’s statement in an article in the *Evangelical Review of Theology* when he wrote: “Incarnation, far from being unique to Christianity, seems to be a universal possession of the religious heritage of mankind” (1993, p. 32).

Christ’s critics have used such parallels time and again in an attempt to establish their contention that Jesus of Nazareth is neither a unique character nor a worthy, personal savior. For example, three weeks after Kenneth Woodward’s article on Jesus was published in *Newsweek*, a letter to the editor from Don Zomberg of Wyoming, Michigan appeared in the April 20 edition of the magazine. In response to a quotation from Woodward’s article which suggested that “Christ

is absolutely original and absolutely unique,” Mr. Zomberg wrote to dissent when he said: “Nothing could be further from the truth. The legend of Jesus is little more than a variant of older religions common to the Middle East thousands of years ago” (2000, 135 [16]:17). Such an attitude—which stems from the fact that historical and mythological parallels between Jesus and other religious personalities **do** exist—likely is much more prevalent than many people realize. And while it is true that none of these historical/mythological parallels is **exact**, it is true that they are close enough to elicit serious investigation on the part of those who believe Jesus Christ to be the unique Son of God.

Of course, contemporary skeptics who use such an argument in attempts to debunk the uniqueness and deity of Christ cannot take credit as its originators. History records that almost two thousand years ago the early Christian apologists were busily engaged in responding to the exact same argument. For example, Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-426) stated in his *Christian Doctrine*:

The readers and admirers of Plato dared calumniously to assert that our Lord Jesus Christ learnt all those sayings of His, which they are compelled to admire and praise, from the books of Plato—because (they urged) it cannot be denied that Plato lived long before the coming of our Lord (2:28, parenthetical item in orig.).

Augustine refuted the argument by suggesting that Plato had read the prophet Jeremiah and then conveniently incorporated Jeremiah’s teachings into his own. The point, however, is clear: as early as A.D. 400, skeptics and enemies of the Cross were launching fiery darts of alleged plagiarism at both Christ and His followers.

Further investigation into the history of Christian apologetics manifests something even more startling. The earliest apologists not only recognized that the story and teachings of Jesus bore striking similarities to ancient mythological accounts, but even **emphasized these similarities** in an attempt to get pagans to understand more about Jesus and His mission. Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165) set forth an argument in his *First Apology* that was intended to put Christ at least on an equal playing field with earlier mythological gods.

And if we assert that the Word of God was born of God in a peculiar manner, different from ordinary generation, let this, as said above, be no extraordinary thing to you, who say that Mercury is the angelic word of God. But if any one objects that He was crucified, in this also He is on a par with those reputed sons of Jupiter of yours.... And if we even affirm that He was born of a virgin, accept this in common with what you accept of Perseus. And in that we say that He made whole the lame, the paralytic, and those born blind, we seem to say what is very similar to the deeds said to have been done by Æsculapius (Chapter 22).

Tertullian (c. A.D. 160-220) observed that the story of Romulus, another character from ancient Greek mythology who was seen after his death, was quite similar to the story of Christ being seen after His death. However, Tertullian went on to note that the stories of Christ were much more certain because they were documented by historical evidence (*Apology*, 21).

While ancient pagans saw, and modern skeptics still see, such similarities as militating against the originality and uniqueness of Christ, the writings of such men as Augustine, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and others document the fact that early Christians could see obvious—yes, even welcome—similarities between the story of Jesus and the accounts of mythological, pagan gods. Furthermore, some of those early Christians even seized upon those very similarities to defend Jesus’ position as the unique Son of God. The apologists’ point, of course, was two-fold: (1) men of the past **had** searched for a unique savior-god and, finding none, resorted to inventing him and bestowing upon him certain distinct characteristics; and (2) that Savior—who, although in the past had been endowed with unique traits of their own feeble creation—actually **had come!**

Christians need to recognize as an undeniable fact—a fact confirmed by mythology, history, and even early Christian apologists—that ancient documents reveal that the story of Christ is not the first story ever told of a virgin-born, crucified, resurrected, miracle-working savior-god who supposedly died for the sins of humanity. These documents further reveal that many of Christ’s teachings can be gleaned—at times almost verbatim—from sources that were in circulation hun-

dreds or thousands of years before Jesus was born. Early apologists acknowledged these facts because they were, and are, quite indisputable.

And that leads us back to the issue that plagued the college freshman mentioned earlier. How, in light of such facts, can we affirm that Jesus Christ is the unique, authentic Son of God—when stories similar to His circulated decades or millennia before He ever came to Earth? What response can we offer to the Bible critics' charges? And what assurance may we offer to the young student about the genuineness of his faith?

WHY AN UNORIGINAL JESUS?

Before we address the major question of this two-part series of articles, the obvious question must be asked: Why would anyone **want** to claim that the story of Jesus is unoriginal or plagiaristic? There probably are several answers that could be offered to such an inquiry. Due to space restrictions, however, we would like to concentrate on only two. First, it is a simple fact that those who do not believe in God, and who consequently accept a completely naturalistic view of the origin of the Universe and its inhabitants, must find **some** way to explain the uniqueness of Christ and the uniqueness of the system of religion He instituted. In addressing this point, the late James Bales wrote:

If one accepts a naturalistic and evolutionary account of the origin of religion, he will believe that Christianity can be explained naturally. His very approach has ruled out the possibility of the supernatural revelation of God in Jesus Christ (n.d., p. 7).

Eminent British evolutionist Sir Julian Huxley asserted:

In the evolutionary pattern of thought there is no longer need or room for the supernatural. The earth was not created; it evolved. So did all the animals and plants that inhabit it, including our human selves, mind, and soul as well as brain and body. **So did religion** (1960, pp. 252-253, emp. added).

Those who believe that the Universe and life within it evolved in a purely naturalistic fashion likewise must find a totally naturalistic cause for **every** facet of life. Religion itself is one of those facets, and therefore, according to the naturalist, also must have evolved—exactly as Huxley suggested it did.

It is not difficult to see why an evolutionist would believe it to be inevitable that the story of Jesus originated from earlier, primitive stories. In fact, to say that the story of Jesus “evolved” from older, more primitive stories is to assert nothing more than what the theory of evolution already teaches in every other area of human existence. Atheist Joseph McCabe explained: “What we see, in fact, is **evolution in religion**. The ideas pass on from age to age, a mind here and a mind there adding or refining a little. The slow river of human evolution had entered its rapids” (1993, p. 72, emp. added).

Second, while some may be motivated by a search for a purely naturalistic origin of religion, others teach that the story of Jesus is derived from earlier Jewish and/or pagan myths and legends. As Bales went on to observe, some have suggested that “Christ and Christianity are viewed as natural developments out of Judaism and paganism” (n.d., p. 7). That very position has been defended by former-believers-turned-apostates, Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, in *The Jesus Mysteries* (which is an all-out, frontal assault on the divinity of Christ).

We had both been raised as Christians and were surprised to find that, despite years of open-minded spiritual exploration, it still felt somehow dangerous to even dare think such thoughts. Early indoctrination reaches very deep. We were in effect saying that Jesus was a Pagan god and that Christianity was a heretical product of Paganism! It seemed outrageous. Yet this theory explained the similarities between the stories of Osiris-Dionysus and Jesus Christ in a simple and elegant way. They are parts of one developing mythos....

The Jesus story does have all the hallmarks of a myth, so could it be that that is exactly what it is.... Why should we consider the stories of Osiris, Dionysus, Adonis, Attis, Mithras, and the other Pagan Mystery saviors as fables, yet come across essentially the same story told in a Jewish context and believe it to be the biography of a carpenter from Bethlehem?...

We have become convinced that the story of Jesus is not the biography of a historical Messiah, but a myth based on perennial Pagan stories. Christianity was not a new and unique revelation but actually a Jewish adaptation of the ancient Pagan Mystery religion. This is what we have called **The Jesus Mysteries Thesis**....

The obvious explanation is that as early Christianity became the dominant power in the previously Pagan world, popular motifs from Pagan mythology became grafted onto the biography of Jesus.... Such motifs were “borrowed” from Paganism in the same way that Pagan festivals were adopted as Christian saints’ days.... The Jesus story is a perennial myth...not merely a history of events that happened to someone 2,000 years ago (1999, pp. 9-10, 2, 6, 13, emp. in orig.).

And so, while there actually may have been a literal person known as “Jesus Christ,” he was nothing more than that—literally a person. The traits claimed for him by his followers (e.g., unusual entrance into the world, unusual activities during his pilgrimage on Earth, unusual exit from this world, etc.) arose “after the fact” as a result of having been derived or plagiarized from ancient pagan and/or Jewish sources.

It is not Christ’s historicity that is at stake here (see, for example, Butt, 2000); unbelievers and infidels of every stripe have long acknowledged His existence. Rather, the issue has to do with whether or not Jesus of Nazareth was Who He claimed to be—the unique, “only begotten,” incarnate Son of God.

MAN’S RELIGIOUS FACULTY AND “SAVIOR SIMILARITIES”

The truth of the matter is that many stories over the course of history resemble that of Jesus of Nazareth in one way or another. And why should this surprise us? After Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, man became keenly aware of both the presence and the consequences of sin. From the time of Cain and Abel, God had established sacrifices and decreed specific rules regarding those sacrifices. Since that time, all humans have had at least some perception—however slight or flawed—that they needed to “do something” to stand justified once again before their Creator. One way to do that was to invent a “stand-in”—someone who could take their place—as the epitome of sinless perfection to plead their case before the Righteous Judge of all the Earth (cf. Genesis 18:25).

Additionally, however, it can be argued that the similarities we have listed (and, indeed, many others just like them) are **only similarities**, not exact parallels. It further can be argued that Jesus’ story, even though it

seems similar to some others, is not exactly the same and, in fact, differs substantially in the minute details. For example, Krishna allegedly was crucified via an arrow through his arms, while Jesus was nailed to the cross. Confucius offered the negative form of the so-called “golden rule” (“**Do not** do to others”), while Jesus stated the positive (“**Do** unto others”). Dionysus’ mother, Persophone, reportedly had intercourse with Zeus, while Mary was a virgin. This line of reasoning possesses some merit, because it certainly is true that none of the ancient stories sounds **exactly** like Christ’s.

A closer look at the Egyptian legend of Osiris provides a good example of the many important differences between the account of Jesus and other stories. Legend says that Osiris was killed by his evil brother Seth, who tore Osiris’ body into fourteen pieces and scattered them throughout Egypt. Isis, the goddess-consort of Osiris, collected the pieces and buried them, thus giving life to Osiris in the underworld. Afterward, she used magical arts to revive Osiris and to conceive a child (Horus) by him. After fathering Horus, Osiris remained in the underworld, not really ever rising from the dead (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1997, 8:1026-1027). This legend, taken as a whole, provides few (if any) real parallels to the story of Jesus. Furthermore, when all the stories about characters who supposedly were similar to Christ are told in their entirety, it is obvious that each of them contains only a few characteristics that come anywhere close to resembling those contained in the life story of Jesus. Additionally, some of the alleged parallels rest upon tenuous documentation and may even be fabricated.

However, there are some common threads that weave their way through many of the various legends: a superhuman hero does miraculous things, is killed to save mankind (sometimes even by crucifixion), and is brought

back to life in some form or another, thereby defeating death. Although the minute details are quite different, the general similarities are close enough to demand scrutiny—and an explanation. As an illustration, suppose someone were to take our copyrighted article, use a thesaurus to change hundreds of its words, and then put his or her name on it without our knowledge or permission. We would view such a person as an obvious plagiarizer. Although the new article might be “unique” in its minutia, in its broad strokes it still would be a copy. In a similar vein, it is not enough for Christians to claim that the story of Jesus did not originate from one (or more) of the hundreds of ancient stories simply by saying that the minute details of His particular life are different from the others. We must offer a better, more thorough, and more convincing argument than this if the story of Jesus Christ is to be defended as genuinely unique.

Independent Nature of Similar Stories


In the early part of the twentieth century, Joseph McCabe, one of the most outspoken atheists of his day, published several works, including *The Myth of the Resurrection* (1925), *Did Jesus Ever Live?* (1926), and *How Christianity “Triumphed”* (1926). In 1993, Prometheus Publishing Company (note that the title of this secular publishing organization is the name of one of the Greek gods supposedly similar to Jesus) republished these works in a book titled *The Myth of the Resurrection and Other Essays*. McCabe painstakingly documented the similarities between the story of Jesus and pagan stories such as those of Osiris, Adonis, Tammuz, and Attis, yet specifically noted: “It is a most important feature of our story that this legend of a slain and resurrected god **arose in quite different parts of the old civilized world**. Tammuz, Attis,

and Osiris are three **separate and independent creations** of the myth-making imagination” (1993, p. 45, emp. added). McCabe thus acknowledged that these pagan stories with similar themes did not copy either one another or some earlier, predominant story. Rather, they arose separately—and even independently—of each other. McCabe admitted: “For some reason...the mind of man came in most parts of the world to conceive a legend of death and resurrection.... In fact, in one form or other there was almost a **world-wide belief** that the god, or a representative [king, prisoner, effigy, etc.] of the god, died, or had to die every year” (pp. 52,53, emp. added; bracketed material in orig.). In his conclusion, McCabe wrote: “In sum, I should say that the **universal belief in a slain and resurrected god** throws light upon the Christian belief by showing us a universal frame of mind which quite easily, in many places, made a resurrection myth” (p. 63, emp. added). McCabe—even as an infidel—willingly acknowledged that numerous (but different) resurrection myths arose from various regions around the globe, each similar in its facts yet original in its derivation. These stories apparently arose because of what he referred to as a “universal frame of mind.” And yet in spite of such evidence, on page 69 of his book, McCabe concluded: “**Man has no religious instinct.**”

Mankind’s Religious Instinct

People around the world—due to a “universal frame of mind”—independently concocted stories that revolved around a god dying and then rising again. These stories span both time barriers and geographical limits; they are—in a very literal sense—“worldwide” and “universal.” Yet we are asked to believe that the people from different countries and cultures who concocted these stories possessed “no religious instinct”? How McCabe could make the concessions he did, yet reach such a conclusion, defies rational explanation.

In truth, man **does** have a religious instinct—one that is keener than even many theologians would like to admit. In speaking of God, the writer of Ecclesiastes remarked: “He hath made everything beautiful in its time: **he hath set eternity in their heart**” (3:11). Paul said that mankind always has been able to understand God’s “everlasting power and divinity” (Romans 1:20). God did not place man on Earth to abandon him. Instead:



Dr. Bert Thompson

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He made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons and bounds of their habitation; that they should **seek** God, if haply they might feel after him and find him though he is not far from each one of us; for in him we live, and move and have our being; **as certain of your own poets have said**, for we are his offspring (Acts 17:26-28, emp. added).

God has indeed “set eternity” in the hearts of men and given them a universal instinct that is intended to cause them to seek Him.

In his book, *Why We Believe the Bible*, the late George DeHoff commented: “No nation or tribe has been found which did not believe in a Supreme Being of some kind and practice religion in some form” (1944, p. 42). He is absolutely right. But it is not just believers who have presented and documented this kind of information. Even nonbelievers have been forced to such a conclusion by the historical and scientific evidence.

Over seventy years ago, Clarence Darrow and Wallace Rice joined forces to edit a book titled *Infidels and Heretics: An Agnostic's Anthology*. On the inside cover, a description of the book's contents suggested that it contained “the best gleanings from the most important works of the great agnostics, skeptics, infidels and heretics of the world.” On page 146, the compilers quoted the famous skeptic, John Tyndall:

Religion lives not by the force and aid of dogma, but because it is ingrained in the nature of man. To draw a metaphor from metallurgy, the moulds have been broken and reconstructed over and over again, but the molten ore abides in the ladle of humanity. An influence so deep and permanent is not likely soon to disappear... (1929).

Approximately fifty years later, Edward O. Wilson of Harvard University (who is known as the “father” of the biological discipline of sociobiology) penned a book titled *On Human Nature*. The inside front cover stated that Wilson's goal was “nothing less than the completion of the Darwinian revolution by bringing biological thought into the center of the social sciences and the humanities.” Wilson wrote: “The predisposition to religious belief is the most complex and powerful force in the human mind and in all probability an ineradicable part of human nature” (1978, p. 167). He went on to say that “skeptics continue to nourish the be-

lief that science and learning will banish religion, which they consider to be no more than a tissue of illusions,” yet the idea that increased learning and technology will strip mankind of his religious nature “has never seemed so futile as today” (p. 170).

THE PERFECT SACRIFICE

How, then, did the instinct to worship God lead to the concoction of numerous stories about a virgin-born savior-god who dies as a sacrifice for mankind's wrongdoings? First, it started with the idea of sacrifice. From the moment Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden, man was acutely aware that he was a sinful being in need of redemption. Humans also understood that some type of atoning sacrifice was required to absolve them of sin. The writer of the book of Hebrews observed that “by faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain” (11:4). Oddly, skeptics seem to understand this point quite well. In the late eighteenth century, T.W. Doane caustically attacked the doctrines of Christ and the Bible. His work, *Bible Myths and Their Parallels in Other Religions* (1882), gnawed at every mooring of Christian doctrine. Yet even he understood that mankind always has realized its own sinfulness and its need for an atoning sacrifice. He wrote: “The doctrine of atonement for sin had been preached long before the doctrine was deduced from the Christian Scriptures, long before these Scriptures are pretended to have been written” (p. 181). Bible scholar R.C. Trench commented:

Nations which it is impossible could have learned it from one another, nations the most diverse in culture, the highest in the scale and well nigh the lowest, differing in everything besides, have yet agreed in this one thing, namely, in the offering of things which have life to God,—or, where the idea of the one God has been lost,—to the “gods many” of heathenism—the essential feature of that offering in every case being that the life of the victim was rendered up (n.d., p. 177).

Those who might wish to challenge Trench's assessment can examine any book on world history or world religions and see that he is correct. Abel offered the first of his flock, and from that day forward, humanity began offering live sacrifices to a deity in the hope of absolving anger and forgiving sin. In fact, mankind has sacrificed living things to a deity from the beginning of time. But which

particular sacrifices did humanity think had the power to forgive sins? The general rule for the atonement value of a sacrifice was: **the more costly and perfect the sacrifice, the more sins it would absolve.**

When God initiated the ritual sacrifice of animals for the religious ceremonies of His chosen people, He laid down strict rules. In Leviticus 22:19-20, God told the Jews: “You shall offer of your own free will a male without blemish from the cattle, from the sheep, or from the goats. But whatever has a defect, you shall not offer, for it shall not be acceptable on your behalf” (NKJV). The Lord **always** has demanded that blood be shed for the remission of sins. Hebrews 9:22 reiterates that point: “And according to the law...all things are cleansed with blood, and apart from shedding of blood there is no remission.” This should not be at all surprising, since “the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh atonement by reason of the life” (Leviticus 17:11).

Men and women of ages past knew all too well God's commandments regarding atonement by blood. It began with Cain and Abel, was reaffirmed by Noah (Genesis 9:1-6), was regulated by Old Testament law, and was carried through to fulfillment by Jesus. When God instituted the Law of Moses, He did not introduce animal sacrifices as an innovation never before seen by the Israelites. Rather, He showed the Israelites the proper manner in which to sacrifice such animals, until the time that the fulfilling sacrifice of His Son would bring to a halt the need for any further blood atonement via animal sacrifices. In showing them the proper way, God made strict provisions to keep the children of Israel from turning from God-approved sacrifices to sacrificing their own innocent children like the pagans around them. In Leviticus 18:21, God told the children of Israel: “And thou shalt not give any of thy seed to make them pass through the fire to Molech; neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am Jehovah.” God went to great lengths to warn the Israelites against offering their children as sacrifices because it was well known that the nations around them took part in such infanticide. The question arises, “What in this world could convince a mother or father to offer their children to a god?” Let us investigate this matter further.

Wendy Davis writes for *Widdershins*, a self-proclaimed journal of unadulterated paganism. In an article on the World Wide Web, *As Old as the Moon: Sacrifice in History*, she stated: "The act of ritual murder is probably as old as we [humans—KB/BT] are. Throughout the ages, people sacrificed when they needed something. Our ancestors often **gave the best they had, their first-born**, to save themselves" (1995, emp. added). The most precious possession of a mother or father would be their first-born child. That child, however, would be not only precious, but also sinless. Sacrifice of anything less than that which is spotless and pure diminishes the inherent value of the sacrifice. Thus, it was believed that a sinless and pure sacrifice of such magnitude could wash away the sins of the parents (or, for that matter, the sins of an entire village!). Therefore, corrupt, perverse religions sprang up around the sacrifice of children, one of the most famous of which was that of Molech (see 2 Kings 23:10).

Yet even though the sacrifice of infants fulfilled the **sinless** aspect of a perfect sacrifice, it was lacking in other areas. For example, an "ordinary" infant born of peasant parents was not the most costly sacrifice available; a royal child of a king would be even better. Thus, as Davis went on to observe, kings ultimately sacrificed their own children to appease "the gods."

But the sacrifice of a king's child still did not represent the perfect sacrifice, because the child did not go of his (or her) own free will. A free-will sacrifice of royal blood would come closest to the perfect offering. In an article titled *No Greater Sacrifice*, which appeared in *Widdershins*, one writer suggested: "Willing sacrifice is more interesting. Why does someone want to sacrifice himself or herself for what they believe in? Historically speaking, we must consider the sacred kings who sacrificed themselves for the Land" (see Andy, 1998). Yes, a king who offered himself of his own free will would be **almost** the perfect sacrifice. The only problem with such a concept was the fact that no king ever had lived a perfect life. As the *Widdershins* writer correctly observed, in an attempt to solve this, "Finally someone came up with the idea of one final sacrifice. One sacrifice to count for all the rest for all time. But who could be offered? It had to be someone very important; even kings were not good enough. Clearly,

only a god was important enough to count as the last one" (Andy, 1998). Thus, it becomes clear why even the pagan world demanded a sacrifice that was sinless, royal, and higher in stature than other humans. Doane stated: "The belief of redemption from sin by the sufferings of a Divine Incarnation, whether by death on the cross or otherwise, was general and popular among the heathen, centuries before the time of Jesus of Nazareth" (1882, pp. 183-185).

Once we comprehend the need for the death of the savior-god, it is not difficult to see why humanity would want (and need) to see him defeat death. The writer of the book of Hebrews addressed this very point when he wrote that Christ allowed Himself to be sacrificed so that He "might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (2:15). Death holds more terror for man than perhaps anything else on Earth. It was for this reason that the Greeks invented Hercules—half man and half god—to conquer the Underworld, and the Egyptians formulated Osiris. Surely a savior-god who offered himself voluntarily as the sacrifice for all humanity could defeat mankind's dreaded enemy—Death. So, the idea of a sacrificial savior-god who victoriously defeats death through his resurrection came easily to the minds of people who knew that they needed forgiveness, and who desperately wanted to live past the grave.

And so, from a "universal frame of mind" different tribes and religions—spanning thousands of years—formulated their personal versions of what they thought a resurrected savior-god should be and do. Some said he was torn into fourteen pieces and scattered throughout the land of Egypt (e.g., Osiris). Others said he would look like a man but would possess superhuman physical strength and descend to the underworld to conquer Hades (e.g., Hercules). Yet one thing is certain: tales about a hero who saved mankind were on the lips of almost every storyteller. Trench stated correctly:

No thoughtful student of the past records of mankind can refuse to acknowledge that through all its history there has run the hope of a redemption from the evil which oppresses it; and as little can deny that this hope has continually attached itself to some single man (n.d., p. 149).

But how can it be maintained, then, that the one savior for whom all humanity waited was, and is, Jesus?

[to be continued]

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