

Manifested in the Flesh

Manifested in the Flesh:
How the Historical Evidence of Jesus
Refutes Modern Mystics and Skeptics

Joel McDurmon

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Published March 2007.

First Edition.

Printed in the United States of America

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Cover design: James Talmage, Byron, Georgia

American Vision, Inc.

3150 Florence Road, Suite 2

Powder Springs, Georgia 30127-5385

www.americanvision.org

1-800-628-9460

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McDurmon, Joel

Manifested in the Flesh: / Joel McDurmon—1st ed.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 0-915815-61-3

To four pastors who have seen me along:

**The Rev. David Wacker,
The Rev. Jerry Underwood,
The Rev. Paul Sagan,
and
The Rt. Rev. David Hicks**

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Foreword

TODAY'S CLIMATE OF attack on Christianity has reminded many of the parallels between the hostile pagan environment of the early church and ours today. The analogies are very real, including outright persecution of Christians in some areas of the world. But there is one stark difference: ancient infidels might almost be forgiven in view of their totally pagan background, whereas modern antagonists against the faith—many of them educated in a Christian culture and with all the evidence for the reliability of Christianity at their disposal—nevertheless choose the path of apostasy almost in defiance of the evidence.

Whatever their motives—sensationalism and its monetary rewards, rebellion, or honest conviction—theirs is a sorry lot. As the pages of this important book will demonstrate, they try to divorce Jesus and his following from history itself, twist the history that survives, and draw mistaken conclusions regarding the origins of the faith. In the process they will madly search for parallels with ancient mystery cults and heretical Gnostic sects, and finally exercise bad judgment in trying to add a sheen of credibility to what are ultimately worthless arguments.

Is such language excessive? Or justified? Those who read these pages should have a delightful time determining which is the case. But who are these foes against the faith today? They come in two basic categories: popular sensationalizers and more serious scholars. Our present horizon is cluttered with the former. They are the writers of articles, books, novels, and screenplays who, along with radio, television, motion-picture, and DVD producers, know the sure-fire formula for best-sellerdom and sales success: *create controversy* by presenting a radical recasting of previously-accepted truths. Controversy has always been

the mother's milk of sales, so it was hardly surprising that when Dan Brown distorted the facts regarding the greatest statistical phenomenon in the history of the world—the holy Christian church—the controversy resulting (and of course the sales) of his *The Da Vinci Code* were correspondingly huge. At least thirty-five such titles that preceded the *Code* and since its publication could be listed here.

The other category is comprised of more serious authors for whom the bottom line is less significant than their conviction that through their research in various forms, they have arrived at a fuller understanding of how Christianity came to be. They want to share their findings with the world in the name of emancipating the public from “errors of the past” when it comes to Christian origins.

Manifested in the Flesh takes on this group in particular, and author Joel McDurmon does so with careful scholarship, dispassionate research, compelling logic, graceful prose, and even dashes of humor. He easily identifies the methodological chinks in the armor of the attackers and cuts through the tissues of misrepresentation on which they rely so heavily. As for the ancient pagan mystery cults (which, they claim, so heavily influenced Christianity), McDurmon lays bare the excessive, almost frantic search by such critics in trying to find parallels between the cults and early Christian practices, as well as how they warp the results of that search. (This malady has well been called “Parallelomania” in Komoszewski’s *Reinventing Jesus*.)

Their attacks against Christianity range from the ridiculous—“There never was a historical person named Jesus of Nazareth”—to the basic claims underlying most of these revisionists: “Jesus may have existed, but he’s not who you think he was.” But their case dies before it even has a chance to be born, since their attempt to sunder Jesus from history fails at the outset. All the founding heroes and heroines of the ancient mystery cults had little or nothing to do with factual history, so if Christianity drew from these cults, Jesus must necessarily be pared away from history as much as possible.

This, however, is *not* possible. Instead we have a colossal paradox today: just at a time when our media are offering us caricatures of Christ

and the church that he founded, his *genuine* portrait is becoming ever clearer when the secular resources of ancient history and archaeology provide fascinating additional confirmations of the biblical record. Christian apologetics—how to defend the faith—has never been easier!

These pages, then, provide a wealth of information not only on why the current critics of Christianity are wrong, but why our faith is right. In the cluttered welter of world religions, parareligions, cults, and spiritual fantasies, two and only two religious systems are totally anchored to the proven facts of the past, that is, to history: our parent Judaism and Christianity. This is not to deny that the founders of other faiths were not historical—certainly there was a Gautama Buddha, a Muhammed, a Mary Baker Eddy, a Joseph Smith— but one looks in vain for any solid correlations between what is claimed in their holy books and the history of the contextual world of their time.

Christianity, on the other hand, delights in how intertwined the Gospels and Epistles are with the world of their day—with solid history. Many Christians assume that because *their* faith is so well grounded in fact, that all other religions must have similarly strong links with the past. Alas, that is far, *far* from the case. For that reason alone, *Manifested in the Flesh* is *very* significant reading for our time.

Paul L. Maier

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author of *In the Fullness of Time*

Preface

The foolishness of man perverteth his way: and his heart fretteth against the LORD (Prov. 19:3).

Let the proud be ashamed; for they dealt perversely with me without a cause: but I will meditate in thy precepts (Ps. 119:78).

WHEN I ORIGINALLY sat down to begin this project, I expected to write only a couple of chapters on the mystery religions for the publisher to use in a multi-part book about recent attacks on the Christian faith. As I wrote, however, the work took on a much different look and developed its own force. The decision was made to publish it as a stand-alone volume.

Such a development occurred, I believe, because atheism is not merely an intellectual position relegated to one discipline of study; it is a *worldview*. Worldview issues by nature spread into every area of human thought and action. So, when I began to respond to the mystery religions, I entered an historical study. But this historical study soon morphed into a theological study. From there it went into comparative religion, biblical studies, apologetics, and so on. All of the issues inseparably intertwine. In order to answer the critics faithfully, the student must get underneath the surface arguments, address the presuppositions, and then see how the different areas of knowledge interact with core beliefs.

Responding to atheist attacks reminds me of the old arcade game “Whac-a-mole” where a “mole” quickly pops up through one of several holes, and the player must whack it with a big mallet before it darts back down. Kids get so frustrated at the varmint that they keep feeding quarters to the machine so they can get one more whack at it. At that

point, they have been suckered in. The mole gets away, and it gets away with their money. The way to beat it is not to keep feeding money to the enemy but to pull the plug and scrap the machine. The same goes for atheism: You cannot waste your time responding to the flurry of trifling arguments and sarcastic slanders that atheists and critics toss at you. By the time you take a swing, they have popped up and down again in three other places. Instead, you have to get behind the source of their power: pull the plug and demolish the framework.

For these two reasons—the nature of the subject as a worldview, and the shotgun style of particular attacks—this book comes to you in the form it is in. It incorporates an overarching worldview apologetic against atheism and mysticism and simultaneously ties together several academic disciplines to answer specific attacks. Readers should keep both in mind as they read through the chapters. The attacks to which this book responds fail because they have an incoherent worldview behind them, and they therefore produce convoluted arguments about history, theology, and scholarship.

This book upholds the traditional Christian doctrine of the historical Incarnation of Jesus Christ against recent attacks by atheists, humanistic scholars, and New Age mystics. Christ came in the flesh—fully man and fully God. The attacks, however, have come in the “Whac-a-mole” fashion, and thus the response must avoid the trap of responding to every little critique. My approach is as follows:

My Introduction first pulls the plug on the pagan worldview: The attacks of the atheists and the mystics all follow the same lie that the serpent told Eve in the garden. The lure of satanic religions is always the promise of enlightenment apart from God’s Word, the denial of God’s power in history, and the promise of divinization for man. If we understand this as we come to the recent attacks on the Gospel, as well as the ancient versions of “mystery religions” to which modern critics appeal, we will see the satanic criteria clearly as the power source for all of them.

Chapter 1 seeks to show how this fallen criteria have remained the same for the modern critics, the ancient mystery religions, as well as every atheistic and mystical critic in between. There is nothing new under the sun. The modern attacks on the faith are in reality just old fables

in new dress. But the fact that the arguments tend to recur in history shows that they have a powerful pull on the fallen human heart, and they must therefore be confronted. It is important to see the rise of such “intellectual” denials of the faith since the nineteenth century and the development of academic response to that endeavor.

Chapter 2 begins the meat of the specialized applications of the apologetic. There I explore the critics’ claim that there were several ancient religions that believed in a “dying and rising god” who sacrificed himself to save the world and that Christianity was just one more version of this pagan motif which happened to win the day. As I walk through the most significant of the ancient mystery religions in this chapter, the reader can see that they in reality have very little in common with Christianity. An analysis drives the point home.

Chapter 3 answers the criticism that the early Church fathers had no answer for the alleged similarities between the mystery religions and Christianity. Following the historical study in Chapter 2 that shows that there were actually very few similarities, this chapter makes the point by—and hold on for this one—actually reading the early Church fathers. The fathers practically ridiculed the idea. They treated the mystery religions as any other idolatry and relied solely on the Old and New Testaments for their understanding of Jesus Christ.

Chapters 4 and 5 make up a section of biblical study which refutes the critics’ view of the Apostle Paul. Chapter 4 answers the question of Paul’s view of and relation to Jesus Christ. Critics argue that Paul’s letters reveal that he believed in only a mystical Christ not an historical person. The argument is nonsense. While Paul does seem to write about the spiritual aspects of Christ much more than the historical, the epistles do explicitly reveal the opposite as well. The rebuttal is that simple. Nevertheless, this chapter affords an opportunity for a wonderful Bible study that highly enriches the answer to the question.

Chapter 5 continues the biblical study by answering the criticism that Paul was primarily a pagan thinker, drawing from his pagan surroundings (especially the mystery religions) in order to form a new religion that we call Christianity. This chapter benefits from the latest of New Testament scholarship which now sees what it should have under-

stood all along: Paul was steeped in Old Testament theology, and the religion that he promoted was not tainted by pagan mysteries but was traditional Old Testament theology with the resurrected Christ as the fulfillment of the Messianic promises.

Chapters 6 and 7 change gears slightly in order to look at how underlying beliefs can drive how people do scholarship. Both believers and unbelievers have underlying presuppositions which affect how they view evidence and indeed what they even consider as evidence. These chapters essentially apply apologetics to the very types of criticisms that the atheists and mystics rely on themselves. Chapter 6 turns the critics' own question on them: Who can you trust? I explore one criticism in depth to show how trust in unbelief exists in the unbeliever's heart *before* he examines the evidence and drives how he answers the question. Chapter 7 does the same thing, but with a broader perspective, across several issues. It relies on a very scholarly article published by Bruce Metzger in 1955. Metzger's reply to the mystery religion proponents is powerful and timeless, and this chapter is an attempt to bring his expert analysis into more accessible language.

With these specific questions answered, Chapters 8 and 9 intend to relate the truth that the critics are reacting so violently against: the truth of Jesus Christ. The truth about the Incarnation of our Lord is too glorious to be summed up in twenty pages, but I have given enough to communicate the traditional understanding of the doctrine as well as how that doctrine refutes every pagan conception of humanity. Especially at issue, since the topic of this book is the true humanity of Jesus, is the doctrine of the perfect man as put forth by both pagans and Christians. Since the atheist and mystic critics deny that God's Son took on human flesh and revealed Himself as perfect humanity, they look for a perfect man in other places and ways: pagan places and pagan ways. Both Chapters 8 and 9 show the contrast and show the destructive and tyrannical results of looking for divine perfection among fallen men.

The concluding Chapter 10 pulls the several strands of historical studies, biblical studies, theology, and apologetics, back together into the overall worldview endeavor. The issue: idolatry. I rehearse the main points covered throughout the book and then end with a needed mo-

tivational appeal to educate ourselves and our posterity as an organic Church.

I have included four appendices on related subjects. These expand ideas touched on in the text, and the titles are self-evident. Appendices I and II expand on the idea of how prior religious beliefs drive the practice and results of scholarship. Appendix I shows this across the board in New Testament studies, Appendix II illustrates this in the legacy of one very influential scholar who appears to have turned out badly wrong.

Appendix III picks apart one of the main books which has promoted the mystery religion theory behind Christianity. I hold the book up to the high standard it claims for itself and expose the work for the farce that it is. Despite bold claims and relentless “evidences,” the mystic’s case crumbles under its own weight.

Appendix IV is a reproduction of one of the earliest written Christian apologetics. Aristides is an unfamiliar name to most Christians—even pastors and seminary students—despite being readily available today. I have included his brief work against pagan religions for several reasons: First, because it is a brief and easily readable work; second, it shows that the earliest of the early Church that we have records of did respond quite soundly to paganism of all sorts; third, I want to encourage believers to read and study what the early fathers of the Church wrote. Their works have lasted throughout the centuries for good reason—they are good works—and Aristides provides a relevant and practical place to start.

The scholarship in this area continues to grow. Many books have appeared within the last years, and a few other fairly recent works have come to my attention. Notable among these are the works of Larry Hurtado, in particular his books *How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?: Historical Questions About Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (2005), his massive *The Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (2003), and *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (2006). Likewise, I have not been able to draw from a very recent work of N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (2006), nor from the broad tome by Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (2006). These wonderful works of scholarship contain valuable insights into biblical Theology and early church history which

would add much to the discussion in this book. I recommend them all for further study.

Many acknowledgments are due. Thanks to Gary DeMar for his professionalism and guidance. His desire for apologetics and Bible studies that are relevant to the modern reader and which confront modern skeptics head-on, has been the force behind this project. Likewise, the talented staff at American Vision, which has turned out so many quality textual, audio, and visual productions to date, has crafted my bare manuscript into a beautiful presentation pleasing to the eye. For this I am grateful and blessed. Very Special thanks to Gary North, who provided me with a thorough critique and helpful suggestions, many of which I have adopted. His comments helped me streamline what was a loose collection of academic essays into a more accessible and coherent presentation to laymen (something he himself has always excelled at). Those areas of the work which may come across as a bit dry, are places where I probably have not taken North's advice. Thank you also to Dr. Paul Maier, who has provided an insightful Foreword, along with some helpful suggestions, as well as a very cheerful and encouraging correspondence. His passion for early Christianity has further inspired mine. Finally, I thank my wife, Lori, who has borne the strains of seminary life upon our family, with the added stress of me working on this book nearly every night for a good while. Her patience and endurance during this time has been a source of inspiration and motivation.

While I have tried to be thorough in this work, the very nature of the questions leads into fields far more vast than can be presented here. Aside from providing what is necessary to refute the critics squarely, I hope this effort opens many doors to further reading and pushes pastor, student, and scholar alike to pursue biblical studies—historical, theological and apologetic—as a lifetime pursuit. At thirty-two years old, Lord willing, my pursuit has only begun.

Joel E. McDurmon
Flourtown, PA
November 2006

Introduction

*Could it be that the story of Jesus was actually yet another version of the myth of Osiris-Dionysius?*¹

*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?*²

Yea, hath God said? (Gen. 3:1)

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God (Ps. 14:1).

ST. PAUL TELLS US that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, “Was made of the seed of David according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3), and that this “mystery of godliness” was “manifested in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16). The coming of Christ in the flesh to save His people is the focal point of human history, and the heart of Christian belief and practice. But this fundamental belief of the historic truth of Jesus Christ has come under intense attack in recent times. New groups of radicals are working hard to popularize the belief that a historical Jesus never walked the earth. Some want to read Christianity as a mere myth under the mystical umbrella of New Age “spirituality,” others deny the faith and the existence of God altogether. But as our Lord was truly “manifested in the flesh,” so must the

¹Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 62.

²Freke and Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries*, 12.

foolishness of these modern pagans be revealed in open light: “for their folly shall be manifest to all men” (2 Tim. 3:9).

Pagan religions have many faces but one folly that originated in the Garden of Eden, when the serpent prompted Eve to ask the question, “Hath God said?” When Eve stepped onto this unholy ground of radical skepticism, and made it the foundation for her interpretation of the world, she adopted the religion of foolishness. She suspended in her heart and mind the truth that God had revealed—which she knew to be true—in order to rely solely upon her own ability. She traded God’s sure revelation for her own limited understanding. From that point on it did not matter how she answered, for she had already denied God by her reliance upon herself. This legacy of assuming that man can submit God’s Word for testing and analysis is the basis of man’s fall, the original sin, and the continuing force behind all pagan religion.

The serpent’s question has surfaced again today in several places, exemplified by a book entitled *The Jesus Mysteries*. The two authors of this New-Age propaganda have drawn from ancient paganism as well as the most radical of modern scholarship, in order to rephrase the serpent’s question in a slightly new way. They query, “Could it be that the story of Jesus was actually yet another version of the myth of Osiris-Dionysius?”³ Along these same lines, another recent attack on the historical Jesus, the atheist documentary film *The God Who Wasn’t There*, claims to reveal that “Jesus Christ is likely a fictional character, a legend never based on a real human.”⁴ Both of these works attained best-seller status. With such harmful ideas becoming popular to the degree that they have, it is time that their core claims be refuted.

The refutation begins by understanding the serpent’s loaded question, “Hath God said?” With this query the devil initiated the first “mystery religion”—a quest for hidden truth—the very same religion that undergirds the modern attacks on the faith. The serpent deceived Eve

³Freke and Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries*, 62. “Osiris” and “Dionysius” are the names of two pagan gods whom we shall meet in a later chapter. The important point here is that the authors put Jesus on the same level as *mythological* gods.

⁴Claim taken from the back of the DVD cover of Brian Flemming, *The God Who Wasn’t There: A Film Beyond Belief* (Beyond Belief Media, 2005).

into a quest for “truth,” though God had already given her the truth. In taking the first step on that quest, Eve denied God’s revelation (and therefore His grace as well). Tied to this rejection of God’s revealed truth was the denial of God’s historical sanction: “Ye shall not surely die” (Gen 3:4). In other words, what God said was true for *history*, the serpent relegated to *mythology*. The companion temptation to this rejection of God’s Word and sovereignty was the lure of secret knowledge and special enlightenment. The serpent promised, “your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as Gods” (Gen. 3:4). These aspects of the serpent’s approach characterize all of the pagan mystery religions from the Garden to today. The program includes the following elements:

1. The quest for secret, hidden, or “mystery” knowledge: “Hath God said?”
2. The outright rejection of God’s sovereignty in history: “Ye shall not surely die.”
3. The promise of enlightenment by the quest: “Your eyes shall be opened.”
4. The promise of becoming divine (or divinization): “Ye shall be as gods.”

The serpent has hissed the same questions all throughout history, and in every clash between biblical religion and its false parodies, God’s representatives triumph by relying upon God’s revelation of Himself in history. When Moses confronted Pharaoh, his message was, “Thus saith the LORD God of Israel” (Ex. 5:1). Pharaoh replied, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice?” (5:2). When God responded through Moses with miracles and plagues, Pharaoh had his magicians imitate them (7:11, although they could not always do so). Similarly, when Elijah confronted the priests of Baal at Mt. Carmel, the issue was, “How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, then follow him: but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). The pagan priests relied on their own versions of sacrificial rituals: yelling, dancing, cutting their own flesh (we shall see more of this behavior in the later mystery religions). Elijah relied on God’s word: “I have done all these things at thy word”

(18:36). In another example, the three Hebrew children, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, opposed the decree of the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3:10) in the name of their God (3:17). As a result, God saved the children in the fiery furnace and, “changed the King’s word” (3:28). In all of these cases God’s people trusted the Word of God while pagans used every possible means to challenge that divine revelation.

The serpent still hisses today. Modern proponents of the so-called “Jesus Mysteries Thesis” try to tempt us with the same old twisted story. Their approach exactly parallels that of the serpent. They propose the quest for hidden truth: “Could it be that the story of Jesus was actually yet another version of the myth of Osiris-Dionysius?”⁵ They reject the divinely revealed history: “The Jesus story is a perennial myth . . . not merely a history of events that happened to someone else 2,000 years ago.”⁶ Then, exactly as the serpent, they promise enlightenment and divinization: “The Jesus story is a perennial myth with the power to *impart saving Gnosis*,⁷ which can *transform us into Christ*.”⁸ Sound familiar?

The authors of *The Jesus Mysteries* and many like them wish to overturn centuries of traditional understanding with such loaded questions and promises. They want us to adopt their destructive approach of radical skepticism: to rely upon our own feelings and our own limited perspective, as if these were the real test of truth. But to do so would be to hold God’s revelation in question, and thereby deny it from the outset. In questioning the truth revealed in Christ we deny it by placing ourselves, as Eve did, in the position of the ultimate Judge.

What Exactly is a Mystery Religion?

The mystery religions of the ancient world were a vast array of cults that offered initiates secret knowledge through which they promised en-

⁵Freke and Gandy, *Jesus Mysteries*, 62.

⁶Freke and Gandy, *Jesus Mysteries*, 13.

⁷“Gnosis” is the Greek word for “knowledge.” Here it refers to the secret knowledge that the mystery religions claimed would enable a person to transcend the world and become divine. This was the core belief that distinguished the early heretics called “Gnostics” as well as the pagan mystery cults from New Testament Christianity.

⁸Freke and Gandy, *Jesus Mysteries*, 13.

lightenment and divinity. In each case, the “knowledge” given revolved around myths told about certain gods and goddesses. The mystery-cults spanned several centuries and usually had two faces: one public and one private. The public side was watered-down and usually served the interests of the pagan States. These were accompanied by regular ceremonies with great pageantry and often coincided with the alleged divinity of the Emperor. In contrast, the private rituals varied greatly. Some were ascetic, some sinister. A few promoted a quiet life of retreat from society; some engaged in human sacrifice. Almost all employed bizarre rituals to dazzle the senses: “No means of exciting the emotions was neglected.”⁹ These emotion-driven secret meetings were attended by primarily women. These displays and their accompanying hero stories downplayed historical reality and emphasized the mythology of their gods as a basis for understanding life.

The early Church fathers—in fact, some of the earliest from whom we have records¹⁰—confronted the pagan mystery cults of their time and refuted them squarely. Scripture indicates that the apostles themselves had to deal with very similar attacks, probably from pagans who belonged to mystery cults, or who otherwise knew various pagan mythologies. We see Peter, for example, urging that, “We have not followed cunningly devised fables . . . but were *eyewitnesses* of his majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16). The apostle responded to the charge that Christianity was just another myth by referring to a distinct historical event that he had *eyewitnessed*. The New Testament writers always emphasized their physical witness of the Lord (Luke 1:1–3; John 19:35–6; 21:24; 1 Cor. 15:5–8; 2 Pet. 1:16–18; 1 John 1:1–3). By their accounts, the original Jesus was indeed an historical figure. Likewise, the apostle Paul often speaks of Jesus as the historical person that He was. Paul purposefully *warns against mythology* several times. In fact, the words “myth” or “fable” (from the Greek

⁹Samuel Angus, quoted in Freke and Gandy, *Jesus Mysteries*, 19.

¹⁰See Appendix IV, “The Apology of Aristides,” which reprints one of the earliest (that we have) Christian responses to pagan foolishness.

word *mythos*) only appear in the New Testament in the context of warning or condemnation (1 Tim. 1:4; 1:14; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; 2 Pet. 1:16).¹¹

The only way, therefore, to get around the claims of the New Testament and the early Church fathers is to create a hypothesis in which the apostles were liars, and in which the New Testament is unreliable. Not surprisingly, this is exactly what the modern “Jesus Mysteries” do: they want so badly to present Jesus as one more religious myth or fable, that they go to great lengths to reject (with much twisting and contorting) every possible reference to a truly historical Jesus. The last thing they would ever want is for their mythical “god-man” belief to become a historical reality. For them, *they* will become gods; *they* will become incarnate deities. If Jesus Christ were the One True God manifested in the flesh, it would spoil the mystics’ whole parade: they would then be forced to acknowledge the One higher than all.

This Side of the Fig Leaf

The belief that Jesus never existed in history is nothing more than an intricately sewn fig-leaf covering for sin. It is the attempt by atheists and New Age proponents to hide their guilt before God. Unlike Eve, who at least had the advantage of innocence when the serpent confronted her, we live in a fallen world with fallen hearts and minds. We must deal with our sinful dispositions daily. If we do not accept the covering that God has provided in the historical blood of Jesus Christ, then we will try to manufacture our own, just as Adam and Eve sewed together fig-leaves for themselves. Often in history those fig leaves have taken the form of the wilted petals of man’s intellectual ingenuity. The mystery religion theory of Christian history is merely an intellectual excuse for rejecting Christ, and it will hold up about as poorly as the original fig leaves did. Can you imagine standing before God on Judgment Day

¹¹An interesting case appears in the inter-testamental Apocryphal book of Baruch (3:23). The passage warns against “myth-tellers” (Greek—*mythologoi*) and “inquisitors of understanding,” saying, “They have not found the way to wisdom, or remembered its paths.” Written probably in the second-century B. C., this Apocryphal book most likely testifies to a Jewish-minded rebuttal of typical pagan idolatry. The groups in question could well have been mystery cults offering myths and secret knowledge.

with the excuse, “God, I couldn’t determine whether the Gospels actually portrayed an historical person or not!” But above all, fallen man wants to escape this final judgment of God, and in the attempt to run, man will do or say the most ridiculous things: he will claim that God does not exist, and he will reject as myth the most important parts of history that God has revealed.

But the Bible cannot honestly be read as anything but real, factual history. The Gospels, Paul and the other apostles all write in the light of an historical figure and His historical death and resurrection. No matter how hard you try, you cannot divorce Jesus Christ from history and reality. Even mystery-religion theorists sometimes unwittingly refute themselves in this regard. Alan Dundes, one of the mystery-theory scholars interviewed in *The God Who Wasn't There*, does just that. He scoffs, “[I]f you take away the folklore from the Bible you don’t have a heck of a lot left, except begat, begat, begat, begat.” But notice the obvious point that he misses: it is the “begat, begat, begat,” that *ties Jesus Christ to an historical setting*. The very part of the Bible that the scholar ridicules provides the details which refute his theory. Jesus was the promised Seed of David and Seed of Abraham, and the “begat’s” tie Him to history in a way that the pagan gods would never imagine. Those gods had their genealogies, too, but they were always obviously mythological: Chaos gave birth to Kronos, and Kronos to Zeus; then Athena burst forth from the brow of Zeus! With Jesus we find a much different story: He is a direct descendent of earthly figures, chronicled in a Jewish genealogy in the way that the Jews had always done in the Old Testament (Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38). St. Paul wrote to Timothy to avoid “fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith” (1 Tim. 1:4). It could very well be that Paul wrote these words in response to a problem Timothy was having with local mystery cults. Paul rejected those mythological tar-babies, because he trusted the historical lineage of Jesus Christ, the “seed of David” (Rom. 1:3). The core of the Christian faith is historical versus the mythology of the mystery religions. Even when scholars such as Dundes try to cut out everything

from the Bible that they can distort as mythology, there still exists a core of material that is distinctly and unmistakably *historical*.

This book seeks to promote that historical reality, and to refute the modern serpentine hiss that Jesus was a mythological figure derived from the pagan mystery religions. It exposes mystery-religion scholarship as a fig-leaf for sin, and shows that the Christian faith—especially the background of the apostle Paul—found everything it needed in the Old Testament revelation of God in the light of Jesus Christ the Messiah. Furthermore, it contrasts the mythical nature of pagan religions with the historical reality of Christ’s incarnation. While this “mystery of godliness” is indeed great, I do not shrink the fact that “He was manifested in the flesh.”

The critics, however, do get one thing right: “Contemporary Christians are largely ignorant of the origins of their religion.”¹² Books like this one that you are reading face the uphill challenge of a disinterested or complacent Christian world. Christians do not study the historical creeds of their *own* faith, let alone things like obscure mystery cults and early Church confrontations with pagans. If we are to stop the influence of New-Age and atheistic attacks on our culture, then we must educate our families and our flocks. That education can begin with the next chapter.

¹²From the back cover of Flemming’s DVD, *The God Who Wasn’t There*.

1

Fads and Myths, Old and New

*You shall not follow the crowd toward evil, nor sway a controversy
by leaning after the crowd (Ex. 23:2)¹*

AN OLD PROVERB says, “Those who can talk Latin may always find their way to Rome.” You can get anywhere you want to go if you know the right language. Mystery religions speak the language of the fallen human heart. As long as they stay hidden in their dark corner of history and do not intrude into popular religion, they cause little problem; but when they become militant and seek to dominate the culture around them, they propose an offense. In Christianity’s confrontation with cults, in ancient times as well as now, the Gospel of Jesus Christ clashes with basic desires of depraved human nature: exclusive knowledge, escape from human problems, and the illusion of becoming divine. Fallen man has no problem convincing himself that whatever way he desires is the right way, especially when that way is wrapped in the glamour of big-screen production and professional cover-art. Following the crowd to do evil has never been easier. The Bible, however, specifically tells us not to follow a mob. We are not to let popular movements pervert the truth and lead us into a lie. The command not to bear false witness

¹My translation.

means that we must stand against the tide, even when it means unpopularity or even persecution. Contrary to the atheists and humanists who ridicule Christians for having a “herd” mentality—blindly following our leaders and unable to think for ourselves—the Bible teaches us to reason against the waves and fads of popular religion.

The proponents of today’s fads and myths about Jesus constitute just such a mob. For well over a century, in the darkest corners of popular religion, a trend has lurked which recently has exploded into the popular imagination. The so-called “mystery religions” of the ancient world have gained new popularity through certain novels, films, and websites that take a militant stance against the traditional understanding of Jesus Christ and Christian history. The resultant chaos has led to what one Christian scholar calls “junk food for the mind—a pseudointellectual meal that is as easy to swallow as it is devoid of substance.”² The spiritual famine that has led to this craze is an opportunity to educate hungry Christians and non-Christians alike with the true bread of Christ and the early fruit of that faith. For some this will mean a change of appetite for both heart and mind. The task of feeding these hungry souls falls to pastors, deacons, elders, seminary professors, Christian high-school and college teachers, home-schoolers, and most importantly, parents.

Once we examine the modern mystery-religion fad for ourselves, we find that like many trends it merely rehashes another old and forgotten ones. It is nothing less than the corpse of long-dead paganism washed up far downstream. A quick glance through the bibliography for this book will reveal that the dates of relevant works range from the nineteenth century to the present—the point being that scholarship has dealt extensively with the questions of the historical Jesus, Paul, and the pagan mystery cults for well over a hundred years. Despite the fact that many critics present their spiel as if no one before them had ever heard it, or as a detective story in which suppressed “truths” are gradually discovered by the probing author, this is not cutting edge stuff. In fact,

²J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What the Da Vinci Code and Other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 222.

it goes back much further; the first scholarly treatment of mystery religions was written in 1614 by the Puritan scholar Isaac Casaubon.³ Not only this, but the earliest apologists in the second century addressed the ancient mysteries as well. Contrary to the claim of some atheists, Christian scholars have always known of the old pagan myths and have studied them to death. Nothing has changed to date. The mystery religions of pagan gods such as Osiris, Cybele, Mithra, etc.,⁴ give us no surprise and no cause for panic.

The Descent of Foolishness

The strongest case for the influence of mystery religions upon early Christianity was made during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by liberal German scholars, who were following in the tradition of “Higher Criticism.”⁵ The higher critics applied the doctrine of evolution⁶ to the study of history, arguing that every religion has evolved from previous ones. The idea continues today. For example, the authors of *The Jesus Mysteries* ask, “What could be more plausible than to posit the gradual evolution of spiritual ideas, with Christianity emerging from the ancient Pagan Mysteries in a seamless historical continuum?”⁷ When they engage in this kind of questioning they assume the doctrine of evolution in the same way as Darwin did in relation to nature. Just as Darwin would have us see the *Descent of Man* from primitive life forms, the critics of Jesus would have us see the descent of Christianity from primitive pagan religions. In reality, no such descent can be shown. Just as unbelieving archaeologists scrape together fragments

³In his *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes*. Bruce M. Metzger, “Methodology in the Study of Mystery Religions and Early Christianity,” in *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian*. New Testament Tools and Studies, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, 8:1–24 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 1 note 1.

⁴See the next chapter for explanations of the various pagan gods.

⁵On Higher Criticism, see Gary North, *The Hoax of Higher Criticism* (Tyler, TX: The Institute for Christian Economics, 1989) and George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 1967.

⁶The original higher critics derived their doctrine of evolution from the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel. Darwin later applied the idea to science.

⁷Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 12.

of bones—sometimes found great distances apart, sometimes non-existent—in order to present the appearance of primate descendants of man, so the mystery theorists do the same with selective pieces of religious history. A few pieces exist here and there, the rest is the writer’s imagination. The heritage of paganism simply rejects God’s revelation, God’s history, and therefore God Himself. As “the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God” (Ps. 14:1), the heritage of paganism—the alleged descent of man, as well as descent of religion—is in reality, the decent of foolishness.

In the scholarly world, this approach has often been seen for the foolishness that it is. Even the strongest attempts by the critics were immediately challenged, severely crippled by the 1930s, had all visibly failed by the 1950s, and were pretty much given up on by the 1970s. Today, only the most radical among liberal scholars and the most crazed among unscholarly occultists take the mystery religion hypothesis even remotely seriously. Now, after the competition and contradiction of liberal scholars among themselves, and with the rise of more serious study of Palestinian Judaism as it was at the time of Christ and the apostles, scholars are now seeing Paul and the early Church as they rarely have before.⁸ New Testament studies have progressed to a point where nearly all of the conclusions and supposed “scientific” guesses of the nineteenth century—especially those concerning the mystery cults—amount to an embarrassment.

One simple reason for this is that no evidence of interaction between Jesus or Paul and the mysteries has ever turned up. The paucity of evidence, which could have been seen as well then as now, liberal scholars simply filled in using their imaginations. As a result, their hypotheses fail to hold intellectual water, and they provide us with little more than an example of what to avoid. New Testament scholar Scott Hafemann explains:

⁸That is, historically speaking. The ancient lectionaries (which are books composed of sections of scripture arranged for reading and study), not to mention St. Paul himself, show that the church made many Old Testament connections *biblically* from the earliest days of Christian liturgy and worship. The ancient church always saw the New Testament message as growing out the Old Covenant promises and prophecies. Scholars today are just catching up in their historical understanding.

The inconclusive and internally contradictory history of Pauline studies since Baur⁹ has demonstrated that the temptation to reconstruct some grand hypothesis based on isolated fragments and “catch words” from Paul’s letters, which are then filled out by recourse to distant parallels, must be resisted. For the simple fact is that there is no direct evidence from any of Paul’s opponents themselves. . . .¹⁰

This recognition, however, comes a bit late in one regard. So much time and energy was spent creating a body of scholarship—the object of which was to replace the supernatural truth of Jesus with naturalistic explanations—that honest scholars today must hack through the dense underbrush of modern biblical studies in order to get down to the presuppositions of past failures. This means lots of scholarly machete work.

The Jungle of Mystery-Cult Scholarship

The scholarly tangle that we have to clear away grew out of the world-views of evolution and naturalism.¹¹ From these ultimate presuppositions, an entire jungle of scholarship twisted and overshadowed everything that came before. In hindsight, the arguments and books produced at the time betray an ideological bent so obvious that reading them seriously takes a good bit of emotional discipline. Well-fixed philosophical starting points govern their conclusions and give much of their scholarship a clear circularity.¹²

For example, trying to stack the deck in favor of the mystery-cult theory, they emphasize and rely upon the claim that the Gospels did not

⁹Ferdinand Christian Baur of Tübingen University was one of the foremost proponents of higher criticism who applied the doctrine of evolution to Christian history. He made as great an impact upon Pauline Studies and New Testament Studies in general as anyone in his era.

¹⁰S. J. Hafemann, “Paul and His Interpreters” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 671.

¹¹Hegel’s evolutionary philosophy, which included both spiritual and historical evolution, had tremendous impact on the early German scholars, and still does upon a few today; but most of their higher critical work was carried out upon strictly naturalistic assumptions.

¹²See the appendix, “Presuppositions and New Testament Studies.”

appear until at least forty years after the events took place. They believe that this gap of time allows for stories about the historical Jesus to be told and retold until blown up into tall tales and myths about a supernatural guy who walked on water, healed people, and raised the dead. Never mind that not a single fiber of manuscript evidence has been discovered to support their theory. Arguments by atheists that promote the claim usually echo the serpent, “Could it be? Can’t you imagine it?” The supposition conveniently allows disbelievers to reject the earliest written records of the life of Christ as mythology.¹³

But a survey of recent New Testament scholarship shows that later dates for the Gospels belong to a minority position. There is some evidence that places the Gospel of Mark as early as A.D. 40, not long after the resurrection of Christ. Mid-50s to early 60s is almost certain.¹⁴ Likewise, Acts was certainly written before A.D. 62, and Luke’s Gospel, being the “former treatise” which he mentions in Acts 1:1, must have come before that date.¹⁵ Arguments for later dates, especially for Luke, must deal with the fact that Acts does not mention the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), the persecution of Christians under Nero (A.D. 64), or the martyrdoms of Paul (A.D. 64–65) or James the brother of Jesus (A.D. 62), although he does mention the martyrdom of James the son of Zebedee (A.D. 44). All of these important events should certainly have found their way into an official history of the apostolic church. Their absence is telling. Those who ignore the weight of these considerations—among the thousands of facts compiled since the original higher critics began their attack—in order to believe that the Gospels came much later, are obviously pursuing some ideological agenda. Indeed, it is well known—if it is not often stated—that late dates are generally only promoted by axe-grinding radicals whose intellectual precommitments (and endowed chairs at liberal universities) drive their work.

¹³For some who argue for Jesus as just one more mystery-religion figure, this supposition becomes part of their evidence!

¹⁴D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 96–99. See also Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 72–76.

¹⁵Carson, Moo, and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 116–117 and Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 340–348.

Once they have brushed the Gospel records aside, they claim that a great historical gulf exists between the Jesus who lived in history and the one who came to be immortalized in the Gospels. I am reminded of a verse: “He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it” (Eccl. 10:8). The only official records that existed, they assume, between roughly A.D. 30 and 75–90, came from the Apostle Paul. From this basis, they argue that Paul, not Jesus, was the founder of Christianity as we know it. And the Paul they want us to see is quite a different character as well. They emphasize the fact that Paul originally came from Tarsus (funny: they have no problem with the historicity of this claim of the Bible), which was a known center of Greek philosophy and mystery religions. Growing up as a young radical, Paul must have assimilated lots of ideas from the abundant mystery religions—ideas he later transformed into the Christian teachings we know today.

From here the story gets really strained: Paul, some claim, did not believe that Jesus was ever human. It is argued that he never mentions the humanity of Jesus; he never mentions Mary, Joseph, Bethlehem, Herod, Pilate, Jesus’ earthly ministry or miracles; and he never actually quotes Jesus. Since he mentions none of these things, then Paul’s Jesus was not an historical but a mythological figure. The only events of Jesus’ life that Paul knows are the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. These he constantly harps on, but only as heavenly, mythological events which he derived from the ancient mysteries. The argument runs that because he only speaks of these heavenly events, and not the historical, therefore he certainly did not know about or believe in the historical. If I only mentioned the general word “breakfast” in my writings, and nothing else about it, then it would prove to some that I knew nothing about ham and eggs.

I will deal with the gratuitous biblical oversights involved with this argument in later chapters; here I just intend to introduce the problem as modern writers have presented it. From their perspective, Paul created Christianity from the mystery cult myths with the divinized character of Jesus as the hero. This was certainly the view of the leading liberal scholar of the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann, who thought that

Paul could “easily interpret the death and Resurrection of Jesus in terms of the mysteries and their sacramentalism,” and as a “Gnostic conception.”¹⁶ Then writers after Paul created the Gospels as mere works of literature by rationalizing the life of Jesus and infusing it with the folklore and mythology of Paul’s precedent. The critics point to “parallels” between practices in the mystery religions and key elements of the Christian faith. The latter, it is uncritically assumed (yet confidently asserted), stole from the mysteries which came before.

Today, in the world of scholarship, this belief is almost dead. It survives only in a few liberal American universities where fundamentalist-bashing still earns fellowships and chairs. But it has seen a recent revival in popular works of fiction, movies, and atheist documentaries—all works by modern-day gnostics who want to rewrite the history of the church for their purposes. Since their theory has failed the tests of scholarly peer-review, scrutiny, and debate, it has retreated to the world of popular media. Like many bad theological ideas, its only safe haven is in the world of fiction and imagination.

Yet there is a certain danger to letting such ideas, ridiculous as they may be, circulate and propagate unchallenged. As much as I would prefer to watch them fizzle out unaided, they have a tendency to produce an audience through propaganda or through some unforeseen agent. For example, the immediate precursor to the type of scholarship I have described was the work of Ferdinand Baur and his followers at Tübingen University in the early nineteenth century. They followed a hard-line method of anti-supernaturalism, denying every possibility of miracle or divine intervention in history. Their historical-critical product soon gained wide recognition for devastating the faith of many people. With this visible result the work was readily adopted as the oppressive tool of an atheistic government. Communist revolutionary Maxim Gorky wrote to Joseph Stalin,

It is essential to put the propaganda of atheism on solid ground. . . .
Every quotation of a believer is easily countered with dozens of

¹⁶Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity: In Its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R. H. Fuller (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1965), 197.

theological quotations which contradict it. We cannot do without an edition of the Bible with critical commentaries of the Tübingen school and books on criticism of the biblical texts, which could bring a very useful confusion into the minds of believers.¹⁷

This same danger continues today. It signals a battle over souls, and over the proper ordering of both society and eternity. In this battle, the enemies of God love “a very useful confusion,” propaganda, and stilted scholarship. Christians must counter the lies and knock the stilts down to earth.

Why Now?

Why have mystery religions become a public issue at this point in time? The answer presents an ominous parallel to the early Church era, when the apologists had to defend the Scriptures against pagan attacks. Charles Norris Cochrane gives the classic account of the decline of the Roman Empire from the earliest of the Caesars who allowed himself to be worshipped as a political god.¹⁸ From this point the seeds of “barbarism and superstition,” which the Empire claimed to eliminate, “were enshrined at the very heart of the system itself in the worship of the divinized sovereign.”¹⁹ The State grew progressively more powerful in its lust to play a Messianic role in the earth. The military grew, civil law expanded, private law fell to the State, and taxation skyrocketed. Religion, philosophy, and culture became subservient as well. The arid heritage of Graeco-Roman philosophy and religion presented the people with only *fate* or *chance* as ultimate principles. Religion was, therefore, depersonalized, and the people forced beneath the press of a merciless and purposeless world. As with all Messianic states, “It was, in a word, the tragedy of men who, being required to play the part of gods, descended to that of beasts.”²⁰ That such a state of affairs would inevitably lead to

¹⁷Quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 134.

¹⁸Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Civilization: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 115ff.

¹⁹Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Civilization*, 160.

²⁰Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Civilization*, 129.

decline was foreshadowed when one of the earliest of the Caesars, Tiberius, said, “After me: the deluge.”²¹

Into this environment entered, especially by military travels, an influx of Eastern mystery religions. These secretive cults presented emotional rituals and myths that involved personal gods. They met the needs of an overly-rationalized populace who longed to escape the coldness of the State religions. The cults emphasized cyclical history, drawing from the cycles of nature, to assure members that the decline of society that they saw around them simply belonged to the grand scheme of the natural evolution and fall of civilizations. These remained secluded and underground for the most part—in some cases they were even persecuted—until the late second to early third centuries. At that point, when the roots of the classical republic had all but eroded away, and, “The voice of Greek and Latin literature . . . was almost stilled,” then, “Orientalism in its grosser forms broke in wave after wave upon the capital.”²² This “orientalism” was nothing less than the extravagant—and often bloody—ritualism of the mystery religions.

The appearance of the mystery religions in great numbers, therefore, corresponded to the final stages of the decaying Messianic State. At a time of impersonal beliefs and failed political saviors, the mystery religions provided the personalism, sense of participation and purpose in the cosmos, and emotional stimulation that so many people wanted. It should not surprise us then to see the same recurrence in our day. On the heels of Darwinism, which denies the Hand of the personal Creator and Sustainer in the universe, we have a critical era of religious, philosophical, and political apostasy. Many in main-line denominations have abandoned the Scriptures and endorsed every pagan idea imaginable, homosexuality being only one of the most talked about. “Philosophy” as well, that two-headed snake, has once again hung itself at a fork in the road: one side devolves every question into its most minute “analytical” fragments of grammar and syntax, the other ignores technicality almost completely in favor of passion, emotion, images, symbols, and intuition.

²¹Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Civilization*, 129. I have added the semicolon.

²²Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Civilization*, 154.

Meanwhile, the State continues to assume more power as it tries to address every perceived crisis in every area of life. Militaristic police and bureaucrats multiply: “For the transgression of a land many are the princes thereof” (Prov. 28:2). Our time is little different from the failed Roman Empire of the early Christian era,²³ and the influx of religions offering escapism, secret knowledge, and transcendence above history draws as big an audience now as it did then.

Conclusion

It is time that a concise apologetic be written which encompasses the worldview issues established in the nineteenth century, while accounting for the popular appeal of New-Age mystery-religion thought (for the two work hand-in-hand). We must revive the tradition of biblical learning and godly passion of the early Church apologists, and yet account for the attacks of today (which are actually less substantial than their second-century cousins). Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was “manifested in the flesh,” and the apostolic tradition which He founded, provide us with the fullest and truest possible understanding of a personal, historical, sovereign, gracious, and loving God. No mythical counterfeits can come close.

For those today, including the menagerie of liberal scholars, outspoken atheists, and radical critics, who insist on dragging up the long-dead theory that Christianity borrowed its beliefs and practices from ancient mystery cults, I offer the critique that follows. The mystery-cult theory rests upon three great faults: (1) a distorted representation of what the mystery cults believed and practiced; (2) a poor understanding of what the Bible itself says; and (3) highly selective, fanciful and perhaps dishonest methods of reconstructing the two together. In short, the mys-

²³Martin Van Creveld sees the modern nation-state as an institution in decline. He argues that it is a failed form of government that will soon be replaced by another that is more international and yet more decentralized. This herald of the doom of the modern institution parallels the situation of ancient Rome, as the State sees itself as a Messiah and yet cannot control the inner contradiction of playing god while acting as a beast. (Martin Van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999]).

tery cult theory presents *bad history*, *bad theology*, and *bad judgment*. The following chapters will expand these three critiques.

One word of warning: some of the ancient mysteries included vulgar and violent practices, and I include reports of some of these in what follows. Parents should give some consideration as to whether their children should have unguarded access to the next few chapters.