

EXPOSING THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE:  
RESPONDING TO THE ZEITGEIST MOVIE

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The documentary *Zeitgeist* was released on the Internet in 2007. It was originally a multimedia performance piece that included live and recorded music accompanying the video. The documentary by Peter Joseph<sup>393</sup> has been very popular. Not only did it win an award at the Activist's Film Festival, it has also spawned two sequels: *Zeitgeist: Appendix* and *Zeitgeist: Moving Forward*. The original movie is divided into three parts: 1) The Greatest Story Ever Told, which deals with the historical Jesus, 2) All the World's a Stage, dealing with alternative theories regarding 9/11 and 3) Don't Mind the Men Behind the Curtain, which deals with the banking industry. While some people have accepted these radical claims, there have been strong criticism against the movie. Such concerns are not just from evangelical Christians. Tim Callahan, from the Skeptics Society, while acknowledging that he accepted some of the claims added: "Unfortunately, this material is liberally — and sloppily — mixed with material that is only partially true and much that is plainly and simply bogus."<sup>394</sup> D.M. Murdock (aka Acharya S) was the academic consultant for the first part of the film. Murdock as written extensively on the Jesus Myth.<sup>395</sup> She has responded to people's concerns regarding the accuracy of the claims about Jesus in *Zeitgeist* by writing an e-book titled

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<sup>393</sup> Joseph produced, directed, wrote, edited and provided music for the film.

<sup>394</sup> <http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/09-02-25/>

<sup>395</sup> Acharya S, *The Christ Conspiracy: The Greatest Story Ever Sold*. (Kempton, Illinois: Adventures Unlimited, 1999); D.M. Murdock, D.M., *Christ in Egypt: The Horus-Jesus Connection* (Stellar House Publishing, 2009).

*The Zeitgeist: Sourcebook*.<sup>396</sup> This essay will respond to the first part of the *Zeitgeist* movie by interacting with Murdock's e-book.

### Sun Worship

Murdock begins by noting the prevalence of sun worship in ancient religions. Murdock is correct when she states that the sun was often personified and given its own mythology. However, there are some unfortunate errors in how this is described. Murdock makes much of the idea of the Sun of God as the Son of God.<sup>397</sup> While this may sound good in English being homonyms, it is meaningless in any of the languages that could have influenced the New Testament.<sup>398</sup> Murdock quotes a fifteenth century Neoplatonic-Christian philosopher named Marsilio Ficino as finding this connection in Plato's *Republic*. This would be a significant discovery. However, it is important to note that Murdock quotes Ficino and not Plato himself. Here is the section from the discussed passage in the *Republic*:

“That is so,” he said. “This, then, you must understand that I meant by the offspring of the good which the good begot to stand in a proportion with itself: as the good is in the intelligible region to reason and the objects of reason, so is this in the visible world to vision and the objects of vision.” “How is that?” he said; “explain further.” “You are aware,” I said, “that when the eyes are no longer turned upon objects upon whose colors the light of day falls but that of the dim luminaries of night, their edge is blunted and they

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<sup>396</sup> This e-book can be found at

<http://www.stellarhousepublishing.com/zeitgeistsourcebook.pdf>.

<sup>397</sup> Peter Joseph and D.M. Murdock, *The Zeitgeist Sourcebook* (Stellar House Publishing, n.d.), p. 8. (Hereafter “*Sourcebook*”).

<sup>398</sup> Murdock acknowledges this when she says: Concerning the —son-sun□ play on words—which is not a cognate but a mere happy coincidence in English that reflects the mythological reality.

*Sourcebook*, p. 8.

appear almost blind, as if pure vision did not dwell in them.” (*Republic* 6.508c)

Looking at the original text, it is obvious that Plato is discussing nothing related to the origins of Christianity. This is another common problem plaguing the Jesus Myth Hypothesis: an avoidance of quoting the actual primary texts.

Murdock looks at the attribution of ‘Savior’ to the personified Sun. Presumably, the point of this is to indicate that the reason Jesus is known as the Savior is that he is another example of a personified Sun. However, as Murdock herself points out: “To describe the sun as •savior, Pausanias uses the word *Soter*, a title commonly applied to many gods and goddesses at different places.”<sup>399</sup> The fact that many gods are known by this description makes it very difficult to draw a line of dependence. The other problem is that Murdock assumes that ‘Savior’ was a common title for Jesus based on later ways of addressing Christ. However, the Gospels refer to Jesus as Savior only twice (Luke 2:11, John 4:42) and although Jesus is sometimes called the Savior in the rest of the New Testament, God the Father is given that title about as often.

### Isis and Horus

Murdock cites Porphyry as a pagan source of the concept of the virgin mother: “In all these ways, then, the power of the earth finds an interpretation and is worshipped: as a virgin and Hestia, she holds the centre; as a mother she nourishes...” Murdock concludes from this: “Here is clearly one source in antiquity of the virgin-mother concept, which was so obviously adopted into Christianity from Paganism.”<sup>400</sup> There are a number of problems with this conclusion. Murdock is in fact quoting Eusebius, who is citing Porphyry. It would be difficult for Porphyry to be a source for the Christian doctrine of the virgin birth as he lived 234-305 AD and was writing specifically against Christians in his *Adversus Christianos*. This is an example

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<sup>399</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 9.

<sup>400</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 7.

of one of the common errors of Jesus Myth theorists who ignore relative dates.

A common assertion by proponents of the Jesus Myth is that Jesus shares December 25 with other savior figures. Murdock cites Plutarch as evidence that Horus was born on December 25, more specifically the winter solstice.<sup>401</sup> There are a couple of problems with this. First of all, Plutarch wrote his book dealing with Osiris and Isis in the second century, too late to be an influence on the Gospels.<sup>402</sup> Secondly, nowhere does the Bible suggest that Jesus was born on December 25. It may very well be that this date was chosen because of pagan interest, but it has nothing to do with pagan influence on the Gospels.

Much has been made about possible connections between Isis and Mary.<sup>403</sup> This is not surprising, as it is true that early Christian artists modeled sculptures of Mary and baby Jesus after statues of Isis and baby Horus. However, Murdock makes too much of this connection. Murdock too quickly dismisses Egyptian accounts of Isis being impregnated by Osiris through postmortem intercourse.<sup>404</sup> There is a philosophical

<sup>401</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 15.

<sup>402</sup> Of course the Osiris and Isis myth predates Christianity, and yet it is the later highly philosophized version in Plutarch that Jesus mythicists often rely on.

<sup>403</sup> For information about the connection to Isis and Horus, see Stanley E. Porter and Stephen J. Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ: An Evangelical Response to the Cosmic Christ Idea* (Toronto: Clements, 2006), pp. 59-80. For information on the actual myth, see David Leeming, "Osiris and Isis" in *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 303, E.A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Religion* (London, Arkana, 1987), pp. 27-83, Rosalie David, *Religion and Magic in Ancient Egypt* (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 137-77, Françoise Dunand and Christine Zivie-Coche, (Ithica: Cornell, 2004), pp. 39-40, Marvin W. Meyer (ed.), *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), pp. 155-96.

<sup>404</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 16. For examples of a sexual conception, see E.A. Wallis Budge, *Legends of the Egyptian Gods* (repr. New York: Dover, 1994), p. li. & p. 105.

reinterpretation of this by Plutarch, but as already noted this post-dates the New Testament. It is difficult to identify the sexual conception of Horus with the virginal conception of Jesus. Murdock quotes Reginald Witt in saying: "The Egyptian goddess who was equally 'the Great Virgin' (*hwnt*) and 'Mother of the God' was the object of the very same praise bestowed upon her successor [Mary, Virgin Mother of Jesus]."<sup>405</sup> This would make Isis to be the inspiration for Mary, since Mary is described as the 'Virgin Mary' and the 'Mother of God.' Unfortunately for Jesus Mythicists, the Bible never refers to Mary in such a way. The virginal conception is mentioned briefly in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, never to be mentioned again in the New Testament. Nor is Mary ever praised as the 'Mother of God' in the Bible.

Murdock cites E.A. Wallis Budge regarding the Egyptian adoption of Christianity and blending with their earlier Egyptian religions.<sup>406</sup> This may have happened, but it says nothing about the origins of Christianity. Christianity already existed when it entered Egypt. It is natural that the Egyptians, as with any culture, would try to understand the new faith by looking for common points of contact. But what about the fact that Isis is sometimes referred to as 'Meri', a word related to the Jewish name Mary? Murdock correctly points out: "Moreover, the title or epithet of 'Meri' or 'Mery,' meaning 'beloved,' was applied to many kings and later to various deities."<sup>407</sup> The problem with this is that Meri is not a name but an attribution such as 'powerful' or 'graceful.' This could be significant if Mary was a rare Jewish name, being fairly unique to the mother of Jesus. The truth is that, not only are there numerous Marys in the New Testament, it was one of the most common names among the Jews of the time.<sup>408</sup> Any Egyptian

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<sup>405</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 16, quoting Reginald E. Witt. *Isis in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997), p. 273.

<sup>406</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 17.

<sup>407</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 17.

<sup>408</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 71.

connection would be from the introduction of Mary in its Hebrew form of Miriam coming from the sister of Moses who was born in Egypt.

In comparing Jesus and Horus, Murdock titles a section: “His birth was accompanied by a star in the east, and upon his birth he was adored by three kings.”<sup>409</sup> There are numerous problems with this comparison, both in terms of Egyptology and Christian origins. Does the star really appear at the birth of Jesus? Indications are that Jesus was perhaps as old as two years old when the star led the magi to Bethlehem. What about the three wise men? Murdock relies on an account of the birth of Osiris and then attempt to blend them together. Even so, Murdock cites a secondary source rather than giving us the primary source for us to compare for ourselves. Given the possibility that there may have been three wise men/stars at the birth of Osiris, does that suggest a connection with Christ? Matthew does not actually tell us how many wise men visited Jesus. Later tradition, based on the number of gifts, decided it was three and even gave them names. If the star and the wise men are the key to the solar connection, why are such details missing in the Lukan infancy narrative?

Murdock sees more parallels between Jesus and Horus. Regarding Horus, Murdock states: “At the age of 12, he was a prodigal child teacher, and at the age of 30 he was baptized by a figure known as Anup and thus began his ministry.”<sup>410</sup> One of the difficulties is that Murdock does not cite primary texts that we can compare with the New Testament but summarizes Egyptian legends with biblical language. Without knowing the actual text used by Murdock, one will have to make comparisons with her summaries. Murdock explains that Horus was on earth until age of twelve and then was raised to become the sun. The age of twelve is thus a symbol of noon

<sup>409</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 18.

<sup>410</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 20. I am not sure if Murdock realizes that ‘prodigal’ does not mean ‘lost’ but means ‘wasteful.’ It is unlikely that either Horus or Jesus could be described as prodigal.

when the sun is its highest.<sup>411</sup> Therefore, the myths never say Horus was twelve years old, later interpreters simply identify noon with this age. This has very little in common with the story of Jesus discussing with the teachers in the Temple. Presumably Jesus went back with his parents and it was life as usual until his ministry began.

Murdock seems to have a clearer parallel, even quoting the actual text from Papyrus DCIV. This passage says: "When Si-Osiris was twelve years old he was wiser than the wisest of the scribes."<sup>412</sup> Murdock translates 'Si' as 'son' and therefore here is a clear example of Horus, the son of Osiris doing something at the age of twelve very similar to what Jesus was doing at the same age. There are a number of problems with this. Papyrus DCIV is dated to 46-47 AD and therefore after the time being described in the Gospels.<sup>413</sup> Not only that, this story is not about Horus the son of Osiris but Senosiris, son of Satni-Khamoïs. This is an example of theophoric name, a name of a mortal that includes the name of a god within it. Regarding the supposed preparatory baptism, Murdock must really stretch the facts. Every lake or marsh becomes a symbol of baptism. Murdock even cites the questionable scholarship of Gerald Massey who identifies with baptism and embalming.<sup>414</sup>

One of the reasons for attempting to identify Jesus as the Sun is to include the signs of the Zodiac for the inspiration for the twelve apostles. Beyond the Zodiac, there is some evidence that twelve beings were sometimes placed along side

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<sup>411</sup> It looks from the Sourcebook that the primary texts do not speak of twelve years of age but rather that later writers identified the twelfth hour with twelve years old.

<sup>412</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 21.

<sup>413</sup> Gaston Maspero, *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 118. Although the text predates our Christian texts, it does post-date the events being described and should be used with caution.

<sup>414</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 21. For more on Gerald Massey, see Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking*, pp. 25-31. See also <http://www.tektonics.org/lp/massjc.html>.

Osiris and Horus.<sup>415</sup> There are numerous problems with this. It is not clear in the hieroglyphs what the exact role of the twelve were. In the narratives, we do not have descriptions of adventures with the twelve in any way parallel with Jesus and the twelve apostles. Most likely, Jesus called twelve followers as a reconstitution of the twelve tribes of Israel rather than any connection to the Zodiac. Except for a few, the personalities of each of the twelve are not described and we cannot even be sure of the precise names of the twelve. In addition, the twelve are only mentioned once outside of the Gospels (1 Corinthians 15:5).

Murdock points out a number of titles given to Horus: “Horus was known by many gestural names such as The Truth, The Light, God’s Anointed Son, The Good Shepherd, The Lamb of God, and many others.”<sup>416</sup> It is difficult to understand the point of these comparisons. Most of these are extremely generic religious titles drawing from the common pool of spiritual imagery. There should be no surprise that there are similarities and such similarities should not lead to a conclusion about cause.

One of the most controversial aspects of the Jesus Myth is this: “After being ‘betrayed’ by Typhon, Horus was “crucified,” buried for three days, and thus, resurrected.”<sup>417</sup> Murdock presents the problem that many critics of the Jesus Myth have:

It needs to be reiterated here that the ancient texts did not necessarily spell out the myths in a linear fashion, resembling a story following a certain timeframe. Mythical motifs found disparately in the ancient Egyptian texts are combined in this paragraph, as they are in modern encyclopedia entries.<sup>418</sup>

What Murdock is admitting here is that there is no one text that makes the claim that she is making. Murdock must draw on

<sup>415</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 23.

<sup>416</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 25.

<sup>417</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 26.

<sup>418</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 26.



images and symbols from numerous texts across a long time period and combine them into a form resembling the Gospel narrative.

The first claim is that Horus is betrayed by Seth/Typhon in a way similar to how Jesus was betrayed by Judas. There are many differences between the stories. Typhon was never one of Horus' followers, did not betray him through deception but instead was his ongoing enemy and Typhon took a much more active role in Horus' death than Judas. One would never read the story of Horus and conclude that Typhon must have been the inspiration for Judas.

The supposed crucifixion is another problem for Jesus Mythicists. Murdock, to her credit, tackles this problem head on.

The "crucifixion" of Horus is misunderstood because many erroneously assume that the term denotes a direct resemblance to the crucifixion narrative of Jesus Christ. Hence, it is critical to point out that we are dealing with metaphors here, not "history," as the "crucifixions" of both Horus and Jesus are improvable events historically. The issue at hand is not a man being thrown to the ground and nailed to a cross, as Jesus is depicted to have been, but the portrayal of gods and goddesses in "cruciform," whereby the divine figure appears with arms outstretched in a symbolic context.<sup>419</sup>

There are a number of problems with this statement. First of all, the crucifixion of Jesus is much more in the realm of history.<sup>420</sup> Historians can pin down the date within a number of years and accounts of the crucifixion were written within the lifetime of the witnesses. Also, it is problematic to define crucifixion in the way that Murdock does. The word for cross is *stauros*, which literally means a stake. While Christian

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<sup>419</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 27.

<sup>420</sup> John Dominic Crossan, part of the controversial Jesus Seminar, makes this comment: "I take it absolutely for granted that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate." John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 1993), p. 372.

tradition later adopted a ‘t’ shape for the cross, the Romans also used ‘T’ and ‘I’ shapes as well.<sup>421</sup> We do not know what position Jesus was crucified and if the evangelists wanted to identify Jesus with the death of Egyptian gods, the point could have been made much clearer. Finally, by redefining crucifixion the way she does, Murdock has given herself the freedom to make almost any death a crucifixion, creating a parallel where this none.

Murdock points out one of the main problems of this comparison in her section on the betrayal. She recounts two versions of Horus’ death: one by a scorpion sting and the other by drowning.<sup>422</sup> It is very difficult to see how either one of these deaths, even with a generous definition of the word, could be considered a crucifixion. More than this, there is no indication that Horus’ death played any major theological role. In Christianity, Jesus’ death was not just an unfortunate injustice, it was God’s plan to provide redemption from sins. Horus was not crucified in any way similar to Jesus.

Murdock also suggests that Horus was resurrected on the third day as Jesus was. Yet in her description of the resurrection, the role of the third day is left out. This description is common among Jesus Mythicists, but it is not found in the actual Egyptian texts. In the account of Horus dying from a scorpion sting, Isis prays for help and Horus is immediately returned to life by Thoth. In the account of the drowning, Isis gives Horus an elixir that brings him back to life. As with the crucifixion, the resurrection of Horus lacks all of the theological significance of the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus’ resurrection was not just an opportunity for him to continue his life, but the first stage of the general resurrection that all believers looked forward to. While more similar than the

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<sup>421</sup> This makes Murdock’s point about the ancient nature of the cross shape meaningless. *Sourcebook*, p. 28. It makes much more sense to see the cross as a historical Roman means of execution than to look for pagan mystical meanings.

<sup>422</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 27.

crucifixion, the resurrection of Horus is quite different from the experience of Jesus.

### Other Pagan Parallels

Murdock attempts to strengthen her argument by bringing in other pagan parallels. She begins with a look at Attis.<sup>423</sup> The problems with Attis are the same as those of Horus. While in a manner, Attis was conceived by virginal conception, there was a male phallus involved. Agdistis, who had both male and female organs, was castrated and from that organ an almond tree grew. From that fruit, Nana became impregnated with Attis. This is far from the biblical picture of the Spirit overshadowing Mary. Descriptions of Nana as a perpetual virgin are meaningless, as Mary is never described in such a way in the Bible.<sup>424</sup> In the same way, any connection with the winter solstice is irrelevant as the Bible never offers the date of Jesus' birth.<sup>425</sup> The most common description of Attis' fate is that of castration. According to the myth, Cybele drove Attis insane and in a frenzy he castrated himself. Calling such a thing crucifixion is forcing a parallel that does not exist. While a tree played a part in what happened to Attis, the castration took place under a tree, it was not a crucifixion to a tree. What about the resurrection of Attis? It was not until centuries after the appearance of Christianity that anything like a resurrection appeared.<sup>426</sup> Originally, Cybele was only able to preserve the body with the hair continuing to grow and some slight

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<sup>423</sup> *Sourcebook*, pp. 32-38. For information on the Attis myth, see Leeming, "Attis" in *Oxford Companion*, p. 38, Meyer, *Ancient Mysteries*, pp. 111-54, Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1987), pp. 77-78.

<sup>424</sup> The natural reading of passages describing Jesus' brothers and sisters is that Mary had other children with Joseph after the birth of Jesus.

<sup>425</sup> Murdock will continue to make this point with other gods such as Dionysus, Mithras. This argument has no weight.

<sup>426</sup> Ronald Nash *Christian Research Journal* Winter 1994, p. 8f.

movement in his little finger. Other versions have a transformation into an evergreen tree. There is no similarity to the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Referring to Attis among others, Walter Burkert concludes: “The evidence for resurrection is late and tenuous in the case of Adonis, and practically nonexistent in the case of Attis; not even Osiris returns to real life, but instead attains transcendent life beyond death.”<sup>427</sup>

Another common comparison with Jesus is that of Dionysus.<sup>428</sup> Again, an examination of the actual myths demonstrate that any parallels are superficial if not completely fictional. One of the mistakes that Murdock makes is in the identification of Dionysus and Osiris. It is true that some ancients did identify these two gods with each other, but it is not true that they took the stories of each god and merged them into one combined story. Regarding the virgin birth, Dionysus was not conceived in such a way. While Murdock is able to quote secondary sources that make such a claim, the primary sources do not provide such evidence. While there are numerous versions of Dionysus’ conception, they all include some sexual intercourse. Murdock also misrepresents the supposed death and resurrection of Dionysus. The impression is given that he is killed and raised as an adult, similar to Jesus. The truth is that in most versions of the myth Dionysus never dies. The only example is when Dionysus is consumed as a child by the Titans. Zeus consumes the heart and impregnates Semele, thus allowing Dionysus to be born a second time. This is more of an example of his miraculous birth than a death and resurrection.

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<sup>427</sup> Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 101.

<sup>428</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 42-47. For more information on the Dionysus myth, see Euripides, *Bacchae* (Mineola: Dover, 1997), Leeming, “Dionysos” in *Oxford Companion*, pp. 103-104, Meyer, *Ancient Mysteries*, pp. 61-110.

While not every god/hero dealt with by Murdock will be looked at here, it is important to look at Mithras.<sup>429</sup> The problem with Mithras' virgin birth is that he was born of a rock. This is the traditional form of the myth that would have been known to the evangelists if they knew of Mithras at all.<sup>430</sup> Admitting this, Murdock turns to a much less known version that has Mithra being born of a goddess named Anahita. What Murdock does not reveal is that it is very controversial regarding how much connection there is between the Persian Mithras and the Mithras of the Roman mystery cults. As Peter van Nuffelen states: "Mithraism ... is now seen less as bringer of Mazdic ideas to the Roman Empire, and more as an original development from an Iranian ferment in the Roman Empire."<sup>431</sup> It is unlikely that the authors of the New Testament had any knowledge of the Persian Mithras. There is also a problem with claiming that Mithras had twelve disciples or companions. There are no narratives of Mithras interacting with these twelve men. What there are, are artifacts that portray Mithras with the signs of the Zodiac. The signs of the Zodiac were common artistic symbols. There are even ancient Jewish synagogues decorated with the signs of Zodiac. In no way do these symbols play a parallel role to the twelve disciples of Jesus. One of the surprising claims by Jesus Mythicists is that Mithras was a dying and rising god. Murdock continues that claim without citing text but simply highlighting the importance

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<sup>429</sup> *Sourcebook*, pp. 47-52. For a response to the Mithras connection, see Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking*, pp. 95-104. For more information on the Mithras myth, see Leeming, "Mithra" in *Oxford Companion*, p. 266, Meyer, *Ancient Mysteries*, pp. 197-222, Franz Cumont, *Mysteries of Mithra* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, pp. 47-65.

<sup>430</sup> One of the difficulties of suggesting Mithraic origins to the Gospels is that most of our texts concerning Mithra are post-New Testament.

<sup>431</sup> Peter Van Nuffelen, "Pagan Monotheism as a Religious Phenomenon" in Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen (eds.) *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 30.

of death and life in the mysteries. The reason for this is that Mithras never died and therefore was never resurrected.

Having presented these pagan “parallels,” Murdock goes on to explain the connection with Jesus Christ, who she describes as “the most recent of the solar messiahs.”<sup>432</sup> According to Murdock: “Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary on December 25th in Bethlehem... his birth was announced by a star in the east, which three kings or magi followed to locate and adore the new savior.”<sup>433</sup> However, even Murdock admits that the Bible never says that Jesus was born on December 25 or that there were precisely three kings. Murdock attempts to bypass this by looking at later traditions. It is possible that certain details in later traditions (especially the birth date) were influenced by pagan motifs, but that says nothing with regard to influence on the Bible. The claim that the three wise men were three stars that followed the star Sirius is nonsensical.<sup>434</sup> There is nothing in Matthew that suggests that the magi were to be seen as anything other than people looking for a special baby. What complicates the allegorical reading of the text is the fact that the magi interact with the historical figure of Herod the Great.

Murdock also attempts to identify Mary with the astrological sign Virgo.<sup>435</sup> There is no reason to make such an identification. Although later Catholic theology would expand the story of Mary, claiming that she was a perpetual virgin and she also was conceived by a virgin, such details are not found in the Bible. Mary is only identified as a virgin in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke and never is she referred to as the “Virgin Mary.” If Mary was seen as Virgo, this virginal identification would have been mentioned in her other appearances in the Gospels and it is unlikely that her other children would be mentioned. Murdock continues with numerous astronomical interpretations that hold very little

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<sup>432</sup> Sourcebook, p. 52.

<sup>433</sup> *Sourcebook*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>434</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 55.

<sup>435</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 56.

weight. Murdock attempts to identify the cross with the Southern Cross constellation.<sup>436</sup> Aside from the fanciful nature of the interpretation, there are two immediate problems. First of all, the cross was a historical Roman means of execution used at the time and place where Jesus is said to have lived. Secondly, the Greek word *stauros* does not tell us the shape of the cross. If the evangelists wanted to identify the cross with a constellation, they could have been much clearer.

Murdock attempts to use this astrological interpretation to explain the length of Jesus' time in the tomb. She explains:

And after this time on December 25th, the sun moves one degree, this time north, foreshadowing longer days, warmth, and Spring. And thus it was said: the sun died on the cross, was dead for three days, only to be resurrected or born again. This is why Jesus and numerous other sun gods share the crucifixion, three-day death, and resurrection concept.<sup>437</sup>

The connection of the death of Jesus with December 25 is confusing, since it is unlikely that his birth is connected with it either. Also, despite her claims, Murdock has not demonstrated that the sun gods had actually been dead for three days. Finally, Jesus was not dead for three days. Jesus was raised on the third day and it is likely that he was actually in the tomb for approximately a day and a half. Murdock then moves to the placing of the death and resurrection near the spring equinox, assuming that once more it was astrologically symbolic.<sup>438</sup> A reading of the Gospels however, demonstrate that the timing of the passion and resurrection is based firmly in the Jewish concept of the Passover. Jesus is seen as the Passover lamb that takes away the sins of the world. There is a lack of solar imagery in the passion narrative. The one example of the sun turning dark is clearly a part of the Old Testament image of God's judgment.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 61.

<sup>437</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 63.

<sup>438</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 65.

<sup>439</sup> See Joel 2:10, Matthew 27:45.

Regarding the twelve disciples, Murdock claims:

Now, probably the most obvious of all the astrological symbolism around Jesus regards the 12 disciples. They are simply the 12 constellations of the Zodiac, which Jesus, being the Sun, travels about with.<sup>440</sup>

Murdock provides an impressive list of examples of the use of 'twelve' in biblical and pagan texts. There is no doubt that this number was highly symbolic in the ancient world. The question is: what role did the twelve disciples play in the biblical narrative? Scholars seem to agree that the twelve disciples were symbolic of a reconstitution of Israel with its twelve tribes.<sup>441</sup> There is also the important question of why the twelve are mentioned only once outside of the Gospels? It is also notable that the twelve disciples never received the unique personalities or characteristics of the twelve signs. Finally, there is the universal witness of the early church that the twelve were actual historical figures.

Murdock provides a creative and lengthy investigation into the astrological interpretations of the story of Jesus. Unfortunately, it is not convincing based on the biblical evidence. For example, Murdock relies mainly on the Matthean nativity account with its star and wise men to make the connections between Jesus and solar religions. However, Luke also presents the nativity without those same images, suggesting that the nativity was not based in solar religion. Murdock makes a great deal out of the concept of astrological ages.<sup>442</sup> It is not clear that even pagan religions were interpreted by such a scheme. However, it is only necessary to go so far as Jewish apocalyptic views to understand the interest in ages. Regarding the identification of Mary with the universal virgin figure, it must be noted that Paul never mention the virgin connection and Mary is only called a virgin three times in the New Testament (Matt 1:23, Luke 1:27, 34).

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<sup>440</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 65.

<sup>441</sup> R.T. France, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 176.

<sup>442</sup> *Sourcebook*, pp. 71-79.



Murdock plainly announces her theory:

Furthermore, the character of Jesus, being a literary and astrological hybrid, is most explicitly a plagiarization of the Egyptian sun god Horus. For example, inscribed about 3,500 years ago, on the walls at the Temple of Luxor in Egypt are images of the enunciation, the miracle conception, the birth, and the adoration of Horus. The images begin with Thoth announcing to the virgin Isis that she will conceive Horus, then Kneph the holy ghost impregnating the virgin, and then the virgin birth and the adoration.<sup>443</sup>

Murdock even reproduces the inscription for all to see the truth of the claim. However, atheist Richard Carrier disagrees. Carrier, who has a background in ancient history, notes the numerous errors made by Murdock. For example, not only are the names of the gods wrong, the conception of the child not virginal but the product of sexual intercourse between a god disguised as the husband and a mortal woman.<sup>444</sup> Referring to Murdock by her pseudonym, Carrier concludes:

Understanding their background and cultural and historical context is certainly helpful, and necessary, but it doesn't lead to any plagiaristic scandal of the sort Acharya S wants there to be. She may still be right that what we are told is actually a myth about Jesus, not historical fact, but that is a conclusion that requires a lot more evidence than what we find at Luxor.

This is another example of the author using the general ignorance regarding Egyptology to attempt to make a connection that is not there.

Justin Martyr, the early church father, is often cited as one who acknowledged the dependency of Christianity to pagan myths.<sup>445</sup> Taken out of context, Justin does seem to support the

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<sup>443</sup> *Sourcebook*, pp. 79.

<sup>444</sup> Richard C. Carrier "Brunner's Gottkoenigs & the Nativity of Jesus: A Brief Communication" [http://www.frontline-apologetics.com/Luxor\\_Inscription.html](http://www.frontline-apologetics.com/Luxor_Inscription.html)

<sup>445</sup> *Sourcebook*, pp. 89-90.

Jesus Myth hypothesis. However, it is important to read Justin's full text and to understand his role as a Christian philosopher. When Justin compares the virgin birth to pagan myths, he is not attempting to determine a line of dependance. Justin is simply attempting to demonstrate that the virgin birth and other miracles are rational and coherent claims even for people coming from a pagan background. Justin then goes on to contrast the story of Jesus with the myths, demonstrating that the Gospel is unique in its truth.

### **Was There a Historical Jesus?**

In order to make this interpretation secure, Jesus Mythicists often attempt to discredit the historicity of Jesus. Murdock quotes herself claiming:

We have no primary sources proving that Jesus Christ actually existed, no legal documents, no "glyphs," no papyri, no statuary, coins—nothing. All we have to go on is hearsay, the bulk of which is secondary, tertiary and so on. ...[O]nly two gospels are accepted as having come from alleged eyewitnesses, and these constitute but a few dozen pages with little biographical or historical material yet full of miracles, impossibilities and improbabilities. All the rest of Christian literature represents sources that are secondary and tertiary, etc.<sup>446</sup>

This statement is almost completely nonsensical. It could be asked: What Jewish religious leader ever had statuary or coins representing them? Jewish sensitivity toward graven images would make this almost impossible. Regarding original papyri, the climate of Jerusalem and surrounding area makes that also very unlikely. Regarding the sources that are available, Murdock misunderstands primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are simply the texts that we have that were written close to the events being described. All of the New Testament would be primary sources, with the later church fathers who cited the New Testament being secondary sources.

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<sup>446</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 92.

The Apostle Paul gives both early and valuable evidence of a historical Jesus.<sup>447</sup> Murdock is also mistaken regarding the biographical nature of the Gospels. Although they may not be twenty-first century biographies, they do fit well into first century biography.<sup>448</sup>

While there are some important Roman witnesses to early Christianity, one of the best extra-biblical evidences for the historical Jesus is that of Josephus. However, Murdock discounts this witness with this statement:

Despite the best wishes of sincere believers and the erroneous claims of truculent apologists, the *Testimonium Flavianum* has been demonstrated continually over the centuries to be a forgery, likely interpolated by Catholic Church historian Eusebius in the fourth century. So thorough and universal has been this debunking that very few scholars of repute continued to cite the passage after the turn of the 19th century. Indeed, the TF was rarely mentioned, except to note that it was a forgery, and numerous books by a variety of authorities over a period of 200 or so years basically took it for granted that the *Testimonium Flavianum* in its entirety was spurious, an interpolation and a forgery.<sup>449</sup>

Murdock is mistaken in this conclusion. It is true that Christians did modify Josephus' original statement about Jesus, but it is not true that it has been accepted as a complete forgery by scholars. It is also important to note that Josephus speaks of John the Baptist and James, who he identifies as the brother of Jesus.

What are scholars saying about this controversial passage? Steve Mason, today's foremost expert on Josephus states:

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<sup>447</sup> Stephen J. Bedard, "Paul and the Historical Jesus: A Case Study in First Corinthians," in *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 2006 7:9-22.

<sup>448</sup> Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 2004).

<sup>449</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 94.

The vast majority of commentators hold a middle position between authenticity and inauthenticity, claiming that Josephus wrote *something* about Jesus that was subsequently edited by Christian copyists. Such a view has the best of both worlds, for it recognizes all of the problems with the passage as well as the factors that support its authenticity.<sup>450</sup>

Mason then concludes with these wise words that put this question in its scholarly context: “since most of those who know the evidence agree that he said something about Jesus, one is probably entitled to cite him as independent evidence that Jesus actually lived, if such evidence were needed.”<sup>451</sup> Raymond Brown notes: “In vocabulary and style large parts of it are plausibly from the hand of Josephus; and the context in which the passage appears in *Ant.* (i.e., among the early unpleasant relations involving the Jewish leaders and Pilate is appropriate.”<sup>452</sup>

It is true that there seems to be some Christian interpolation to what Josephus has originally written about Jesus, but it is within our power to reconstruct a likely original form of the passage.<sup>453</sup> Here is one possible version:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man... For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks... When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for

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<sup>450</sup> Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, Hendrickson, 2003), p. 235.

<sup>451</sup> Mason, p. 236.

<sup>452</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 374

<sup>453</sup> F.F. Bruce offers a number of alternatives to explain how find the original text in our current Christianized version. F.F. Bruce, *New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), pp. 108-12.

him... And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.<sup>454</sup>

The fact that there was once an original testimony by Josephus to Jesus without the Christian additions is supported by Origen's remarks that Josephus did not accept Jesus as being the Christ.<sup>455</sup> There is no manuscript evidence that the *Testimonium Flavianum* was a complete insertion into Josephus' writing and so it is safe to say that there is strong non-biblical evidence for the historical existence of Jesus.<sup>456</sup>

The question could be asked: Why is there not more evidence?<sup>457</sup> This must be countered with the question: What other evidence should be expected? Should there be Roman legal records? There would have been thousands of trials throughout the Roman Empire and we have almost no records of any but the most famous Romans. It is not as if Jesus' records are the only ones missing. Should there be written records by the people who witnessed the miracles? The literacy rate was relatively low and so it is not surprising that they are missing. In addition, such records would have likely been destroyed by now. It is very likely that some of the eyewitness accounts did make it into the biblical accounts. Paul seemed to think that there were eyewitnesses who were available at his time that people could interview (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

If Murdock and other Jesus Mythicists are correct, one could ask: How did the world come to believe that Jesus was a historical figure? Murdock has an answer:

It was the political establishment that sought to historicize the Jesus figure for social control. In 325 A.D. in Rome, Emperor Constantine convened the

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<sup>454</sup> Loeb Classical Library, modified by Stanley Porter. Porter and Bedard, p. 142.

<sup>455</sup> *Contra Celsum* i. 47, *Commentary on Matthew* x. 17. See *Jesus Legend*, pp. 196-97.

<sup>456</sup> Eddy and Boyd deal with all the questions of authenticity. Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *Jesus Legend* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), pp. 190-98.

<sup>457</sup> Murdock, herself asks this question. *Sourcebook*, p. 96.

Council of Nicea. It was during this meeting that the politically motivated Christian doctrines were established and thus began a long history of religious bloodshed and spiritual fraud.<sup>458</sup>

There are many things wrong with this statement. First of all, there are many comments by church fathers before Nicea that Jesus was understood as historical.<sup>459</sup> Secondly, the purpose of Nicea was not to determine the historicity of Jesus.<sup>460</sup> Nicea was convened to deal with the Arian controversy that claimed that Jesus was a divine creature rather than the co-eternal Son. While Constantine makes a convenient scapegoat to blame anything that later critics dislike, Murdock can find no support for her theory at Nicea.

### Conclusion

The *Zeitgeist* movie has garnered an incredible amount of popularity. What it has not demonstrated is historical evidence or scholarly support its claims about the historical Jesus. D.M. Murdock has attempted to provide this evidence with her astrological interpretation, Egyptian comparison and concerns about historicity. It seems likely that there were some pagan influences on Christianity, especially in later depictions of Mary and the dating for certain celebrations. What is lacking is evidence that pagan myths influenced the biblical texts themselves. Those who are considering the theory that Christianity is the latest version of a pagan solar myth, should not rely on the conspiracy-laden claims of Jesus Mythicists such as D.M. Murdock, but should read the New Testament, Church Fathers and Egyptian myths for themselves. Such a study may lead to the conclusion that Christianity is the story of the unique Jesus and not a pagan counterfeit.

Rudolf Bultmann, a liberal scholar far from being an evangelical defender of the faith, said: "It is clear, first of all,

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<sup>458</sup> *Sourcebook*, p. 99.

<sup>459</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.22.1-6; Origen, *De Principiis* Preface 4.

<sup>460</sup> Nor was it to determine the canon, despite popular beliefs.

that the Christ occurrence is not a myth like the cult myths of the Greek or Hellenistic gods.”<sup>461</sup> Burton Mack, member of the controversial Jesus Seminar, should be quoted at length:

As for the notion of “dying and rising gods,” it is true that a death of some kind can be found in each of the mythologies of these cults, but none of them describes the deity’s destiny as one of dying and rising. Persephone is abducted, then lives alternatively in the upper and lower worlds, as does vegetation. Dionysos does not die in most of his myths, though his vine gets pruned, his celebrations were ecstatic and orgiastic, and one of his animals might be killed and eaten by Maenads (female votaries of Dionysos). Only the Orphics imagined that the Titans killed, roasted, and ate Dionysos before Zeus incinerated the Titans, and from their ashes arose the human race, part evil from the Titans, part divine from Dionysos, thus calling for an ascetic way of life. Adonis is killed by a wild boar and mourned by Aphrodite in some versions of his myth; in others he spends part of the year with Persephone in the underworld. Attis pledged his fidelity to Cybele, the Great Mother of the wild mountains, but fell under the spell of a nymph, and so, in a frenzy, he castrated himself and thus became immune to human desires. Osiris was the mythic king of Egypt, killed by his brother Seth and “awakened” by Isis to father Horus the next king, but he remained in the underworld as its sovereign and judge. Mithras does not die, though he slays Taurus the bull as a sign of his cosmic and military powers. So it has become clear that Frazer and other scholars misread these myths and rituals. They had the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in mind when reading them, and thought of the mystery religions as precursors and parallels to Christianity, offering eternal

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<sup>461</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament Theology and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), p. 32.

life on the basis of a myth-ritual dramatization of a violent death and return to life.<sup>462</sup>

Thus, despite its popularity, the *Zeigeist* movie and other examples of the Jesus Myth should be seen for what they are: appeals to the human interest in conspiracy theories rather than the results of extensive research and scholarship.

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<sup>462</sup> Burton L. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation* (Indonesia: Equinox, 2008), p. 110.