

# Pseudo-Scholarship Illustrated

## Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?

Susan M. Elliott

### “I’m not a Bible scholar, but . . .”

Usually this statement insinuates that the speaker’s ostensibly exceptional insight trumps actual expertise. A least such a statement gives lip service to the speaker’s limitations. Pretense to scholarship is more deceptive, although pseudo-scholars tend to mislead themselves first of all. Co-authors Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy provide an illustration of such self-deceptive pseudo-scholarship in a series of books published over the past decade that bases one set of misguided assumptions on another.<sup>1</sup> While some may charitably choose to “forgive them for they know not what they do,” such a sentiment does not preclude critical analysis of their work. Freke and Gandy’s books merit critique partly because they tend to sell better than books of genuine scholarship and are reaching a wide reading public.

In *The Jesus Mysteries*,\* the first book in a series, Freke and Gandy claim to propose a ground-breaking theory of Christian origins. They contend that there was no historical Jesus and that Jewish Gnostics created the Jesus story about the “god-man” at the center of their “adaptation of the ancient Pagan Mystery religion” (p. 2). The original Christians were thus Gnostics who always understood the narrative allegorically. The group they label “Literalists” later fabricated the historical Jesus. As these “Literalists” gained ascendancy starting in the late third century CE, they suppressed these Gnostics as they obliterated “Paganism.” This provocative thesis is finding a following among educated readers who have reasonable suspicions about the veracity of traditional renditions of Christian origins.

### Is This Credible Scholarship?

The authors present their work as an unbiased scholarly investigation and their dense footnotes and a bibliogra-

\*Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries – Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?* HarperCollins/Thorsons, 2000; Random House/Three Rivers, 1999.

phy give the impression of trustworthy scholarship. Yet the publishers issued the book under an imprint for self-help and spirituality titles rather than one that makes the results of current scholarship accessible for a popular audience. Thoughtful readers need to understand this important distinction. Amateur scholarship written for popular appeal is not the same as professional scholarship made available for a broader public. However well-intentioned they may be, such amateur efforts are best termed “pseudo-scholarship.”

Other reviewers have sought to discredit the book by pointing to the authors’ lack of credentials. Their publicity information is undeniably vague on this point, but a brief e-mail exchange with Debbie O’Shea-Freke, Timothy Freke’s wife and administrator, yielded more specific information. Freke earned a B.A. honors degree in philosophy from Bristol University, and Gandy an M.A. in classical civilization from Birkbeck College of the

University of London. Neither author has published any peer-reviewed work. The issue, however, is not the authors’ lack of credentials but the many indications of pseudo-scholarship displayed in the work itself. Peer review at the outset, before the work was being sold to a mass audience, could have prevented many of these issues. Book reviews such as this one must function after the fact in lieu of peer review.

### Pseudo-Scholarship

#### Clues for the Non-Expert Sleuth

An initial clue of substandard scholarship is amateurish footnoting. While this may seem a picayune academic concern, it signals pervasive methodological flaws. The second footnote in the book exemplifies a consistently problematic pattern. The authors attribute words that are similar to Christian Eucharistic formulae to a generalized “Pagan priest” celebrating at the location “where the Pope celebrates the Catholic mass” (p. 1). Their footnote indicates that the inscription is Mithraic but cites a secondary source

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without indicating an original source or date. An astute reader who followed this clue would discover that no extant evidence for the Greco-Roman Mithras cult in Italy is dated before the end of the first century CE.<sup>2</sup> They ignore a pesky little matter of dating here: “origins” *predate* what they originate. For the inscription to be used as evidence for the origin of a Christian worship practice, it would need to predate the practice. Furthermore, anyone knowledgeable in the field would recognize the secondary source as a generalized popular work based primarily on dated research.<sup>3</sup>

Here we have a first inkling of the muddle the authors consistently make of the data. They seem oblivious to the

importance of dating their material. They merge all of the evidence for the various mystery cults and philosophies from the entire Greco-Roman era into a single “Pagan religion.” At one point they even declare that sexual equality was a characteristic of this imaginary merged version of the “Pagan Mysteries” where “initiation was open to all” (p. 106), quite a surprising statement in light of their frequent references to the exclusively male cult of Mithras. They appear to assume that any undated scrap of data from any of the cults that has any similarity to Christianity is evidence of original Christian reliance on the mysteries. They give scant attention to other possible explanations or to the fact that much of their evidence is dated after the first century CE. They also rely excessively on popularized sources, as if all works in print are of equal value for research.

A second clue for the non-expert reader is the authors’ liberal use of exclamation points to congratulate themselves on a startling insight or to say “Gotcha!” to traditional interpretations. Their exclamations also signal an inflated self-evaluation that emerges explicitly in the last chapter where they position their work using an astrological interpretation. They equate their discovery of “The Jesus Mysteries Thesis” at the coming of the Age of Aquarius with the creation of Christianity at the beginning of the Age of Pisces. Even if the authors expect readers to accept this astrological logic, it would have no place in a work of credible scholarship.

Another clue occurs in their discussion of the artifact that appears on the book’s cover: “The ‘chance’ discovery of this amulet made us feel as though the universe itself was encouraging us to make our findings public” (p. 13). The tiny amulet itself has been lost since the 1940s and cannot be studied. Its image is, at best, open to several interpretations. At worst it may be a forgery. The authors’ assertion that their personal feeling about the image reveals the universe’s endorsement for their theory should alert the reader to question their evaluative criteria.

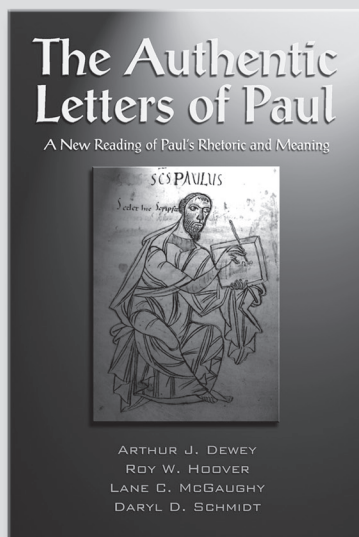
### Clues in the Details from an Informed Perspective

A reader knowledgeable in the field of the mystery cults of the Greco-Roman era will notice factual errors, misstatements, and methodological misunderstandings on nearly every page, errors far too numerous to address individually. A few illustrative examples must suffice.

If *The Jesus Mysteries* were the only information available about the mystery cults of the Greco-Roman era, we would be left with the impression that all of these cults centered on a “dying-rising god-man” in the image of Jesus, a view hardly consistent with current scholarship. We might think that Dionysus, only ambiguously present in the cult narrative, was actually the central figure in the Eleusinian mysteries rather than Demeter and Kore. The authors fail to mention the importance of self-castration in the cult of

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Cybele and Attis. Given only this volume, we might suppose that the somewhat ambiguous death of Attis was more important than his unmentioned castration. It was not. We might even assume that Attis was the central figure in the cult rather than Cybele, the Mother of the Gods, and that Cybele was Attis' mortal virgin mother, a characterization of the cult that corresponds to no extant evidence. We might mistakenly assume that Mithras actually dies somewhere in his cult narrative, while the extant pictorial evidence shows a bull dying, not Mithras.<sup>4</sup> We could also be left with the impression that Christians' ritual use of bread and wine derived from the cult of Dionysus, rather than from the ubiquitous use of these elements in meals in the Greco-Roman world. Other examples abound.

The authors also muddle their analysis of research on early Christian texts. For example, after carefully dismissing the New Testament letters to Timothy and Titus as "Literalist forgeries," they quote from the Letter to the Hebrews as if it were an authentic letter of Paul, an error that could have been avoided by a quick glance at almost any basic New Testament textbook or mainstream annotated Bible. At the same time, they exclude inconvenient passages from the New Testament letters that most scholars accept as Paul's own writings. They substitute a condensed version of second-century gnostic interpretations of Paul based on Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Paul*, fallaciously assuming that her description of gnostic interpretations are actually descriptions of the historical Paul.

### Flaws in the Big Picture from an Informed Perspective

While the notion that Jesus may not have existed as an historical person may be the authors' most provocative conjecture, the book's major disservice is its inaccurate depiction of the mysteries. In addition to the numerous factual errors and an unfortunate muddle of data about the specific mysteries, the aggregate depiction of a monolithic "Pagan mystery religion" is also misguided.

A basic understanding of the mysteries will help explain the difference between pseudo-scholarship and credible scholarship about them. The term "mysteries" describes a variety of cults that flourished during the Greco-Roman era.

Currently many scholars refer to the mysteries as "cults," not to classify them pejoratively as extremist sects, but rather to distinguish them from contemporary notions of "religion." In the academic study of religion the term "cult" refers to a practice of ritual and worship devoted to one or more deities. The mysteries were not mutually exclusive "religions" that emphasized belief systems, and they did not necessarily form a significant element of participants'

self-identification. To call them cults identifies them as sets of ritual practices in a polytheistic environment where worship practices did not, for the most part, indicate exclusive loyalty to a particular deity.

These cults are grouped together under the category of "mysteries" because they share a form of initiation ritual in which the initiate or "*mystes*" kept the initiation experience a secret. Even the term "initiation" may give an inaccurate impression that strong group identification characterized all of these cults, when in fact it did not. These rituals involved participants in an intense experience related to a narrative about one or more deities, but did not necessarily lead to inclusion in a social infrastructure of the cult after the initiation.

The mystery cults included public expressions as well as initiation rituals. For example, processions through city streets or to rural cult sites took place on special days. Groups that formed to prepare various elements of the parade also met throughout the year. Participation in rituals devoted to one deity did not preclude similar expressions of devotion to another.

Each of the cults had its own origins and history. The origins of the Eleusinian mysteries practiced near Athens, for example, are dated at least to the eighth century BCE, arguably earlier, and lasted for over a thousand years until the destruction of the sanctuary at Eleusis by the Goths at the end of the fourth century CE. Other mystery cults originated in a variety of locations. Still others were not tied to a specific location or sanctuary as the cult at Eleusis was. These cults spread and developed over the course of the Greco-Roman era, often developing in parallel ways partly because they were responding to the same changing context and partly by imitating one another. At the end of the fourth century CE, the Christian Emperor Theodosius I suppressed the mystery cults along with other polytheistic worship and destroyed many sanctuaries. Thus these cults with diverse origins and characteristics shared a common fate.

Freke and Gandy rely on a portrayal of the mystery cults that scholarship of the past few decades has almost entirely discredited. Earlier in the twentieth century, leading scholars such as Franz Cumont, Richard Reitzenstein, and James George Frazer depicted the mysteries according to a Christian template as "religions of salvation" in which devotees sought salvation from death by assimilating themselves to a particular mystery's "dying-rising god." Having thus interpreted the mysteries in a Christian pattern, it is no surprise that they discovered Christianity to be a mystery "religion."

More recent scholarship has correctly diagnosed this circular reasoning, and current studies of the mysteries at

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tempt to interpret the data without assuming a Christian template. Without assuming the centrality of the “dying-rising god” in the mysteries, scholars are noting that these cults addressed an array of human concerns in addition to the concern for death and afterlife evident in some of them. Such concerns and experiences range from rape to safety at sea, from crop fertility to gender transgression, from release from sexual repression to motherly grief, and much more. When scholars stopped trying to force-fit the mysteries into a Christian template, they began to recognize great diversity in the cults.

Freke and Gandy have, if anything, exaggerated the Christian template assumed by an earlier era of scholarship, though they sometimes cite works that clearly explain current scholarship.<sup>5</sup> They also ignore the care current scholarship takes to retrace the development of each cult in specific locations. Credible scholars sort data not only by time and place but also with consideration for rhetorical analysis of literary evidence, social analysis, distinctions between myth and ritual, and much more. The emerging scholarly picture accounts for a process of development and mutual influence among cults of various origins under common conditions in a changing context over the course of the Greco-Roman era. While Christianity emerged in this milieu and was certainly influenced by the mysteries and many other aspects of Greco-Roman culture, it in turn influenced the mysteries as well. Evidence suggests lively competition between early Christian groups and several of the cults as they competed in the “religious marketplace” of the late Roman Empire.

Participants in the many and varied religious and philosophical expressions of the Greco-Roman era would not have recognized themselves as adherents of the unified “Pagan Mystery Religion” that Freke and Gandy describe. “Pagan” is an unflattering Christian designation of those who were neither Jews nor Christians as “country bumpkins.” No one would have been likely to define themselves as “pagan” in this religious sense until much later when Christianity became prominent. Furthermore, the notion of a “religion” as something analogous to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam applies ambiguously at best in the Roman era, hence the choice many scholars make to refer to the mysteries as “cults.” The conceptual unification that defined the mysteries developed during the Roman era, and Christian propaganda was a factor in that development.

The authors also ignore a generation of credible research on early Christian texts, most notably the work of

the Jesus Seminar. They sweep aside all of the painstaking research on sayings and parables with the unproved contention that all of the teaching material was borrowed or invented. While such a hypothesis might have merit, the texts themselves deserve attention if it is to be taken seriously.

### **If this is not scholarship, what is it?**

*The Jesus Mysteries* is probably best categorized not as credible scholarship but as an invention of an alternative history.

What Freke and Gandy do is similar to what they accuse the so-called “Literalist” Christians of having done by inventing a “literal” history of the life of Jesus.

In place of an historical Jesus reconstructed by critical scholarship, the authors invent historical Gnostics as a more “usable past” for their present-day version of Gnosticism. *The Jesus Mysteries* demonstrates that even anti-literalist gnostic

apologists appear to require a historically defensible usable past even though they advocate an allegorical rather than a historical view of Jesus.

The Gnosticism that Freke and Gandy invent is a dubious category, however. “Gnosticism” is a category that scholars are re-examining. Just as the assumption of a Christian template led to misrepresentations of the mysteries, the broad definition of “Gnosticism” has obscured the wide variety in the diverse groups collected in this modern category. Scholars who now focus on “gnostic” groups are making corrections similar to those being made by specialists studying the mysteries without the assumption of the Christian template. Scholars are finding rich diversity among the so-called gnostic groups as well.

What the various “Gnostics,” the mysteries, certain philosophical schools, and many other groups have in

common, however, is their late fourth-century demise under a form of Christianity merged with imperial power. While from the imperial Christian viewpoint those diverse groups may have shared a common identity as a “Pagan Religion” opposed to the “One True Faith,” those defined as “pagans and heretics” did not necessarily share this understanding of themselves.

Scholars investigating various suppressed cults, groups, movements, and philosophies in order to understand them on something closer to their own terms are continuing a long effort to retrieve the history of those defeated by the victorious version of Christianity.

As these scholars amplify our understanding of history, they connect to a popular desire from a wide variety of contemporary perspectives to know about people with similar views in the past, a craving for a “usable past.”<sup>6</sup> Feminist

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scholars, for example, have used a variety of methods to recover the “hidden histories” of women in the ancient world. Empire-critical scholars and others give attention to the vast impoverished majority of the Roman Empire, the slaves and conquered peoples, the urban and rural poor. Retrieval of these hidden histories involves both re-readings of extant evidence for traces of the voices silenced by history’s victors and reconstructions based on juxtaposing ancient and contemporary evidence.

By the standards of scholarly rigor, such efforts vary in quality. Just as traditionalist versions of Christian origins provide a usable past for traditionalist Christianity, some of these efforts are more influenced by the desire to find a usable past to validate any of a variety of alternatives to traditionalism than by the desire for an accurate reconstruction of the past. Such alternative reconstructions provide useful challenges to longstanding assumptions about Christian origins, however, and they provoke re-examination of the data.

### **What contributions does *The Jesus Mysteries* make?**

This is the utility of some important insights lurking in Freke and Gandy’s jumbled assemblage. They provoke a re-examination of the data and thus offer food for thought for scholars interested in understanding early Christianity minus the template of traditionalist assumptions. By inventing an alternative version of early Christian origins, the authors challenge assumptions about usable pasts that have influenced traditional versions of early Christian origins. They express a genuine aspiration to understand silenced voices of the Christian past even as they interpolate their own contemporary gnostic agenda.

The book also points to an understanding that Christianity developed in a milieu influenced by Greco-Roman mystery cults, a notion long resisted in traditional scholarship. Just as scholars of Greco-Roman religions are working to understand the mysteries without a Christian template, scholars of early Christianity have been laboring over the past several decades to undo a legacy of denial of Greco-Roman influences on nascent Christianity. Although their insight is hardly original, the authors of *The Jesus Mysteries* correctly diagnose that legacy of denial and bring it to a popular audience.<sup>7</sup>

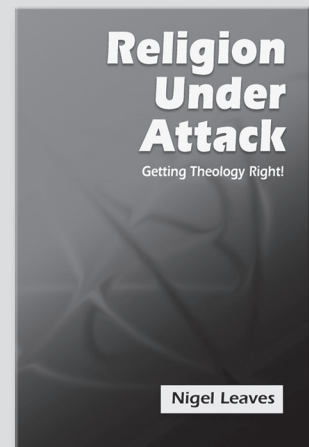
If Freke and Gandy were willing to begin again, a credible research project may lie latent in these pages. A more particular hypothesis lies embedded in its overly general claims: that a Jewish mystery cult developed in Alexandria created Jesus as a Messiah figure analogous to the figure of Osiris in the cult of Isis. To pursue this hypothesis, they would need to employ rigorous research methods to evaluate the data. They would need to establish, first of all, that such a cultic creation existed, and that this cult was the orig-

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inal form of Christianity, not just one of its many versions. They would need to compare their work and establish that their hypothesis is more plausible than others based on evidence of Christian origins from other locations. They would also need to be willing to allow their hypothesis to be invalidated by extant data or shown impossible to validate for lack of evidence.

The popularity of this book among readers with an appetite for critical reconsideration of Christian origins poses a constructive challenge for the Westar Institute to make the results of our work available more quickly and more broadly. The difficulty, of course, is that professional scholarship and establishment of consensus takes more time than such amateur efforts require. The challenge is before us, however, to interest more of the readership that made this book popular in Westar's work. An equal challenge for all of our work is to let the past be the past, whether it is usable for our present purposes or not. **4R**

### Endnotes

1. Subsequent titles published by Three Rivers Press include: *Jesus and the Lost Goddess: The Secret Teachings of the Original Christians* (2001); and *The Laughing Jesus: Religious Lies and Gnostic Wisdom* (2005). *The Gospel of the Second Coming: The Long-Awaited Sequel!* (Hay House, 2008) shows their sense of humor, at least, in a satirical invention presented as a Gnostic gospel long held in secret by the Vatican and released to them by a secret source there. The work includes an introduction by a Professor "Faye Kinnit" of the Immaculata College of Feminist Theology, Texas. "Do not believe everything you read" is spelled backwards in a curly script across an introductory page.
2. I am unable to locate this inscription in references available to me at this writing but it is not among the usual references for the earliest dating of the Greco-Roman cult.
3. Joscelyn Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World* (Thames & Hudson, 1981). For my own dissertation research, I evaluated this source

as too general, popularized, and methodologically dated to be of any use for credible scholarly research. The author's website (<http://people.colgate.edu/jgodwin>) indicates that his expertise is in musicology.

4. Interpreters seeking parallels to Christianity suggest that Mithras is identified with the bull but this does not appear in extant evidence for the Roman era. This is a dispute that needs discussion rather than assuming a convenient interpretation.

5. They cite Walter Burkert's *Ancient Mystery Cults*, for example, but appear not to have read it. At least they offer no explanation of their choice to ignore his clear explanation of the methodological issues of a previous generation of scholarship.

6. Many credible scholars acknowledge that biases inform every investigation and openly acknowledge their own.

7. For a foundational work on this legacy of denial, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*.

### Recommended Reading:

Burkert, Walter. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Harvard University Press, 1987.

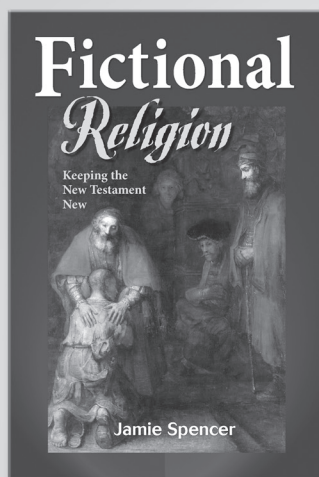
Kraemer, Ross Shepard. *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World*. Oxford University Press, 1992.

Smith, Jonathan Z. *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Williams, Michael Allen. *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*. Princeton University Press, 1996.



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