

The Myth of the Pagan Origins of Easter (Jesus of Nazareth's Resurrection)

You may not get any chocolate bunnies this Easter, but you're bound to stumble across an article or meme suggesting that [the story of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead is just a reincarnation of some pagan myth](#). Whether it's Ishtar, Osiris, or Attis, these claims are [tantalizing but devoid of scholarly content](#)—much like the sugar rush of the chocolate bunny, with its deficit of actual nourishment.

Claims like these are at least as old as [James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*](#), published in 1890. However, they circulate routinely in new packaging. Unfortunately, the public tends to remain ignorant of the results of alternative scholarship. Sensationalism (like sex) sells. So does controversy. And when the sensation or the controversy revolves around beliefs that millions believe in whole-heartedly, sorting fact from fiction becomes increasingly difficult.

I do not propose to decisively solve any questions about faith or belief. As a church historian, I only aim to brush aside the cobwebs of sensationalism and summarize some of the facts that many serious historians and theologians agree on.

Nor will I try to explain or justify many of the cultural traditions and practices surrounding Easter. There seems to be an [undoubted influence of pre-Christian cultures on Easter](#) as we know it, as well as an evolution of the holiday itself in the U.S. within the last 200 years. We don't have to explain or justify Easter eggs in order to doubt claims that Easter is really a pagan festival.

Two questions deserve careful discussion this Easter season:

is the story of Jesus' death and resurrection influenced by the stories and legends of other "dying saviors"? Secondly, what evidence do we have that might explain why his early followers so firmly believed in his resurrection from the dead?

The first century was filled with many "mystery religions" and many of them centered on stories where a god, or legendary figure, would die and then rise again. Some of the more popular "mystery religions" included the Eleusinian mysteries (centered around the stories of Demeter and Persephone), Mithraism, the devotees of Isis and Osiris, the Dionysian mysteries, and the cult of the "Great Mother"—Cybele, and her consort Attis.

These secretive groups observed rituals that involved self-castration, sacrificing a bull and having the initiate positioned under the sacrifice to drink the blood, "sacred" prostitution, and my personal favorite—followers of Dionysus (god of wine) getting totally drunk and tearing apart a live goat or fawn. So, while these groups may have had some similarities to the emerging Christian movement, the differences were rather stark.

The differences are also apparent when we compare the various "dying god" stories and the Christian story. Even a "Christ mythicist" (someone who believes that Jesus never existed) like [Richard Carrier admits](#) that he can only find two "resurrected" figures who bear an uncanny resemblance to the Jesus story. Professor Ronald Nash [highlighted the differences](#):

- "None of the so-called savior-gods died for someone else ...
- "Only Jesus died for sin ..." The other "dying-gods" tend to die because of accidents or quarrels.
- "Jesus died once and for all" according to the teachings

of the New Testament. Other stories involve the “god” dying every year, corresponding to changing seasons.

- The early followers of Jesus clearly believed that their leader had risen in actual fact. In contrast, “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.”
- “Unlike the mystery gods, Jesus died voluntarily.”
- Lastly, according to the Biblical writers, “Jesus’ death was not a defeat but a triumph ... 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.”

Bart Ehrman, noted New Testament scholar, best-selling author of *Misquoting Jesus*, and former conservative Christian, [summarizes](#): “The alleged parallels between Jesus and the ‘pagan’ savior-gods in most instances reside in the modern imagination: We do not have accounts of others who were born to virgin mothers and who died as an atonement for sin and then were raised from the dead (despite what the sensationalists claim ad nauseum in their propagandized versions).”

None of this denies that there aren’t some similarities between the “dying gods” and the Jesus narrative. It is a plea for caution and restraint in claiming that the Jesus narrative was just another riff on the Ishtar story. Such a claim would ring hollow to the first century Jews who followed Jesus.

A second question to ponder: What would have to happen for the first followers of Jesus to concoct the outrageous story that their beloved leader had risen bodily from the dead?

This idea was not part of the Greco-Roman thought world (who believed the body was generally a nasty encumbrance for the pure soul) or ancestral Judaism (which tended to teach that the “resurrection of the dead” would happen to all the

righteous ones, at the end of history).

In his article contra “Christ mythicism” [Dr. Ehrman concludes with a significant admission](#). Even though Ehrman is no believer in the divinity of Jesus, he admits that *something* changed the minds of Jesus’ followers:

“... aspects of the Jesus story simply would not have been invented by anyone wanting to make up a new Savior. The earliest followers of Jesus declared that he was a crucified messiah. But prior to Christianity, there were no Jews at all, of any kind whatsoever, who thought that there would be a future crucified messiah. The messiah was to be a figure of grandeur and power who overthrew the enemy. Anyone who wanted to make up a messiah would make him like that. Why did the Christians not do so? Because they believed specifically that Jesus was the Messiah. And they knew full well that he was crucified. The Christians did not invent Jesus. They invented the idea that the messiah had to be crucified.”

I would differ with Dr. Erhaman only in his last statement. The first Christians were totally shocked that their leader was tortured and crucified. This didn’t fit with the trajectory of his life, or with their sacred stories. They were expecting a leader to liberate them from the Roman oppressors. Instead, the life of Jesus ended with him being stripped naked and brutalized by the most painful methods known to the Roman soldiers.

That should have ended the messianic movement; Jesus should have been simply one among hundreds of others upstart Jewish leaders and would-be “Messiahs.” Only, it didn’t. The movement continued, grew, and conquered the Roman conquerors.

Although it’s outside the realm of historical proof, many today still believe the impossible actually happened: a Savior of mankind rose from the dead, conquering the grave.

And that is why they celebrate Easter.

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