

CRITIQUE OF FIVE OF ASHER NORMAN'S *TWENTY-SIX REASONS*
WHY JEWS DON'T BELIEVE IN JESUS

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In *Twenty-Six Reasons Why Jews Don't Believe in Jesus*, Asher Norman sets out to provide an apologia for modern orthodox Judaism—an apologia that is specifically targeted against Christian missionaries:

It is crucial for Jews to have the theological information necessary to defend themselves against the aggressive efforts of Christian missionaries, especially those who specifically target Jews for conversion. I have presented my arguments in a candid and uncompromising fashion, which may unintentionally offend some Christian readers. Therefore, if you are a Christian who would be offended by a Jewish rebuttal to the arguments of Christian missionaries and Christian claims about Jesus, this may not be the book that you should read.¹

After providing the rationale for the book, he lets the reader know that he is very candid and uncompromising in his arguments. He forewarns Christians that some might not want to read the book lest they be “unintentionally” offended. This paper is an examination of the validity of five of the twenty-six reasons he gives for “Jewish” rejection of Jesus Christ and Christianity. Each section will begin with an overview of his objection. This will be followed by a critique with the aim of providing a better understanding of the critical *facts* at stake.

“Reason 10: Jesus Was ‘Elected God’ In 325 C.E.”

In this section Norman asserts that Jesus was elected God in 325 C.E.² He says that most Christians are incorrect in believing that the deity of Jesus was *always* a part of Christianity. The

¹Asher Norman, *Twenty-Six Reasons Why Jews Don't Believe in Jesus* (Los Angeles, CA: Black, White, and Read Publishing, 2008), xxvi.

²*Ibid.*, 79-80.

implication is that the deity of Jesus was not *always* a Christian doctrine. His primary evidence consists of a history lesson on Arianism and the vote at the Council of Nicea—about *three hundred years* after the birth of Christianity.

There are at least three flaws with Norman's inference that Jesus only became ("was elected") God in Christianity because of a vote at the council of Nicea in 325 C.E. First, logically the allegation that the deity of Jesus was not *always* part of Christianity does not prove anything. This would be akin to saying that Yahweh was not the true God of Israel because He was not always viewed as the true God of Israel. Throughout the Hebrew Bible we have multiple instances of the Jews involved in polytheism as they rejected Yahweh as the only God for Israel (cf. Exod. 32:4; 1 Kings 11:4; Hos. 3:1; 1 Chron. 5:25). What some Jews believed afterwards has absolutely no bearing on the true nature of Yahweh as the God of Israel. This is also true of the deity of Christ. Historical evidence from the fourth century does not *establish* the deity of Christ.

The second problem with Norman's argument is historical: he completely skips over the critical formative period of Christianity. If one is going to use church history to attack a Christian doctrine, one should at least examine its beginnings instead of *only* citing church history hundreds of years later. A careful study of early Christianity reveals an explicit faith in the full deity of Jesus Christ. Mike Lacona notes six major Church Fathers who explicitly affirmed the deity of Christ:

1. Justin: "[He] who is called God," "God the Son of God," "is even God." 2. Irenaeus: "the Spirit designates both [Father and Son] by the name of God," "His essence, that He is God." 3. Clement of Alexandria: "truly most manifest Deity," "made equal to the Lord of the universe." 4. Tertullian: "never separate from the Father, or other than the Father," of the same "substance" as the Father, "Trinity." 5. Hippolytus: "is God, being the substance of God," "God the Word," "in essential being with His Father." 6. Origen: not beyond the "substance" of the Father, "the great God," "we regard the Savior as God," "without any beginning," "fullness of His deity."³

³Michael Licona, "The Early Church Fathers On Jesus," The Apologetics Ministry of Mike Licona, <http://www.risenjesus.com/the-early-church-fathers-on-jesus> [accessed April 28, 2011].

With Christianity affirming the deity of Jesus Christ very early, we can understand why the vote at Nicea was two hundred eighteen affirming His deity against two. The issue at Nicea was not to vote on creating the divinity of Christ; it was about which of the preexisting ideas was correct. The debate at Nicea was not over whether Jesus was divine or not, it was over how to understand and explain His *divinity*—a doctrine which was already established and accepted by an overwhelming majority of Church Fathers.

A third flaw in Norman’s argument against the deity of Jesus Christ as an authentic Christian doctrine is in the New Testament documents (which alone *establish* the true nature of Christ and Christianity). What occurred in A.D. 325 is irrelevant if it can be demonstrated that the deity of Christ is explicitly established in the New Testament Scriptures. Licona demonstrates clearly that the deity of Christ is unequivocally established in the New Testament by providing a scholarly exegetical analysis of three most explicit New Testament passages (John 1:1; 20:28; Col. 2:9) on the undiminished and eternal deity of Christ.⁴

In stark contrast to the aforementioned scholarship, it should be noted that in this chapter (as well as in many other sections in this book) Norman resorts to using Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy as his principal sources. Freke and Gandy are New Age mystics who are on the outer limits of “fringe scholarship.”⁵ They have never published a peer reviewed paper nor a scholarly monograph; they do not possess the relevant qualifications for critical history or contextual biblical interpretation.⁶ They are best known for spreading unsubstantiated theories of Christ as a

⁴Michael Licona, “Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock; What to Say to Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses When They Knock on Your Door,” <http://www.risenjesus.com/templates/RisenJesus/Behold.pdf>, 31-50 [accessed April 29, 2011].

⁵For evaluation of Freke and Gandy and their shoddy “scholarship,” see James Patrick Holding, ed. *Shattering the Christ Myth* (United States: Xulon Press, 2008), xvii; 249-252.

⁶*Ibid.*, 249.

myth. It is quite telling that Norman would use them as a major source while completely ignoring widely recognized professional historians. How unfortunate, especially in light of Norman's intent to be "uncompromising" in his arguments. In "telling it like it is," perhaps he is wagering on the reader being ignorant of these sources and not bothering to check them out.

"Reason 11: Judaism Has No Concept of a Triune Deity (The Trinity)"

After listing several definitions of the Trinity—all of which explicitly affirm the *oneness* of God—Norman states that from a Jewish theological perspective, the theory of the Trinity is not compatible with "Jewish radical monotheism."⁷ He also spends a fair amount of time attacking the irrationality of the Trinity. However, the crux of the issue is not whether one can fully explain the multidimensional nature of the transcendent God with physical analogies. The central issue is whether the multiplicity or complexity in the one God is compatible with the Judaism of the Hebrew Scriptures. If it can be demonstrated in the Hebrew Bible that there is a multiplicity within the one Godhead, Norman's arguments against the irrational nature because of multiplicity in the Godhead (as per the Christian view of God) are moot.⁸

The nature of the God revealed in the Hebrew Bible is perfectly compatible with the Triune God revealed in New Testament. Arnold Fruchtenbaum makes the point that it "can be shown that the doctrine of the Trinity actually originates in the Hebrew Scriptures and is merely developed and clarified in the New Testament."⁹ There are at least three major evidences from

⁷Norman Asher, *Twenty-six Reasons Why Jews Don't Believe in Jesus*, 81-84.

⁸One common Jewish attack on the Trinity as it relates to the incarnation is that it is irrational because God is both in heaven as object of prayer as well as on earth as Jesus. However, in the Hebrew Bible we find the same kind of parallels with God both being in heaven as object of prayer and on earth as a person (cf. Gen. 16:7-9, 11; 22:11-22, 15-18; 32:24-30; Exod. 3:1-6; Judges 13:19-23). While the incarnation of Jesus is on a much higher level than a Christophany, the point remains that God is *personally* in both places. For excellent discussion on the appearance of God on earth to individuals in the Hebrew Bible, see Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume Two: Theological Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 14-37.

⁹Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Messianic Christology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1998), 102-103.

the Hebrew Bible that a Triune God is compatible with the nature of God as revealed to the Jews.

First, the noun “God” in the Old Testament is often in the plural form. The most common name used for God in the Old Testament is *Elohim*. The “*im*” ending is masculine plural in the Hebrew and points to the fact that the very name for God opens the door to a plurality *within* the one God.¹⁰ *Elohim* is the same word translated “gods” when the context makes it clear that the reference is to the gods of pagans (cf. Deut. 13:2). The fact that the normal grammatical rules of Hebrew are violated when the plural *Elohim* takes a singular verb further points a multiplicity within the *one* Godhead. It may be objected that the Hebrew does not have a singular word for God/*Elohim*. However, this is simply not true. The singular form of *Elohim* is *Eloah*. The fact that *Eloah* “is found only 250 places, as compared to the 2,500 instances of the plural form. . . . tends to turn the argument in favor of plurality in the Godhead rather than against it.”¹¹ Another plural noun for God in Hebrew is *Adonai* (Lord), which is consistently used of God (cf. Psa. 110:1), and never found in the singular.¹² If God is an absolute unity, why is the plural form used so often?

Second, there are several instances of plural pronouns used of God. In Genesis 1:26 God said “let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.” Although Judaism asserts that the “our” refers to angels,¹³ this is not true. Man is made in God’s image (cf. Gen. 9:6)—there is not a shred of evidence even suggesting that man is made in the image of angels. Furthermore, angels did not help God create man. Other passages where the multiplicity within the one God is expressed in “divine” pronouns include Genesis 3:22, (“and Yahweh God said, Behold, the man

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 103.

¹²Ibid., 105.

¹³Ibid., 106.

is become as one of Us”), Genesis 11:6 (“Come, let Us go down”), and Isaiah 6:8 (“and who will go for Us?”).

Third, there is not a single verse anywhere in the Hebrew Bible that teaches that God is an absolute unity. The verse that is often cited as a proof-text for God’s absolute unity is the famous Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4, which is translated in the New Jewish Publication Society Version: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.” This translation shows that the issue in this passage is not an absolute unity. Instead, it teaches exclusive allegiance to Yahweh: “the Lord alone was to be Israel’s God.”¹⁴ The emphasis of alone (*echad*) is *uniqueness* and not absolute unity. It has absolutely nothing to do with the issue of God’s essential nature. It was the profession of faith in the Lord *alone*: the God of Jacob would be the *only* God of Jacob’s descendants. This call to allegiance to Yahweh alone was a constant message of the prophets (e.g. Isa. 44:8; 45:5; 45:18, 22).¹⁵ Again, the point in the passage is that the Lord *alone* should be worshipped—not that He is an absolute unity. Furthermore, there exists a different word in the Hebrew for absolute unity, namely *yachid*:

This word [*yachid*] is used in a number of places with the emphasis being on the meaning of ‘only one.’ If Moses had intended to teach God’s absolute oneness as opposed to compound oneness, this would have been a far more appropriate word to have used. In fact, Maimonides notes the strength of *yachid* and chose it . . . in place of ‘*echad*.’ However, this is was not the word God chose for Deuteronomy 6:4.¹⁶

As for the Hebrew word for “one” (*echad*), which is used in the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4, it should be pointed out that it is used throughout the Hebrew Bible for a compound unity: e.g., when man and woman are united, the two become one (*echad*) couple (Gen. 2:24); the many components of the tabernacle make up the one (*echad*) tabernacle (Exod. 26:6); Israel is

¹⁴Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume Two: Theological Objections*, 6.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁶Fruchtenbaum, *Messianic Christology*, 108.

one (*'echad*) nation composed of many different people (2 Sam. 7:23); and the many who joined together to build the Tower of Babel could be called one (*'echad*) people (Gen. 11:6).¹⁷ This multiplicity or complexity within a oneness is indeed compatible with the doctrine of the Trinity.

“Reason 15: Jesus’ Blood Did Not Atone For Our Sins”

In this section Norman sets out to demonstrate that under Jewish law human blood could not have atoned for sin and there were means other than animal blood to atone for sin (e.g. flour, incense, charity, repentance, prayer).¹⁸ He opines, “under Jewish law *personal* sin could *not* be redeemed by blood sacrifice.”¹⁹ His contention is that there was no forgiveness for *intentional* sins. However, Michael Brown notes that

the sacrifices of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) provided atonement for both intentional and unintentional sins, something taught emphatically in the Talmud and Law Codes. Scripture is clear on this, and Jewish tradition never questioned it. There was also one particular sacrifice (namely, the *'asham*, the guilt offering or reparation offering) that in conjunction with repentance served as atonement for intentional sins (called “transgressions” in the Bible).²⁰

After Brown provides a description of the purpose of sacrifices, he quotes leading Jewish authorities on the intentional sins of Leviticus 5:20-26, and concludes: “this observation alone shoots a hole in the anti-missionary teaching that only unintentional sins could be atoned with blood sacrifices.”²¹ He points out that God responded to Solomon’s prayer for forgiveness of the sins of his people by saying He would forgive them because of the sacrifices offered up in the

¹⁷Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume Two: Theological Objections*, 4-5.

¹⁸Norman Asher, *Twenty-six Reasons Why Jews Don’t Believe in Jesus*, 105-16.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 105.

²⁰Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume Two: Theological Objections*, 126.

²¹*Ibid.*, 126-168

Temple. (2 Chron. 7:12-16).²² Those intentional sins for which there is “no sacrifice” actually refer to *continual* intentional, “willful, defiant sin”—not for past intentional sins.²³ One can categorically affirm from the Hebrew Bible that sacrifices were not for unintentional sins only.²⁴

Although Norman downplays redemption by blood, blood sacrifice was central throughout biblical history: e.g., Abel, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, the Passover lamb for the redemption of the Exodus generation, the priests, the altar, the animal sacrifices, and as reflected in all the Talmudic writings.²⁵ Whenever atonement is mentioned in Leviticus it is always in conjunction with blood. As Leviticus 17:11 reveals, “life is in the blood”—one life is sacrificed as a substitute for another life.²⁶

Norman attempts to minimize blood sacrifices by pointing to flour and other bloodless means of “atonement.” However, the flour was mingled with blood sacrifices and “there is not a single verse in the Bible that would even hint that flour, in and of itself, had any atoning power” without the atoning altar and its sacrifices.²⁷ Likewise, money was never used for atonement of sin.²⁸ The same is true of incense. Atonement for sins is not the issue in any of these bloodless “sacrifices.”²⁹ Note Brown’s excellent summary of blood atonement as revealed in the Hebrew Bible:

²²Ibid., 131-132.

²³Ibid., 134

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., 106-107.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 113.

²⁸Ibid., 115-116.

²⁹Ibid., 117.

We can safely say, then, that we have demonstrated conclusively that blood sacrifices were the one, God-ordained means of atonement in the Hebrew Bible.

Any other system of atonement that does not include the blood is not biblical, and any other system of atonement that fails to offer substitutionary atonement (i.e. an innocent sacrificial victim dying on behalf of a guilty sinner) is not able to provide real forgiveness of sins. God established life for life – not money for life, not jewelry for life, not flour for life, not incense for life—as the means of expiation of his people. As the Talmudic rabbis recognized at least while the Temple stood—There is no atonement without blood.”³⁰

In the final section of this chapter Norman contends that prayer replaced sacrifices by citing 2 Chronicles 6:36-39 and Hosea 14:2 as proof-texts.³¹ Concerning 2 Chronicles 6:36-39, the context indicates “that the Temple *would* be standing and that sacrifices *would* be offered.”³² Regarding Hosea 14:2, the context is “the *end* of the period described in Hosea 3:4-5, the time when Israel *returns* to the Lord, the time when sacrifices and offerings are restored.”³³ The prophets did not repudiate the “God-sanctioned system of atonement as laid out in the Torah.”³⁴ God’s denunciation of animal sacrifices because of the hypocrisy of the people is no more a categorical repudiation of animal sacrifices than His denunciation of hypocritical prayer (cf. Isa. 1:11-15) is a categorical repudiation of prayer.

“Reason 23: The Historicity of Jesus is Problematic”

After questioning the historicity of Christ, Norman provides a long quotation by Robert Price alleging that Jesus was a “mythic hero archetype.”³⁵ It is interesting that Norman must go to such lengths as to cite Robert Price. As James Patrick Holding writes, “among the thousands

³⁰Ibid., 121-23.

³¹Norman Asher, *Twenty-six Reasons Why Jews Don’t Believe in Jesus*, 112-113.

³²Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume Two: Theological Objections*, 96.

³³Ibid., 95.

³⁴Ibid., 71-72.

³⁵Norman Asher, *Twenty-six Reasons Why Jews Don’t Believe in Jesus*, 183-90.

of individuals with credentials in ancient history or New Testament studies, I am aware of only two who question the existence of Jesus: Robert Price and Richard Carrier.”³⁶ Furthermore, those who deny the existence of Jesus (“Christ-mythers”) must ignore a vast number of historical facts “which are readily accepted by virtually every competent historian.”³⁷ This would explain why Norman does not cite a single widely recognized scholar as a source in this section.

In Norman’s claims against an historical Jesus, he introduces what is known as the Rensberg’s List. Regarding this list, Norman says that this silence is understandable if an historical Jesus was invented in the second century.³⁸ However, the notion that Jesus may not have existed as a historical person is not shared by most recognized scholars.³⁹ As Bruce affirms, “The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the ‘Christ-myth’ theories.”⁴⁰ That the apostles appealed to the fact that they were “eyewitnesses” (Acts 2:32), and that the opponents of Christians were challenged with “you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22), are powerful testimonies that could not have been so boldly declared without evidence.⁴¹ After examining each writer on Rensberg’s List (which Norman does not do), Holding concludes that in “almost all cases,

³⁶James Patrick Holding, *Shattering the Christ Myth* (United States: Xulon Press, 2008), 79.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Norman Asher, *Twenty-six Reasons Why Jews Don’t Believe in Jesus*, 184.

³⁹For discussion of radical theories which deny the existence of Jesus, see Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 27-46. For discussion of the historicity of Jesus, see James H. Charlesworth *Jesus Within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries: The Anchor Bible Reference Library* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 9-29; Ed Hindson and Ergun Caner, eds., *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics: Surveying the Evidence for the Truth of Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2008), s.v. “Christ, Historicity of,” by Dewin L. Gray; Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*, 27-68.

⁴⁰F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publications, 1987), 119.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 33, 44-46.

Remsberg's writers authored works which would not mention Jesus, even if their authors had happened to be Christians."⁴² He adds, "Remsberg himself seemed equivocal in his commitment to a Christ-myth thesis."⁴³ Norman's quick dismissal of Josephus' references to Christ stands in contradiction to one of the world's premier *Jewish* Josephus scholars, Louis Feldman.⁴⁴ Given the weight that Norman gives Remsburg's List, it is worthy to note the remarks of Brown regarding the famous and celebrated Jewish successor of Hillel, Yohanan ben Zakkai:

there is not a word spoken about him in any external sources—neither Jewish nor Roman. The primary Jewish historian of the day, Flavius Josephus, himself a Pharisee, does not mention Rabbi Yohanan, despite providing the most detailed account of the Jewish war and the fall of Jerusalem. . . . Should we therefore claim that Yohanan ben Zakki did not exist? How absurd!⁴⁵

Norman also adds that the silence of ancient historians to even mention Matthew's account of the miraculous rising of "many dead Jews" out of their graves makes the account incredulous. However, we are not told how many of the dead were raised out of their graves or for how long they appeared.⁴⁶ Regardless of how many there were, the fact that these saints "entered the holy city and appeared to many" points to history rather than metaphor. Furthermore, given the passages in the Hebrew Bible on resurrections associated with Israel's restoration or Messiah (cf. Ezek. 37:12-13; Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2), this was the sort of sign that

⁴²James Patrick Holding, ed. *Shattering the Christ Myth*, 94.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 94n1.

⁴⁴Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: ILL: IVP Academic, 2010), 235-43. This book includes Michael Licona's personal communication with one of the world's greatest Josephus scholars, Louis Feldman. Feldman confirmed that the majority of scholars accept the authenticity of Josephus' reference to Jesus, 242n174.

⁴⁵Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume Four: New Testament Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 60.

⁴⁶Holding notes that there may have been as few as ten and we have no idea how long they appeared to others. See James Patrick Holding, "Index Matthew," TEKTON Education and Apologetics Ministry, <http://www.tektonics.org/af/asilent.html> (accessed April 11, 2011).

“Judaism regularly expected to accompany the death of the righteous.”⁴⁷ While Norman finds it incredible to believe in the New Testament miracles that are not substantiated by external sources, as an orthodox Jew he would likely accept without hesitation the miraculous events of the Hebrew Bible of which there is no surviving external evidence.⁴⁸ Whatever the “many” were in Matthew 27:52-53, there were certainly far less than the two million who left Egypt—yet there is not one word in ancient testimony from the Egyptians of *such* a mass exodus.⁴⁹

Although Norman attempts to discount evidence from all other non-Christian sources (e.g., Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny, the Talmud), historian Edwin M. Yamauchi illustrates the tremendous insights we can glean from these sources:

Even if we did not have the New Testament or Christian writings, we would be able to conclude from such non-Christian writings as Josephus, the *Talmud*, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger that: (1) Jesus was a Jewish teacher; (2) many people believed that he performed healings and exorcisms; (3) he was rejected by the Jewish leaders; (4) he was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius; (5) despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed that he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome by A.D. 64; (6) all kinds of people from the cities and countryside—men and women, slave and free—worshipped him as God by the beginning of the second century.⁵⁰

The truth is that “we have better historical documentation for Jesus than for the founder of any religion.”⁵¹ It should be noted that Norman does not provide a single citation of a

⁴⁷Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 684. For discussion of Jewish expectation, see Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume Four: New Testament Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 122; N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1992), 632-36.

⁴⁸For summary of miraculous events in the Hebrew Bible of which we have no external corroboration, see Michael Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume Four: New Testament Objections*, 119-23.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁰Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, eds., *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 221-22.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 229n105.

widely recognized scholar in his discussion of the non-Christian historical sources. Furthermore, it should be noted that there are four “minimal” historical facts related to Christ and His resurrection that virtually all historians (including atheists) accept: 1) Jesus’ death by crucifixion, 2) the disciples’ belief that they saw the resurrected Lord, 3) the conversion of James, and 4) the conversion of Paul).⁵² The evidence for the historicity of Jesus far outstrips written evidence for Julius Caesar or Tiberius Caesar.⁵³

“Reason 24: Jesus’ history appears to have been harvested from the Jewish Bible and the histories of Mystery-religion god-men”

In this chapter Norman provides “evidence” that the life of Jesus was harvested from the Jewish Bible and from pagan religions.⁵⁴ Rather than seeing Jesus fulfill types and prophecies, Norman posits that the writers of the New Testament just created the life of Jesus according to patterns in the Jewish Bible. He rightly notes that Christians believe the opposite is true: that Jesus’ life alluded to these events in the Jewish Bible and that the events in his life “fulfilled” prophecies in the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁵ Concerning the idea that the disciples invented Jesus from the Old Testament, Michael Brown shows how “this stretches the limits of credibility for it suggests that the authors of the Gospels actually thought they could fool their contemporaries, who were themselves eyewitnesses of the Messiah’s life, death, and resurrection. How absurd!”⁵⁶

⁵²For discussion of the four facts in which virtually all historians—secular or otherwise—accept, see Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004), 43-64.

⁵³Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 128.

⁵⁴Norman Asher, *Twenty-six Reasons Why Jews Don’t Believe in Jesus*, 191-202.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 193

⁵⁶Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume Three: Messianic Prophecy Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 152. This is an excellent resource for understanding many details on how Jesus fulfilled prophecies in the Hebrew Bible.

Next, Norman turns to other aspects of Jesus' life which he believes were harvested from pagan mystery religions. In this section he lists six "pagan God-men/predecessors" from which the life of Jesus Christ was supposedly harvested: Baal, Adonis, Attis, Isis, Mithras and Osiris-Dionysus (once again, relying the "authority" of New Age mystics, Freke and Gandy).⁵⁷

With regard to Baal, there are no tablets describing Baal's death and supposed return to life.⁵⁸ On Adonis, Norman writes: "Adonis was gored to death by a divinely sent boar, and raised on the third day. The name of his virgin mother was Myrrh." The problem is that there is not one scintilla of evidence of the "virgin mother" or a resurrection. Furthermore, the earliest text on Adonis is "*second century*—too late to influence the story of Jesus."⁵⁹ The third parallel that is proffered by Norman is Attis, who supposedly had a virgin mother, was raised in three days, and was born on December twenty-fifth. Not only are these assertions blatantly false, experts in the field recognize that it was the Attis cult that borrowed from Christianity.⁶⁰ The fourth myth proposed as a source of harvest for the life of Jesus is Isis. Points of comparisons that "show" that Jesus' life was harvested from Isis include salvation through repentance, encouragement of monogamy and the sanctity of marriage, and birth on December 25th. As to December twenty-fifth, this date is irrelevant because this is not part of Jesus' life in the Gospels. As to the other similarities, one wonders if Norman is actually serious when he says that the history of Jesus is a copy of Isis because of similarities regarding *priests*, *monogamy* and the *sanctity of life*. These

⁵⁷Norman Asher, *Twenty-six Reasons Why Jews Don't Believe in Jesus*, 193-97. For scholarly refutations of all allegations made by Christ-mythers, see James Patrick Holding, *Shattering the Christ Myth*, 203-381; Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks: Did the New Testament Borrow from Pagan Thought?* (Richardson, TX: Word Publishing Group, 1992), 115-61.

⁵⁸James Patrick Holding, *Shattering the Christ Myth*, 242.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 241.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 229-232.

truths are also found in the Hebrew Bible! After providing a scholarly evaluation of the supposed parallels between the Isis cult and Jesus, Ronald Nash writes that “it requires a fertile imagination to discover any significant parallels between either version [Egypt or Roman] and the Christian understanding of Jesus.”⁶¹

Norman’s fifth *assertion* of parallels between pagan gods and Jesus is with Mithras. However, current Mithraic scholars do not believe the thesis that Christianity borrowed anything philosophically from Mithraism.⁶² Vermaseren, a Mithraic scholar, states that “no Mithraic monument can be dated earlier than the end of the first century A.D.”⁶³ As noted by Nash, “Historian Edwin Yamauchi has examined the entire matter on several occasions and considers groundless the case for any significant Mithraic influence on Roman society.”⁶⁴

Norman’s sixth “example” of the life of Jesus being harvested from pagan religions is Jesus and Osiris-Dionysus. Once again, there is total absence of recognized scholarship for these claims. Concerning Freke and Gandy, the only sources Norman uses, Holding notes:

Freke and Gandy add the title “Lord God of God born” and second the title of “savior,” saying, “His followers call to him: ‘Come, thou savior.’” The title “Lord God of God is born” is referenced to page 444 of Jane Harrison’s book, cited in the notes—and it is *not there* . . . Cole, after a study of the grave inscriptions of Dionysus worshippers, points out that Dionysus . . . ‘is not a savior who promises his worshippers regeneration, but with the stories of his own rebirth and rejuvenation, he is one who makes this life more sweet and the next one, perhaps, only a little less harsh.’⁶⁵

On Norman’s citation of Dionysus riding into town on a donkey while people waved

⁶¹Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks: Did the New Testament Borrow from Pagan Thought?* 136-38.

⁶²James Patrick Holding, *Shattering the Christ Myth*, 205.

⁶³Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks: Did the New Testament Borrow from Pagan Thought?* 148.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 148.

⁶⁵James Patrick Holding, *Shattering the Christ Myth*, 235.

palm leaves to honor them, Holding provides a scholarly analysis:

Freke and Gandy say that Dionysus ‘is often pictured astride a donkey, which carries him to meet his passion’ and note that the scene was re-enacted with crowds ‘shout[ing] the praises of Dionysus and wav[ing] bundles of branches.’ It is true that we do have depictions, in ancient paintings, of Dionysus riding on a mule, in a procession with *satyrs* (crowds?!) waving branches of ivy. But this is the typical behavior offered to any kingly, triumphant figure such as a conquering king of a foreign power. . . . Zechariah 9 offers a contextually more likely grounding for Jesus’ procession . . . a historical parallel may be cited in the triumphal entry of Simon the Maccabean (143-134 B.C.) . . . Was Simon imitating Dionysus also?⁶⁶

The claim that both Jesus and Dionysus were hung on a tree or crucified as a sacrifice for the sins of the world is nonsense. Sure, Dionysus is called “Young Man of the Tree,” but one wonders why this might not mean that he climbed or planted trees—there is no basis for the allegation that he was nailed to a tree.⁶⁷ The contention that Dionysus celebrated a ritual or sacramental meal where his flesh was viewed as being eaten is patently false.⁶⁸ On the claim that Dionysus turned water into wine (like Jesus), it should be noted that this source is much later than for the Gospel of John, and that the water was not turned into wine but “replaced by wine.”⁶⁹ As far as “parallel” transfigurations, we have a case of borrowing Christian terminology to describe a remotely similar event, and “Dionysus does not change as those present are watching.”⁷⁰ If, as Norman asserts, the teachings of Osiris and Jesus are alike then why is it that the Egyptians scholars don’t seem aware of it.⁷¹ It could hardly have been an oversight.

⁶⁶Ibid., 233-34.

⁶⁷Ibid., 235.

⁶⁸Ibid., 234.

⁶⁹Ibid., 235.

⁷⁰Ibid., 236.

⁷¹Ibid., 226-27.

These “parallels” are the product of the shoddy and deceptive “work” of Freke and Gandy (which were the sole citations for Norman’s pagan god-men parallels). It should be noted that Freke and Gandy have also been guilty of perpetuating deception by a forged amulet of a “crucified Dionysus” dated fourth century (which is on the front cover of their book, *the Jesus Mysteries*)—suggesting that Christians harvested that crucifixion image for Jesus.⁷²

Following the aforementioned six pagan gods, Norman turns to the eastern front to illustrate similarities between Jesus and Krishna as well as between Jesus and Buddha from which Christians supposedly used to harvest the Jesus story.⁷³ There is the claim that Krishna and Jesus were both resurrected. However, nowhere is there any resurrection of the same body—only reincarnation in these eastern religions.⁷⁴ With the claim that Krishna was pierced or crucified like Jesus, it should be noted that Krishna was “shot by a hunter.”⁷⁵ Hardly a parallel! Furthermore, if any later parallels can be found, these would be moot because “there can be no doubt that the Hindus later borrowed the tales [from Christian missionaries].”⁷⁶ As for the claim that as boys, Buddha and Jesus went to their temples at the age of twelve and astonished all with their wisdom, there is no verification.⁷⁷ Regarding the claim that both Jesus and Buddha had a disciple who walked on water, there is no evidence of this that pre-dates Christian missionary efforts in Buddhist countries.”⁷⁸

⁷²Ibid., 238.

⁷³Norman Asher, *Twenty-six Reasons Why Jews Don’t Believe in Jesus*, 197-202.

⁷⁴James Patrick Holding, *Shattering the Christ Myth*, 308.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., 220.

⁷⁷Ibid., 218

⁷⁸Ibid.

Following this, Norman offers similarities between all three: Jesus, Krishna, and Buddha.⁷⁹ The problem with this is that they *all* are irrelevant, vague, or simply false.⁸⁰ One of the most often cited and most egregious prevarication is that they were all born of a virgin. This is not true: Buddha's mother, Maya, was impregnated when a white elephant entered her womb—hardly a virgin conception! Krishna was the eight child thus ruling out virginity. One wonders how these can be *sold* as parallels to Jesus' virgin conception.

After providing a plethora of bogus parallels, Norman moves into what is known as diabolical mimicry or plagiarism by anticipation. Diabolical mimicry was popularized by Freke and Gandy in their book *the Jesus Mysteries*.⁸¹ Diabolical mimicry is the idea that early Christians, recognizing that Christianity had similarities to earlier pagan beliefs, desperately tried to explain these similarities away by declaring that the devil looked into the future and inspired pagans to copy Christianity.

The three early Christian proponents of “diabolical mimicry” that are cited are Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian. Those who claim that Irenaeus was guilty of mimicry never provide any citation by Irenaeus.⁸² Regarding Tertullian, Freke and Gandy offer their own paraphrase of Tertullian in order to make him say what he does not in fact say.⁸³ Closer examination reveals that there is no sense of “plagiarism by anticipation, and it is clear that Tertullian was claiming that the devil was imitating *existing* Jewish law with regard to

⁷⁹Norman Asher, *Twenty-six Reasons Why Jews Don't Believe in Jesus*, 199-200.

⁸⁰James Patrick Holding, ed. *Shattering the Christ Myth*, 203-334.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 277.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 278-79.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 279-81.

sacrifices.”⁸⁴ The third reference is Justin Martyr. Although Justin Martyr is the Church Father most often quoted for the diabolical mimicry theory, the truth is that “the Christians (via their Hebrew roots) actually had beliefs that were older than the Romans (via their Greek roots).”⁸⁵ He merely illustrated how Greek writers borrowed ideas from prophecies of the Hebrew prophets.⁸⁶

In concluding this section, there are at least three key points on Norman’s parallels that should be noted. First, even with the discrediting of major parallels between Christianity and the pagan religions, there are always a few universal minor religious parallels (e.g., animal sacrifices). These parallels are universal because man universally understands that God exists (cf. Rom. 1:18-20), and this universal existential truth takes on similar forms all over the world. Second, there are two critical flaws in Norman’s “parallels” between pagan gods and Christ: no detailed comparisons were provided (only vague, unsubstantiated, and misleading parallels), and *no causal connection from the pagans to Christians was ever even offered!*

Third, any fair, honest, and *uncompromising* comparison between Christianity and pagan religions must include the stark differences between Christianity and these pagan religions. Unlike the pagan religions, which are filled with polytheism with their immoral, capricious, and often lustful gods, Jesus taught that there was one God who is personal, holy, immutable, faithful, and righteous, and offers salvation by grace apart from works (cf. Rom. 3:28). This salvation only possible because of the Great Exchange wherein Christ took upon Himself the sins of man and in return offers His own righteousness to sinful man (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21). It is this grace that sets Christianity apart from all of the religions of the world. There is nothing like it in paganism—not even close! Jesus and Christianity are unique—not copied!

⁸⁴Ibid., 280.

⁸⁵Ibid., 284.

⁸⁶Ibid.

Conclusion

Given the high praise and many acclamations by reviewers of Asher Norman's book (cited on the front and back covers), I expected more out of the book. His principal sources in attacking the credibility of Jesus consist of fringe writers and Christ-mythers (e.g., Timothy Freke, Peter Gandy, Robert Price). There was also a lack of depth and exegesis on biblical issues of the Trinity and atonement. This degrades Norman's arguments as well as his book.

The five arguments examined in this paper are fallacious on historical and exegetical grounds. His inference that Jesus was not always viewed as God because *some* claiming to be Christians (hundreds of years later) rejected the full deity of Jesus Christ is a non sequitur and is also defeated by the evidence from the New Testament as well as the Church Fathers. His argument that the Triune God of Christianity is utterly incompatible with the absolute oneness of God in Judaism does not stand up under close examination of the Hebrew word "one," the plural names of God, or the personal pronouns used of God. His argument that blood is not required for atonement fails to seriously consider the biblical context and puts him at odds with the entire theme of the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. His argument against the historicity of Christ ignores the virtual unanimous consensus of historical scholarship. Finally, his argument that the history of Jesus was harvested from Jews and pagans depends upon fringe mystic writers.

It is critical to have an apologia (Jewish or Christian) that is undergirded by scholarship. A Christian who is not prepared would likely have his Christian faith threatened under the barrage of Norman's arguments against Jesus and Christianity. The believer who is prepared understands the fallaciousness of these arguments. His faith can be strengthened regarding the historicity of Jesus and the veracity of Christianity as he examines the facts. Facts are indeed stubborn things. They do not support Norman's "reasons" for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah.

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