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THE JESUS MYSTERIES



WAS THE "ORIGINAL JESUS"
A PAGAN GOD?

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The Unthinkable Thought

'Jesus said, "It is to those who are worthy of my Mysteries that I tell my Mysteries." '

The Gospel of Thomas

On the site where the Vatican now stands there once stood a Pagan temple. Here Pagan priests observed sacred ceremonies which early Christians found so disturbing that they tried to erase all evidence of them ever having been practised. What were these shocking Pagan rites? Gruesome sacrifices or obscene orgies perhaps? This is what we have been led to believe. But the truth is far stranger than this fiction.

Where today the gathered faithful revere their Lord Jesus Christ, the ancients worshipped another godman who, like Jesus, had been miraculously born on 25 December before three shepherds. In this ancient sanctuary Pagan congregations once glorified a Pagan redeemer who, like Jesus, was said to have ascended to heaven and to have promised to come again at the end of time to judge the quick and the dead. On the same spot where the Pope celebrates the Catholic mass, Pagan priests also celebrated a symbolic meal of bread and wine in memory of their saviour who, just like Jesus, had declared:

'He who will not eat of my body and drink of my blood, so that he will be made one with me and I with him, the same shall not know salvation.' 2

When we began to uncover such extraordinary similarities between the story of Jesus and Pagan myth we were stunned. We had been brought up in a culture which portrays Paganism and Christianity as entirely antagonistic religious perspectives. How could such astonishing resemblances be explained? We were intrigued and began to search further. The more we looked, the more resemblances we found. To account for the wealth of evidence we were unearthing we felt compelled to completely review our understanding of the relationship between Paganism and Christianity, to question beliefs that we previously regarded as unquestionable and to imagine possibilities which at first seemed impossible. Some readers will find our conclusions shocking and others heretical, but for us they are merely the simplest and most obvious way of accounting for the evidence we have amassed.

We have become convinced that the story of Jesus is not the biography of an 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'. It may sound farfetched at first, just as it did initially to us. There is, after all, a great deal of unsubstantiated nonsense written about the 'real' Jesus, so any revolutionary theory should be approached with a healthy dose of scepticism. But although this book makes extraordinary claims, it is not just entertaining fantasy or sensational speculation. It is firmly based upon the available historical sources and the latest scholarly research. Whilst we hope to have made it accessible to the general reader, we have also included copious notes giving sources, references and greater detail for those who wish to analyse our arguments more thoroughly.

Although still radical and challenging today, many of the ideas we explore are actually far from new. As long ago as the Renaissance, mystics and scholars saw the origins of

Christianity in the ancient Egyptian religion. Visionary scholars at the turn of the nineteenth century also made comparable conjectures to our own. In recent decades, modern academics have repeatedly pointed towards the possibilities we consider. Yet few have dared to boldly state the obvious conclusions which we have drawn. Why? Because to do so is taboo.

For 2,000 years the West has been dominated by the idea that Christianity is sacred and unique, whilst Paganism is primitive and the work of the Devil. To even consider that they could be parts of the same tradition has been simply unthinkable. Therefore, although the true origins of Christianity have been obvious all along, few have been able to see them, because to do so requires a radical break with the conditioning of our culture. Our contribution has been to dare to think the unthinkable and to present our conclusions in a popular book rather than some dry academic tome. This is certainly not the last word on this complex subject, but we hope it may be a significant call for a complete reappraisal of the origins of Christianity.

THE PAGAN MYSTERIES

In Greek tragedies the chorus reveals the fate of the protagonists before the play begins. Sometimes it is easier to understand the journey if one is already aware of the destination and the terrain to be covered. Before diving deeper into detail, therefore, we would like to retrace our process of discovery and so provide a brief overview of the book.

We had shared an obsession with world mysticism all our lives which recently had led us to explore spirituality in the ancient world. Popular understanding inevitably lags a long way behind the cutting edge of scholarly research and, like most people, we initially had an inaccurate and out-dated view of Paganism. We had been taught to see it as a superstitious culture which indulged in idol worship and bloody sacrifice, and dry philosophers wearing togas stumbling blindly towards what we today call 'science'. We were familiar with various Greek myths which showed the partisan and capricious nature of the Olympian gods and goddesses. All in all, Paganism seemed primitive and fundamentally alien. After many years of study, however, our understanding has been transformed.

Pagan spirituality was actually the sophisticated product of a highly developed culture. The state religions, such as the Greek worship of the Olympian gods, were little more than outer pomp and ceremony. The real spirituality of the people expressed itself through the vibrant and mystical 'Mystery religions'. At first underground and heretical movements, these Mysteries spread and flourished throughout the ancient Mediterranean, inspiring the greatest minds of the Pagan world, who regarded them as the very source of civilization.

Each Mystery tradition had exoteric Outer Mysteries, consisting of myths which were common knowledge and rituals which were open to anyone who wanted to participate. There were also esoteric Inner Mysteries, which were a sacred secret only known to those who had undergone a powerful process of initiation. Initiates of the Inner Mysteries had the mystical meaning of the rituals and myths of the Outer Mysteries revealed to them, a process which brought about personal transformation and spiritual enlightenment.

The philosophers of the ancient world were the spiritual masters of the Inner Mysteries. They were mystics and miracle-workers, more comparable to Hindu gurus than dusty academics. The great Greek philosopher Pythagoras, for example, is remembered today for his mathematical theorem, but few people picture him as he actually was – a flamboyant sage who was believed to be able to miraculously still the winds and raise the dead.

At the heart of the Mysteries were myths concerning a dying and resurrecting godman, who was known by many different names. In Egypt he was Osiris, in Greece Dionysus, in Asia

Minor Attis, in Syria Adonis, in Italy Bacchus, in Persia Mithras. Fundamentally all these godmen are the same mythical being. As was the practice from as early as the third century BCE.⁴ in this book we will use the combined name 'Osiris-Dionysus' to denote his universal and composite nature, and his particular names when referring to a specific Mystery tradition.

From the fifth century BCE philosophers such as Xenophanes and Empedocles had ridiculed taking the stories of the gods and goddesses literally. They viewed them as allegories of human spiritual experience. The myths of Osiris-Dionysus should not be understood as just intriguing tales, therefore, but as a symbolic language which encodes the mystical teachings of the Inner Mysteries. Because of this, although the details were developed and adapted over time by different cultures, the myth of Osiris-Dionysus has remained essentially the same.

The various myths of the different godmen of the Mysteries share what the great mythologist Joseph Campbell called 'the same anatomy'. Just as every human is physically unique yet it is possible to talk of the general anatomy of the human body, so with these different myths it is possible to see both their uniqueness and fundamental sameness. A helpful comparison may be the relationship between Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Bernstein's *West Side Story*. One is a sixteenth-century English tragedy about wealthy Italian families, whilst the other is a twentieth-century American musical about street gangs. On the face of it they look very different, yet they are essentially the same story. Similarly, the tales told about the godmen of the Pagan Mysteries are essentially the same, although they take different forms.

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 relating to Osiris-Dionysus:

- Osiris-Dionysus is God made flesh, the saviour 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 25 December 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 honour 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? Because, as we were to discover later, the early Roman Church did everything in its power to prevent us perceiving them. It systematically destroyed Pagan sacred literature in a brutal programme of eradicating the Mysteries - a task it performed so completely that today Paganism is regarded as a 'dead' religion.

Although surprising to us now, to writers of the first few centuries CE these similarities between the new Christian religion and the ancient Mysteries were extremely obvious. Pagan critics of Christianity, such as the satirist Celsus, complained that this recent religion was nothing

more than a pale reflection of their own ancient teachings. Early 'Church fathers', such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Irenaeus, were understandably disturbed and resorted to the desperate claim that these similarities were the result of 'diabolical mimicry'. Using one of the most absurd arguments ever advanced, they accused the Devil of 'plagiarism by anticipation', of deviously copying the true story of Jesus before it had actually happened in an attempt to mislead the gullible! These Church fathers struck us as no less devious than the Devil they hoped to incriminate.

Other Christian commentators have claimed that the myths of the Mysteries were like 'pre-echoes' of the literal coming of Jesus, somewhat like premonitions or prophecies. This is a more generous version of the 'diabolical mimicry' theory, but seemed no less ridiculous to us. There was nothing other than cultural prejudice to make us see the Jesus story as the literal culmination of its many mythical precursors. Viewed impartially, it appeared to be just another version of the same basic story.

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. This is a possibility that is even put forward by many Christian theologians. The virgin birth, for example, is often regarded as an extraneous later addition that should not be understood literally. Such motifs were 'borrowed' from Paganism in the same way that Pagan festivals were adopted as Christian saints' days. This theory is common amongst those who go looking for the 'real' Jesus hidden under the weight of accumulated mythological debris.

Attractive as it appears at first, to us this explanation seemed inadequate. We had collated such a comprehensive body of similarities that there remained hardly any significant elements in the biography of Jesus that we did not find prefigured by the Mysteries. On top of this, we discovered that even Jesus' teachings were not original, but had been anticipated by the Pagan sages! If there was a 'real' Jesus somewhere underneath all this, we would have to acknowledge that we could know absolutely nothing about him, for all that remained for us was later Pagan accretions! Such a position seemed absurd. Surely there was a more elegant solution to this conundrum?

THE Gnostics

Whilst we were puzzling over these discoveries, we began to question the received picture of the early Church and have a look at the evidence for ourselves. We discovered that far from being the united congregation of saints and martyrs that traditional history would have us believe, the early Christian community was actually made up of a whole spectrum of different groups. These can be broadly categorized into two different schools. On the one hand there were those we will call 'Literalists', because what defines them is that they take the Jesus story as a literal account of historical events. It was this school of Christianity that was adopted by the Roman Empire in the fourth century CE, becoming Roman Catholicism and all its subsequent offshoots. On the other hand, however, there were also radically different Christians known as 'Gnostics'.⁵

These forgotten Christians were later persecuted out of existence by the Literalist Roman Church with such thoroughness that until recently we knew little about them except through the writings of their detractors. Only a handful of original Gnostic texts survived, none of which were published before the nineteenth century. This situation changed dramatically, however, with a remarkable discovery in 1945 when an Arab peasant stumbled upon a whole library of Gnostic gospels hidden in a cave near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. This gave scholars access to many texts which were in wide circulation amongst early Christians, but which were deliberately

excluded from the canon of the New Testament - gospels attributed to Thomas and Philip, texts recording the acts of Peter and the 12 disciples, apocalypses attributed to Paul and James, and so on.

It seemed to us extraordinary that a whole library of early Christian documents could be discovered, containing what purport to be the teachings of Christ and his disciples, and yet so few modern followers of Jesus should even know of their existence. Why hasn't every Christian rushed out to read these newly discovered words of the Master? What keeps them confined to the small number of gospels selected for inclusion in the New Testament? It seems that even though 2,000 years have passed since the Gnostics were purged, during which time the Roman Church has split into Protestantism and thousands of other alternative groups, the Gnostics are still not regarded as a legitimate voice of Christianity.

Those who do explore the Gnostic gospels discover a form of Christianity quite alien to the religion with which they are familiar. We found ourselves studying strange esoteric tracts with titles such as Hypostasis of the Archons and The Thought of Norea. It felt as if we were in an episode of Star Trek - and in a way we were. The Gnostics truly were 'psychonauts' who boldly explored the final frontiers of inner space, searching for the origins and meaning of life. These people were mystics and creative free-thinkers. It was obvious to us why they were so hated by the bishops of the Literalist Church hierarchy.

To Literalists, the Gnostics were dangerous heretics. In volumes of anti-Gnostic works - an unintentional testimony to the power and influence of Gnosticism within early Christianity - they painted them as Christians who had 'gone native'. They claimed they had become contaminated by the Paganism that surrounded them and had abandoned the purity of the true faith. The Gnostics, on the other hand, saw themselves as the authentic Christian tradition and the orthodox bishops as an 'imitation church'.⁶ They claimed to know the secret Inner Mysteries of Christianity which the Literalists did not possess.

As we explored the beliefs and practices of the Gnostics we became convinced that the Literalists had at least been right about one thing: the Gnostics were little different from Pagans. Like the philosophers of the Pagan Mysteries, they believed in reincarnation, honoured the goddess Sophia and were immersed in the mystical Greek philosophy of Plato. 'Gnostics' means 'Knowers', a name they acquired because, like the initiates of the Pagan Mysteries, they believed that their secret teachings had the power to impart 'Gnosis' - direct experiential 'Knowledge of God'. Just as the goal of a Pagan initiate was to become a god, so for the Gnostics the goal of the Christian initiate was to become a Christ.

What particularly struck us was that the Gnostics were not concerned with the historical Jesus. They viewed the Jesus story in the same way that the Pagan philosophers viewed the myths of Osiris-Dionysus - as an allegory which encoded secret mystical teachings. This insight crystallized for us a remarkable possibility. Perhaps the explanation for the similarities between Pagan myths and the biography of Jesus had been staring us in the face the whole time, but we had been so caught up with traditional ways of thinking that we had been unable to see it.

THE JESUS MYSTERIES THESIS

The traditional version of history bequeathed to us by the authorities of the Roman Church is that Christianity developed from the teachings of a Jewish Messiah and that Gnosticism was a later deviation. What would happen, we wondered, if the picture were reversed and Gnosticism viewed as the authentic Christianity, just as the Gnostics themselves claimed? Could it be that orthodox Christianity was a later deviation from Gnosticism and that Gnosticism was a

synthesis of Judaism and the Pagan Mystery religion? This was the beginning of the Jesus Mysteries Thesis.

Boldly stated, the picture that emerged for us was as follows. We knew that most ancient Mediterranean cultures had adopted the ancient Mysteries, adapting them to their own national tastes and creating their own version of the myth of the dying and resurrecting godman. Perhaps some of the Jews had, likewise, adopted the Pagan Mysteries and created their own version of the Mysteries, which we now know as Gnosticism. Perhaps initiates of the Jewish Mysteries had adapted the potent symbolism of the Osiris-Dionysus myths into a myth of their own, the hero of which was the Jewish dying and resurrecting godman Jesus.

If this was so, then the Jesus story was not a biography at all but a consciously crafted vehicle for encoded spiritual teachings created by Jewish Gnostics. As in the Pagan Mysteries, initiation into the Inner Mysteries would reveal the myth's allegorical meaning. Perhaps those uninitiated into the Inner Mysteries had mistakenly come to regard the Jesus myth as historical fact and in this way Literalist Christianity had been created. Perhaps the Inner Mysteries of Christianity, which the Gnostics taught but which the Literalists denied existed, revealed that the Jesus story was not a factual account of God's one and only visit to planet Earth, but a mystical teaching story designed to help each one of us become a Christ.

The Jesus story does have all the hallmarks of a myth, so could it be that that is exactly what it is? After all, no one has read the newly discovered Gnostic gospels and taken their fantastic stories as literally true; they are readily seen as myths. It is only familiarity and cultural prejudice which prevent us from seeing the New Testament gospels in the same light. If those gospels had also been lost to us and only recently discovered, who would read these tales for the first time and believe they were historical accounts of a man born of a virgin, who had walked on water and returned from the dead? Why should we consider the stories of Osiris, Dionysus, Adonis, Attis, Mithras and the other Pagan Mystery saviours 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 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 Mysteries Thesis answered many puzzling questions, yet it also opened up new dilemmas. Isn't there indisputable historical evidence for the existence of Jesus the man? And how could Gnosticism be the original Christianity when St Paul, the earliest Christian we know about, is so vociferously anti-Gnostic? And is it really credible that such an insular and anti-Pagan people as the Jews could have adopted the Pagan Mysteries? And how could it have happened that a consciously created myth came to be believed as history? And if Gnosticism represents genuine Christianity, why was it Literalist Christianity that came to dominate the world as the most influential religion of all time? All of these difficult questions would have to be satisfactorily answered before we could wholeheartedly accept such a radical theory as the Jesus Mysteries Thesis.

THE GREAT COVER UP

Our new account of the origins of Christianity only seemed improbable because it contradicted the received view. As we pushed further with our research, the traditional picture began to completely unravel all around us. We found ourselves embroiled in a world of schism and power struggles, of forged documents and false identities, of letters that had been edited and added to, and of the wholesale destruction of historical evidence. We focused forensically on the few facts we could be confident of, as if we were detectives on the verge of cracking a sensational 'whodunnit', or perhaps more accurately as if we were uncovering an ancient and unacknowledged miscarriage of justice. For, time and again, when we critically examined what genuine evidence remained, we found that the history of Christianity bequeathed to us by the Roman Church was a gross distortion of the truth. Actually the evidence completely endorsed the Jesus Mysteries Thesis! It was becoming increasingly obvious that we had been deliberately deceived, that the Gnostics were indeed the original Christians, and that their anarchic mysticism had been hijacked by an authoritarian institution which had created from it a dogmatic religion - and then brutally enforced the greatest cover-up in history.

One of the major players in this cover-up operation was a character called Eusebius who, at the beginning of the fourth century, compiled from legends, fabrications and his own imagination the only early history of Christianity that still exists today. All subsequent histories have been forced to base themselves on Eusebius' dubious claims, because there has been little other information to draw on. All those with a different perspective on Christianity were branded as heretics and eradicated. In this way falsehoods compiled in the fourth century have come down to us as established facts.

Eusebius was employed by the Roman Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the state religion of the Empire and gave Literalist Christianity the power it needed to begin the final eradication of Paganism and Gnosticism. Constantine wanted 'one God, one religion' to consolidate his claim of 'one Empire, one Emperor'. He oversaw the creation of the Nicene creed - the article of faith repeated in churches to this day - and Christians who refused to assent to this creed were banished from the Empire or otherwise silenced.

This 'Christian' Emperor then returned home from Nicaea and had his wife suffocated and his son murdered. He deliberately remained unbaptized until his deathbed so that he could continue his atrocities and still receive forgiveness of sins and a guaranteed place in heaven by being baptized at the last moment. Although he had his 'spin doctor' Eusebius compose a suitably obsequious biography for him, he was actually a monster - just like many Roman Emperors before him. Is it really at all surprising that a 'history' of the origins of Christianity created by an employee in the service of a Roman tyrant should turn out to be a pack of lies?

Elaine Pagels, one of the foremost academic authorities on early Christianity, writes:

'It is the winners who write history - their way. No wonder, then, that the traditional accounts of the origins of Christianity first defined the terms (naming themselves "orthodox" and their opponents "heretics"); then they proceeded to demonstrate - at least to their own satisfaction - that their triumph was historically inevitable, or, in religious terms, "guided by the Holy Spirit". But the discoveries [of the Gnostic gospels] at Nag Hammadi reopen fundamental questions.'

History is indeed written by the victors. The creation of an appropriate history has always been part of the arsenal of political manipulation. The Roman Church created a history of the triumph

of Literalist Christianity in much the same partisan way that, two millennia later, Hollywood created tales of 'cowboys and Indians' to relate 'how the West was won' not 'how the West was lost'. History is not simply related, it is created. Ideally, the motivation is to explain historical evidence and come to an accurate understanding of how the present has been created by the past. All too often, however, it is simply to glorify and justify the status quo. Such histories conceal as much as they reveal.

To dare to question a received history is not easy. It is difficult to believe that something which you have been told is true from childhood could actually be a product of falsification and fantasy. It must have been hard for those Russians brought up on tales of kindly 'Uncle Joe' Stalin to accept that he was actually responsible for the deaths of millions. It must have strained credibility when those opposing his regime claimed that he had in fact murdered many of the heroes of the Russian revolution. It must have seemed ridiculous when they asserted that he had even had the images of his rivals removed from photographs and completely fabricated historical events. Yet all these things are true.

It is easy to believe that something must be true because everyone else believes it. But the truth often only comes to light by daring to question the unquestionable, by doubting notions which are so commonly believed that they are taken for granted. The Jesus Mysteries Thesis is the product of such an openness of mind. When it first occurred to us, it seemed absurd and impossible. Now it seems obvious and ordinary. The Vatican was constructed upon the site of an ancient Pagan sanctuary because the new is always built upon the old. In the same way Christianity itself has as its foundations the Pagan spirituality that preceded it. What is more plausible than to posit the gradual evolution of spiritual ideas, with Christianity emerging from the ancient Pagan Mysteries in a seamless historical continuum? It is only because the conventional history has been so widely believed for so long that this idea could be seen as heretical and shocking.

RECOVERING MYSTICAL CHRISTIANITY

As the final pieces of the puzzle were falling into place, we came across a small picture tucked away in the appendices of an old academic book. It was a drawing of a third-century CE amulet. We have used it as the cover of this book. It shows a crucified figure which most people would immediately recognize as Jesus. Yet the Greek words name the figure 'Orpheus Bacchus', one of the pseudonyms of Osiris-Dionysus. To the author of the book in which we found the picture, this amulet was an anomaly. Who could it have possibly belonged to? Was it a crucified Pagan deity or some sort of Gnostic synthesis of Paganism and Christianity? Either way it was deeply puzzling. For us, however, this amulet was perfectly understandable. It was an unexpected confirmation of the Jesus Mysteries Thesis. The image could be that of either Jesus or Osiris-Dionysus. To the initiated, these were both names for essentially the same figure.

The 'chance' discovery of this amulet made us feel as though the universe itself was encouraging us to make our findings public. In different ways the Jesus Mysteries Thesis has been proposed by mystics and scholars for centuries, but has always ended up being ignored. It now felt like an idea whose moment had come. We did, however, have misgivings about writing this book. We knew that it would inevitably upset certain Christians, something which we had no desire to do. Certainly it has been hard to be constantly surrounded by lies and injustices without experiencing a certain amount of outrage at the negative misrepresentation of the Gnostics, and to have become aware of the great riches of Pagan culture without feeling grief that they were so wantonly destroyed. Yet we do not have some sort of anti-Christian agenda. Far from it.

Those who have read our other works will know that our interest is not in further division, but in acknowledging the unity that lies at the heart of all spiritual traditions - and this present book is no exception. Early Literalist Christians mistakenly believed that the Jesus story was different from other stories of Osiris-Dionysus because Jesus alone had been an historical rather than a mythical figure. This has left Christians feeling that their faith is in opposition to all others - which it is not. We hope that by understanding its true origins in the ongoing evolution of a universal human spirituality, Christianity may be able to free itself from this self-imposed isolation.

Whilst the Jesus Mysteries Thesis clearly rewrites history, we do not see it as undermining the Christian faith, but as suggesting that Christianity is in fact richer than we previously imagined. The Jesus story is a perennial myth with the power to impart the saving Gnosis which can transform each one of us into a Christ, not merely a history of events that happened to someone else 2,000 years ago. Belief in the Jesus story was originally the first step in Christian spirituality - the Outer Mysteries. Its significance was to be explained by an enlightened teacher when the seeker was spiritually ripe. These Inner Mysteries imparted a mystical Knowledge of God beyond mere belief in dogmas. Although many inspired Christian mystics throughout history have intuitively seen through to this deeper symbolic level of understanding, as a culture we have inherited only the Outer Mysteries of Christianity. We have kept the form, but lost the meaning. Our hope is that this book can play some small part in reclaiming the true mystical Christian inheritance.

The Pagan Mysteries

'Blest is the happy man Who knows the Mysteries the gods ordain, And sanctifies his life, Joins soul with soul in mystic unity, And, by due ritual made pure, Enters the ecstasy of mountain solitudes; Who observes the mystic rites Made lawful by the Great Mother ; Who crowns his head with ivy, And shakes his wand in worship of Dionysus."

Euripides

Paganism is a 'dead' religion - or more accurately an 'exterminated' religion. It did not simply fade away into oblivion. It was actively suppressed and annihilated, its temples and shrines desecrated and demolished, and its great sacred books thrown onto bonfires. No living lineage has been left to explain its ancient beliefs. So, the Pagan worldview has to be reconstructed from the archaeological evidence and texts that have survived, like some giant metaphysical jigsaw puzzle.

'Pagan' was originally a derogatory term meaning 'country-dweller', used by Christians to imply that the spirituality of the ancients was some primitive rural superstition. But this is not true. Paganism was the spirituality which inspired the unequalled magnificence of the Giza pyramids, the exquisite architecture of the Parthenon, the legendary sculptures of Phideas, the powerful plays of Euripides and Sophocles, and the sublime philosophy of Socrates and Plato. Pagan civilization built vast libraries to house hundreds of thousands of works of literary and scientific genius. Its natural philosophers speculated that human beings had evolved from animals.² Its astronomers knew the Earth was a sphere' which, along with the planets, revolves around the sun.⁴ They had even estimated its circumference to within one degree of accuracy.⁵ The ancient Pagan world sustained a population not matched again in Europe until the eighteenth century.⁶ In Greece, Pagan culture gave birth to the concepts of democracy, rational philosophy, public libraries, theatre and the Olympic Games, creating a blueprint for our modern world. What was the spirituality that inspired these momentous cultural achievements? Most people associate Paganism with either rustic witchcraft or the myths of the gods of Olympus as recorded by Hesiod and Homer. Pagan spirituality did indeed embrace both. The country people practised their traditional shamanic nature worship to maintain the fertility of the land and the city authorities propped up formal state religions, such as the worship of the Olympian gods, to maintain the power of the status quo.

It was, however, a third, more mystical, expression of the Pagan spirit which inspired the great minds of the ancient world. The thinkers, artists and innovators of antiquity were initiates of various religions known as 'Mysteries'. These remarkable men and women held the Mysteries to be the heart and soul of their culture. The Greek historian Zosimos writes that without the Mysteries life for the Greeks would be unlivable' for 'the sacred Mysteries hold the whole human race together'.⁷ The eminent Roman statesman Cicero enthuses:

'These Mysteries have brought us from rustic savagery to a cultivated and refined civilisation. The rites of the Mysteries are called "initiations" and in truth we have learned from them the first principles of life. We have gained the understanding not only to live happily but also to die with better hope.'⁸

Unlike the traditional rituals of the official state religions, which were designed to aid social cohesion, the Mysteries were an individualistic form of spirituality which offered mystical visions and personal enlightenment.⁹ Initiates underwent a secret process of initiation which profoundly transformed their state of consciousness. The poet Pindar reveals that an initiate into the Mysteries 'knows the end of life and its God-given beginning'.¹⁰ Lucius Apuleius, a poet-philosopher, writes of his experience of initiation as a spiritual rebirth which he celebrated as his birthday, an experience for which he felt a 'debt of gratitude' that he 'could never hope to repay'.¹¹ Plato, the most influential philosopher of all time, relates:

'We beheld the beatific visions and were initiated into the Mystery which may be truly called blessed, celebrated by us in a state of innocence. We beheld calm, happy, simple, eternal visions, resplendent in pure light.'¹²

The great Pagan philosophers were the enlightened masters of the Mysteries. Although they are often portrayed today as dry 'academic' intellectuals, they were actually enigmatic 'gurus'. Empedocles, like his master Pythagoras, was a charismatic miracle-worker.¹³ Socrates was an eccentric mystic prone to being suddenly overcome by states of rapture during which his friends would discover him staring off into space for hours.¹⁴ Heraclitus was asked by the citizens of Ephesus to become a lawmaker, but turned the offer down so that he could continue playing with the children in the temple.¹⁵ Anaxagoras shocked ordinary citizens by completely abandoning his farm to fully devote his life to 'the higher philosophy'.¹⁶ Diogenes owned nothing and lived in a jar at the entrance of a temple.¹⁷ The inspired playwright Euripides wrote his greatest tragedies during solitary retreats in an isolated cave.¹⁸

All of these idiosyncratic sages were steeped in the mysticism of the Mysteries, which they expressed in their philosophy. Olympiodorus, a follower of Plato, tells us that his master paraphrased the Mysteries everywhere.¹⁹ The works of Heraclitus were renowned even in ancient times for being obscure and impenetrable, yet Diogenes explains that they are crystal clear to an initiate of the Mysteries. Of studying Heraclitus he writes:

'It is a hard road to follow, filled with darkness and gloom; but if an initiate leads you on the way, it becomes brighter than the radiance of the sun.'²⁰

At the heart of Pagan philosophy is an understanding that all things are One. The Mysteries aimed at awakening within the initiate a sublime experience of this Oneness. Sallustius declares: 'Every initiation aims at uniting us with the World and with the Deity.'²¹ Plotinus describes the initiate transcending his limited sense of himself as a separate ego and experiencing mystical union with God:

'As if borne away, or possessed by a god, he attains to solitude in untroubled stillness, nowhere deflected in his being and unbusied with self, utterly at rest and become very rest. He does not converse with a statue or image but with Godhead itself. And this is no object of vision, but another mode of seeing, a detachment from self, a simplification and surrender of self, a yearning for contact, and a stillness and meditation directed towards transformation. Whoever sees himself in this way has attained likeness to God; let him abandon himself and find the end of his journeying.'²²

No wonder the initiate Sopatros poetically mused, 'I came out of the Mystery Hall feeling like a stranger to myself' 23

THE SACRED SPECTACLE AT ELEUSIS

What were these ancient Mysteries that could inspire such reverent awe and heartfelt appreciation? The Mystery religion was practised for thousands of years, during which time it spread throughout the ancient world, taking on many different forms. Some were frenzied and others meditative. Some involved bloody animal sacrifice, while others were presided over by strict vegetarians. At certain moments in history the Mysteries were openly practised by whole populations and were endorsed, or at least tolerated, by the state. At other times they were a small-scale and secretive affair, for fear of persecution by unsympathetic authorities. Central to all of these forms of the Mysteries, however, was the myth of a dying and resurrecting godman.

The Greek Mysteries celebrated at Eleusis in honour of the Great Mother goddess and the godman Dionysus were the most famous of all the Mystery cults. The sanctuary of Eleusis was finally destroyed by bands of fanatical Christian monks in 396 CE, but up until this tragic act of vandalism the Mysteries had been celebrated there for over 11 centuries.²⁴ At the height of their popularity people were coming from all over the then known world to be initiated: men and women, rich and poor, slaves and emperors²⁵ - even a Brahmin priest from India.²⁶

Each year some 30,000 Athenian citizens embarked on a 30-kilometre barefoot pilgrimage to the sacred site of Eleusis on the coast to celebrate the autumn Mysteries of Dionysus.²⁷ For days they would have been preparing for this important religious event by fasting, offering sacrifices and under-going ritual purification. As those about to be initiated danced along the 'Sacred Way' to Eleusis, accompanied by the frenzied beat of cymbals and tambourines, they were accosted by masked men who abused and insulted them, while others beat them with sticks.²⁸ At the head of the procession was carried the statue of Dionysus himself, leading them ever onwards. After ritual naked bathing in the sea and other purification ceremonies the crowd reached the great doors of the Telesterion, a huge purpose-built initiation hall. Only the chosen few who were already initiated or about to be initiated into the secret Mysteries could enter here.

What awesome ceremony was held behind these closed doors that touched the great philosophers, artists, statesmen and scientists of the ancient world so deeply? All initiates were sworn to secrecy and held the Mysteries so sacred that they kept this oath.²⁹ From large numbers of hints and clues, however, we know that they witnessed a sublime theatrical spectacle. They were awed by sounds and dazzled by lights. They were bathed in the blaze of a huge fire and trembled to the nerve-shattering reverberations of a mighty gong. The Hierophant, the high priest of the Mysteries, was quite literally a 'showman' who orchestrated a terrifyingly transformative dramatic reenactment of sacred myth. He himself was dressed as the central character - the godman Dionysus.³⁰ A modern scholar writes:

'A Mystery Religion was thus a divine drama which portrayed before the wondering eyes of the privileged observers the story of the struggles, sufferings, and victory of a patron deity, the travail of nature in which life ultimately triumphs over death, and joy is born of pain. The whole ritual of the Mysteries aimed especially at quickening the emotional life. No means of exciting the emotions was neglected in the passion-play, either by way of inducing careful predispositions or of supplying external stimulus. Tense mental anticipations

heightened by a period of abstinence, hushed silences, imposing processions and elaborate pageantry, music loud and violent or soft and enthralling, delirious dances, the drinking of spirituous liquors, physical macerations, alternations of dense darkness and dazzling light, the sight of gorgeous ceremonial vestments, the handling of holy emblems, autosuggestion and the promptings of the Hierophant -these and many secrets of emotional exaltation were in vogue ' 31

This dramatization of the myth of Dionysus is the origin of theatre.³² But the initiates were not a passive audience. They were participants who shared in the passion of the godman whose death and rebirth symbolically represented the death and spiritual rebirth of each one of them. As a modern authority explains:

'Dionysus was the god of the most blessed ecstasy and the most enraptured love. But he was also the persecuted god, the suffering and dying god, and all whom he loved, all who attended him, had to share his tragic fate. ' 33

By witnessing the awesome tragedy of Dionysus, the initiates at Eleusis shared in his suffering, death and resurrection, and so experienced a spiritual purification known as 'catharsis'. 34

The Mysteries did not offer religious dogmas to simply be believed, but a myth to be entered into. Initiation was not about learning something, but about experiencing an altered state of awareness. Plutarch, a Pagan high priest, confesses that those who had been initiated could produce no proof of the beliefs that they acquired. Aristotle maintains, 'It is not necessary for the initiated to learn anything, but to receive impressions and to be put in a certain frame of mind.'³⁵ The philosopher Proclus talks of the Mysteries as evoking a 'sympathy of the soul with the ritual in a way that is unintelligible to us and divine, so that some of the initiates are stricken with panic, being filled with divine awe; others assimilate themselves to the holy symbols, leave their own identity, become at home with the gods, and experience divine possession/³⁶

Why did the myth enacted by the Mysteries have such a profound effect?

ENCODED SECRET TEACHINGS

In antiquity the word mythos did not mean something 'untrue', as it does for us today. Superficially a myth was an entertaining story, but to the initiated it was a sacred code that contained profound spiritual teachings.³⁷ Plato comments, 'It looks as if those also who established rites of initiation for us were no fools, but that there is a hidden meaning in their teachings/³⁸ He explains that it is 'those who have given their lives to true philosophy' who will grasp the 'hidden meaning' encoded in the Mystery myths, and so become completely identified with the godman in an experience of mystical enlightenment.³⁹

The ancient philosophers were not so foolish as to believe that the Mystery myths were literally true, but wise enough to recognize that they were an easy introduction to the profound mystical philosophy at the heart of the Mysteries. Sallustius writes:

'To wish to teach all men the truth of the gods causes the foolish to despise, because they cannot learn, and the good to be slothful, whereas to conceal the truth by myths prevents the former from despising philosophy and compels the latter to study it.' 40

It was the role of the priests and philosophers of the Mysteries to decode the hidden depths of spiritual meaning contained within the Mystery myths. Heliiodorus, a priest of the Mysteries, explains:

'Philosophers and theologians do not disclose the meanings embedded in these stories to laymen but simply give them preliminary instruction in the form of a myth. But those who have reached the higher grades of the Mysteries they initiate into clear knowledge in the privacy of the holy shrine, in the light cast by the blazing torch of truth.' 41

The Mysteries were divided into various levels of initiation, which led an initiate step by step through ever deepening levels of understanding. The number of levels of initiation varied in different Mystery traditions, but essentially the initiate was led from the Outer Mysteries, in which the myths were understood superficially as religious stories, to the Inner Mysteries, in which the myths were revealed as spiritual allegories. First the initiate was ritually purified. Then they were taught the secret teachings on a one-to-one basis.⁴² The highest stage was when the initiate understood the true meaning of the teachings and finally experienced what Theon of Smyrna calls 'friendship and interior communion with God'.

THE INTERNATIONAL MYSTERIES

The Mysteries dominated the Pagan world. No other deity is represented on the monuments of ancient Greece and Italy as much as Dionysus, godman of the Eleusinian Mysteries.⁴³ He is a deity with many names: Iacchos, Bassareus, Bromios, Euios, Sabazius, Zagreus, Yhyoneus, Lenaios, Eleuthereus, and so the list goes on.⁴⁴ But these are just some of his Greek names! The godman is an omnipresent mythic figure throughout the ancient Mediterranean, known in different ways by many cultures.

Five centuries before the birth of Christ, the Greek historian Herodotus, known as 'the father of history', discovered this when he travelled to Egypt. On the shores of a sacred lake in the Nile delta he witnessed an enormous festival, held every year, in which the Egyptians performed a dramatic spectacle before 'tens of thousands of men and women', representing the death and resurrection of Osiris. Herodotus was an initiate into the Greek Mysteries and recognized that what he calls 'the Passion of Osiris' was the very same drama that initiates saw enacted before them at Eleusis as the Passion of Dionysus.⁴⁵ The Egyptian myth of Osiris is the primal myth of the Mystery godman and reaches back to prehistory. His story is so ancient that it can be found in pyramid texts written over 4,500 years ago! ⁴⁶

In travelling to Egypt Herodotus was following in the footsteps of another great Greek. Before 670 BCE Egypt had been a closed country, in the manner of Tibet or Japan more recently, but in this year she opened her borders and one of the first Greeks who travelled there in search of ancient wisdom was Pythagoras.⁴⁷ History remembers Pythagoras as the first 'scientist' of the Western world, but although it is true that he brought back many mathematical theories to Greece from Egypt, to his contemporaries he would have seemed anything but 'scientific' in the modern sense.

A wandering charismatic sage dressed in white robes and crowned with a gold coronet, Pythagoras was part scientist, part priest and part magician.⁴⁸ He spent 22 years in the temples of Egypt, becoming an initiate of the ancient Egyptian Mysteries.⁴⁹ On returning to Greece he

began to preach the wisdom he had learned, performing miracles, raising the dead and giving oracles.

Inspired by Pythagoras, his disciples created a Greek Mystery religion modelled on the Egyptian Mysteries. They took the indigenous wine god Dionysus, who was a minor deity all but ignored by Hesiod and Homer, and transformed him into a Greek version of the mighty Egyptian Osiris, godman of the Mysteries. This initiated a religious and cultural revolution that was to transform Athens into the centre of the civilized world.⁵⁰

The followers of Pythagoras were models of virtue and learning, regarded as puritans by their neighbours. Strict vegetarians, they preached non-violence towards all living things and shunned the temple cults that practised the sacrifice of animals. This made it impossible for them to participate in the traditional Olympian religion of Athens. Forced to live on the fringes of acceptability, they often organized themselves into communities that shared all possessions in common, leaving them free to devote themselves to their mystical studies of mathematics, music, astronomy and philosophy.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the Mystery religion spread quickly amongst the ordinary people and within a few generations the Egyptian Mysteries of Osiris, now the Mysteries of Dionysus, inspired the glory of Classical Athens.

In the same way that Osiris was synthesized by the Greeks with their indigenous god Dionysus to create the Greek Mysteries, other Mediterranean cultures which adopted the Mystery religion also transformed one of their indigenous deities into the dying and resurrecting Mystery godman. So, the deity who was known as Osiris in Egypt and became Dionysus in Greece was called Attis in Asia Minor, Adonis in Syria, Bacchus in Italy, Mithras in Persia, and so on. His forms were many, but essentially he was the same perennial figure, whose collective identity was referred to as Osiris-Dionysus.⁵²

Because the ancients recognized that all the various Mystery godmen were essentially the same mythic being, elements from different myths and rites were continually combined and recombined to create new forms of the Mysteries. In Alexandria, for example, a charismatic sage called Timotheus consciously fused Osiris and Dionysus to produce a new deity for the city called Serapis.⁵³ He also gave an elaborate account of the myth of the Mystery godman Attis. Lucius Apuleius received his initiation into the Egyptian Mysteries from a high priest named after the Persian godman Mithras. Coins were minted with Dionysus represented on one side and Mithras on the other.⁵⁴ One modern authority tells us that 'possessed by the knowledge of his own secret rites', the initiate of the Mysteries 'found no difficulty in conforming to any religion in vogue'.⁵⁵

Like the Christian religion which superseded it, the Mysteries reached across national boundaries, offering a spirituality which was relevant to all human beings, regardless of their racial origins or social status. Even as early as the fifth century BCE philosophers such as Diogenes and Socrates called themselves 'cosmopolitans' - 'citizens of the cosmos' - rather than of any particular country or culture, which is testimony to the international nature of the Mysteries.⁵⁶

One modern scholar, commenting on the merging and combining of different mystery traditions, writes:

'This went a long way towards weaning the minds of men from the idea of separate gods from the different nations, and towards teaching them that all national and local deities were but different forms of one great Power. But for the rise of Christianity and other religions, there can be little doubt but that the whole of the Graeco-Roman deities would continually have merged into Dionysus.'⁵⁷

OSIRIS-DIONYSUS AND JESUS CHRIST

Osiris-Dionysus had such universal appeal because he was seen as an 'Everyman' figure who symbolically represented each initiate. Through understanding the allegorical myth of the Mystery godman, initiates could become aware that, like Osiris-Dionysus, they were also 'God made flesh'. They too were immortal Spirit trapped within a physical body. Through sharing in the death of Osiris-Dionysus initiates symbolically 'died' to their lower earthly nature. Through sharing in his resurrection they were spiritually reborn and experienced their eternal and divine essence. This was the profound mystical teaching that the myth of Osiris-Dionysus encoded for those initiated into the Inner Mysteries, the truth of which initiates directly experienced for themselves.

Writing of the Egyptian Mystery godman Osiris, Sir Wallis Budge, who was keeper of antiquities in the British Museum, explains:

'The Egyptians of every period in which they are known to us believed that Osiris was of divine origin, that he suffered death and mutilation at the hands of the power of evil, that after great struggle with these powers he rose again, that he became henceforth the king of the underworld and judge of the dead, and that because he had conquered death the righteous might also conquer death.' 58

'He represented to men the idea of a man who was both God and man, and he typified to the Egyptians in all ages the being who by reason of his sufferings and death as a man could sympathise with them in their own sickness and death. The idea of his human personality also satisfied their cravings and yearnings for communion with a being who, though he was partly divine, yet had much in common with themselves. Originally they looked upon Osiris as a man who lived on the earth as they lived, who ate and drank, who suffered a cruel death, who by help of certain gods triumphed over death, and attained unto everlasting life. But what Osiris did they could also do.' 59

These are the key motifs that characterize the myths of all the Mystery godmen. What Budge writes of Osiris could equally be said of Dionysus, Attis, Adonis, Mithras and the rest. It also describes the Jewish dying and resurrecting godman Jesus Christ. Like Osiris-Dionysus, he is also God Incarnate and God of the Resurrection. He also promises his followers spiritual rebirth through sharing in his divine Passion.

CONCLUSION

The Mysteries were clearly an extremely powerful force in the ancient world. Let's review what we've discovered about them:

- The Pagan Mysteries inspired the greatest minds of the ancient world.
- They were practised in different forms by nearly every culture in the Mediterranean.
- They comprised Outer Mysteries which were open to all and secret Inner Mysteries known only to those who had undergone a powerful process of mystical initiation.
- At the heart of the Mysteries was the myth of a dying and resurrecting godman - Osiris-Dionysus.
- The Inner Mysteries revealed the myths of Osiris- Dionysus to be spiritual allegories encoding spiritual teachings.

The question which intrigued us was whether the Mysteries could have somehow influenced and shaped what we have inherited as the 'biography' of Jesus? Unlike the various Pagan Mystery godmen, Jesus is traditionally viewed as an historical rather than a mythical figure, literally a man who was an incarnation of God, who suffered, died and resurrected to bring salvation to all humankind. But could these elements of the Jesus story actually be mythical stories inherited from the Pagan Mysteries?

We began investigating the myths of Osiris-Dionysus more closely, searching for resemblances with the Jesus story. We were not prepared for the overwhelming number of similarities that we uncovered.