

PAGAN PARALLELS TO THE VIRGIN BIRTH

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"The first to plead his case seems just,
until another comes and examines him."

Proverbs 18:17

Anti-missionaries love the 'pagan parallel' argument. Despite numerous rebuttals to the concept, this lingering idea never seems to die. What's more astounding is that anti-missionaries do not apply the same rules to themselves, as they do others. One of the most famous "parallels" is in the virginal conception and birth of the Messiah.

What the anti-missionaries do not take into account, nor mention, are the pagan parallels to the Tanakh, and even more specifically the birth of Moshe himself! As this pagan document states,

"Sargon, the great king of Akkad, am I. Of my father I know only his name.... Otherwise I know nothing of him. My father's brother lived in the mountains. My mother was a priestess whom no man should have known. She brought me into the world secretly.... She took a basket of reeds, placed me inside it, covered it with pitch and placed me in the River Euphrates. And the river, without which the land cannot live, carried me through part of my future kingdom. The river did not rise over me, but carried me high and bore me along to Akki who fetched water to irrigate the fields. Akki made a gardener of me. In the garden that I cultivated, Inanna (the great goddess) saw me. She took me to Kish to the court of King Urzabala. There I called myself Sargon, that is, the rightful king."¹

Stephen Van Eck notes the similarities of, "Being placed in a basket sealed with pitch and set adrift on a river is the story of Sargon of Akkad, the first regional conqueror, who had lived more than a thousand years before Moses. The story of how he was set adrift in a basket on the River Euphrates was inscribed on an Akkadian Stela."²

Apparently, the "anti-missionaries" are not applying the same rules to themselves as they do others. "Unequal weights and measures", is one of the **most common anti-missionary traits** amidst their arguments against the New Testament, especially when dealing with numerical, doctrinal, and historical

1. Stephen Van Eck, *The Pentateuch: Not Wholly Moses or Even Partial*
URL: <http://www.infidels.org/library/magazines/tsr/1999/5/995moses.htm>

2. Ibid.

discrepancies. This brings us to the most important question: Are there any real, substantial parallels to the virgin birth of the Messiah?

APPROACHING THE "PARALLEL ARGUMENT"

When one approaches the pagan parallel concept, extreme caution is needed, as noted by Glenn Miller,

“There is a surprising tendency of scholars of all persuasions to **adopt Christian terminology** in describing non-Christian religions, rituals, myths, etc. (e.g. "baptism", the "Last Supper"). [Joseph Campbell is sometimes a good example of this.] Sometimes this is done to establish some conceptual link for the reader, but often it borders on misleading the reader. Too often a writer uses such terminology imprecisely in describing a non-Christian element and then expresses shock in finding such similarities between the religions! This is highly misleading, and borders on the irresponsible and inexcusable. Complex matters such a religious myth and rite demand much more cautious and careful approaches.”³

With that established, one must also be careful of outdated or biased scholarship. A good example of this is when one proudly says, "There were 16 god/man saviors, virgin born, and resurrected before Jesus." One book that an anti-missionary referred me to was Kersey Graves' *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors* which appears on the internet at probably the most prominent atheist site on the net, Infidels.org. What is really amazing is the warning the atheistic web site places on the very URL the "anti-missionary" referred me to! It appears as follows,

“Note: the scholarship of Kersey Graves has been questioned by numerous freethinkers; the inclusion of *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors* in the Secular Web's Historical Library does not constitute endorsement by Internet Infidels, Inc. This document was included for historical purposes; readers should be extremely cautious in trusting anything in this book.”⁴

Here is the quite possibly the largest atheist web site on the internet warning its readers of the scholarship in this book. Glenn Miller aptly comments on a different work, which proposes the same ideas,

"[This] abysmal piece on "Origins of Christianity" cited by some who come through the ThinkTank - besides being riddled with gross errors of fact and method - **does not cite a SINGLE scholarly work** dealing with primary materials, and its main supports are from works **hopelessly out of date** . . . 2) mix such non-documented assertions with statements supported only by secondary materials - e.g. Barbara Walker's *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. [I have been told by a prominent skeptic on the web that these works are considered 'embarrassments' to their cause.]⁵

3. Glenn Miller, Was Jesus a Copycat Savior Myth? URL: <http://www.messianicart.com/chazak/copycat.html>

4. *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors*, URL: http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/kersey_graves/16/

5. Glenn Miller, Was Jesus a Copycat Savior Myth? URL: <http://www.messianicart.com/chazak/copycat.html>

VALIDITY OF THE QUESTION

With that caution in mind, let's examine the original question. Raymond E. Brown correctly identifies that,

"the validity of these parallels hinges on three points. Would such legends or traditions have been known to Christians in NT times so that they could have influenced the idea of the virginal conception of Jesus? . . . How attractive or acceptable would these pagan legends have been to Greek-speaking Jewish Christians? . . . Are any of these divinely engendered births really parallel to the non-sexual virginal conception of Jesus described in the NT. . .?"⁶

The last question is the most pertinent. Glenn Miller perfectly noted above that, "there is a surprising tendency of scholars of all persuasions to adopt Christian terminology in describing non-Christian religions, rituals, myths. . ." He goes on to illustrate this claim,

"A good example of this would be the rite of the Tauroboleum, [in which] it a priest stood in a pit under a plank floor containing a bull (or lamb, for reasons of expense-control). The animal was slaughtered and the blood of the animal fell upon the priest below. Predictably, **some writers have used the phrase "washed in the blood of the Lamb"** to describe this ceremony. Besides the HUGE chronological problem that this rite is not **evidenced for at least 150 years after the close of the NT(!)**, the problem is one of identifying the point of the ritual. Was it a 'washing', was it a 'consumption', or was it a 'union with' the Bull (or more likely, the destruction/defeat of the bull, as it was in the later Mithraic versions of this rite)? . . .

To automatically put it into the category of 'washed in the blood of the Lamb' (Rev 7.14) or 'sprinkled with the blood of Jesus' (I Pet 1.2) is considerably presumptuous, given the paucity of the data. We don't know the meaning of the ceremony at all, other than that it was for the consecration of a priest . . ."⁷

The most important observation relevant to the discussion is the attempt to describe the ritual with New Testament terminology, i.e. 'washed in the blood of the Lamb.' A similar occurrence, of course, follows suit in describing the miraculous births of pagan gods. Miraculous births are not foreign to Judaism at all, as several are recorded in the Tanakh⁸. As a matter of fact, these miraculous births are the prophetic structure and background of Yeshua's birth.⁹ As previously noted, scholars describe in Christian terminology pagan events and ideas. Glenn Miller again notes,

"Another very common alleged similarity is the virgin birth. Other religious figures, especially warrior gods (and actually some heroic human figures such as Alexander the Great) over time became associated with some form of miraculous birth, occasionally connected with virginity. It is all too easy to simply accept this on face value without investigating further."¹⁰

Some have claimed that Buddha, along with a host of other pagan 'gods', also have had virgin births. As Josh McDowell notes,

"Some have attempted to account for the virgin birth by tracing it to Greek or Babylonian mythology. They argue that the Gospel writers borrowed this story from the mythology of their

6. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, pg. 523

7. Glenn Miller, *Was Jesus a Copycat Savior Myth?* URL: <http://www.messianicart.com/chazak/copycat.html>

8. See the conceptions and births of Isaac, Jacob, Samson, Samuel.

9. See our article, *The Mystery of the Mem*

10. Glenn Miller, *Was Jesus a Copycat Savior Myth?* URL: <http://www.messianicart.com/chazak/copycat.html>

day. This view does not fit the facts, for there is not any hero in pagan mythology for which a virgin birth is claimed, and moreover it would be unthinkable to the Jewish mind to construct such a story from mythology. "Many deities among Greeks, Babylonians and Egyptians were reported born in an unusual manner, but for the most part these beings never actually existed. The accounts are filled with obvious mythological elements which are totally absent from the Gospel narratives. They are reports of a god or goddess being born into the world by sexual relations between some heavenly being or by some adulterous affair among the gods and goddess."¹¹

In almost all of the pagan parallels, a god or a goddess has **sexual intercourse** with the woman/goddess. The exception to the fact is the son of Zoroaster, who was reported to have been conceived by a virgin bathing in a lake, which Zoroaster spilled his seed in before his death. Brown notes, "It is also difficult to date the tradition that, after Zoroaster's death, his seed which had been preserved in a body of cold water impregnated a virgin who bathed therein."¹² Brown also mentions four "seeming exceptions" but says, "I show that divine intercourse is really presupposed in all four." One fact, among many, which has seemed to escape the minds of the 'pagan parallel proponents', is that **after sexual intercourse, you are no longer a virgin**. However, the 'virgin birth parallel' argument still continues to be claimed by the skeptics. Brown perfectly questions,

“AFTER SEXUAL
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"Are any of these divinely engendered births really parallel to the non-sexual union virginal conception of Jesus described in the NT, where Mary is not impregnated by a male deity or element, but the child is begotten through the creative power of the Holy Spirit? These "parallels" consistently involve a type of *hieros gamos* where a divine male, in human or other form, impregnates a woman, either through normal sexual intercourse or through some substitute form of penetration. In short, there is no clear example of *virginal* conception in world or pagan religions that plausibly could have given first-century Jewish Christians the idea of the virginal conception of Jesus."¹³

It could be noted that Buddha's mother did not have sexual intercourse, however, Brown notes that Boslooper in *Virgin Birth*, "states that the most ancient Buddhism knew nothing of the virginity of the Buddha's mother, and that later came the tradition of her conception from the white elephant who entered her side."¹⁴

THEIR CRUMBLING CASE

Unfortunately for the anti-missionaries their case crumbles when raising the tired idea of the virgin birth, pagan parallel argument. As Brown notes that, "Despite claims to the contrary, Alexandrian paganism had no myths of virginal conceptions by the mothers of the Pharaohs - only myths of male gods using their divine seed to beget royal children of women."¹⁵ And that, "when, after the first century, Christians did compare the virginal conception of Jesus to the pagan birth legends, they could see no affinity but rather a sharp contrast between the two," citing Tertullian Apologeticum XV, XXI, Origen Against Celsus I:37. Just simply studying the miraculous births of the pagan gods and leaders, doesn't

11. Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, pg. 189-190

12. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, pg. 523

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, pg. 523

strike one as parallel to Messiah Yeshua's birth, but rather grossly distinct from their mythological stories. As Dr. Thomas Thorburn notes,

"All these various stories of supernatural conceptions and births, which we meet with in folklore and the history of mythology, have this one point in common - they serve to point not so much to the similarity as to the complete contrast and dissimilarity which exists between the Christian birth-story and the tales which are current in various pagan circles."¹⁶

So, to answer the question, and the anti-missionaries: No, the pagan birth stories are not parallel to the miraculous birth of the King Messiah and the concept of the virgin birth is not borrowed from them. It is rather rooted in the background of the miraculous births in the Tanakh. The lesson learned is that one must be critical of wild claims, and research what you read thoroughly. Sadly many have failed to do this, and thus, the need to write this paper. As the brilliant apologist J.P. Holding states,

"In spite of having been pronounced dead even by intelligent skeptics, the thesis that Judaism and Christianity consist merely of stolen pagan myths and ideas continues to be promulgated by the uncritical and accepted by the gullible."¹⁷

16. Cited in Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, pg. 190

17. *Confronting the Copycat Thesis*, Tektonics.org, http://www.tektonics.org/tekton_04_02_04.html