

Harpur's *The Pagan Christ*. A critique by Michael Cocks, with assistance from Dr David Bell, and the Rev. Victor MacGill.

THE PAGAN CHRIST: Rediscovering the Lost Light, by Tom Harpur.
Thomas Allen Publishers: Toronto, ON. 220+ pages, including index. Hardcover. \$34.95
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NOTE :*There is a favourable review by Wayne A. Holst for The Toronto Star to be found in Harpur's link in this journal. The editors agree with Harpur's picture of a universal Christ, but take strong exception to important elements in his book.*

Here is a letter to the Editor of *The Listener*, from Michael Cocks:

Date: May 5 2005 - 1:35pm

Is Jesus really the Egyptian god Horus?

Abraham Boon (Listener, May 7, 2005) relates how Tom Harpur in *The Pagan Christ* "writes about his discovery of the distortions and deliberate falsifications of historical facts that were made by the church authorities in the third and fourth centuries AD."

How did he discover this?

Harpur is a former professor of New Testament and Greek, so it is astonishing that he slavishly follows the writing of Theosophist Alvin Kuhn discovering these falsifications from him, and two other obscure 'experts' who assert that the Gospels are nothing but the story of Horus re-writ, and that Jesus did not exist.

Look up the themes "Horus" and "crucifixion" for instance, with an internet search engine, and we immediately find the name of Alice Bailey. Alice Bailey, like her predecessor, Madam Blavatsky, received her insights telepathically from a Tibetan mentor, who in Bailey's case is called Kut Humi. Now, whatever authority Kut Humi may have, he needs to be checked from independent sources.

On a website Harpur lists twenty five equations between the Horus story with the Jesus story. They don't stand up, when we look up the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. There we will find fourteen articles on Horus. We do read that, "*The myth of Osiris shows some analogies with the Gospel story and, in the figure of Isis with the role of the Virgin Mary. The iconography of the Virgin and Child has evident affinities with that of Isis and the infant Horus.*"

We also learn about the continual birth, death and resurrection of Horus.

But while we may discern Egyptian influence in the Gospels, written more than a generation after the death of Jesus, it is quite wrong to make the quantum leap in thought, that the Gospels are nothing but the story of Horus re-written, and that Jesus did not even exist.

Looking at independent material, we find the Horus mythology unbelievably complex, and that it is like looking in a Rorschach inkblot to discern all the "amazing" parallels with Jesus. Secondly, one expects something better of a former NT professor than to obediently quote the authority of Kuhn in saying that St. Paul knew nothing of an historical Jesus. If we read Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 1 and 2, we will find Paul relating to Peter and also to James, whom he apparently does not regard as the brother of the Horus myth. People do not quarrel about the real existence of St Paul. And people don't quarrel about the authenticity of Galatians.

We might also care to look up these references: 1 Cor 11.2;

Romans 9.5; Colossians 1.22; 2 Corinthians 5.16. They explicitly refer to an historical Jesus. Why should Harpur wave all this away, to follow Kuhn?

In greater detail:

Harpur has this website showing 25 major parallels between Horus and Jesus:

: http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_jcpa5.htm He concludes that Jesus did not exist, and that the Gospels are a rewrite of the Horus story.

But also see <http://www.adam.com.au/bstett/BJesusandHorus74.htm> where a writer demonstrates the flaws in what Harpur has done.

Although Harpur has been an Anglican clergyman, and has been a Professor of New Testament studies, yet he seems to rely completely on the opinions of Alvin Kuhn (see this specimen of his writing <http://www.personal.usyd.edu.au/~apert/kuhn.html>) *Ancient Wisdom regained*: an introduction to ideas of Alvin Boyd Kuhn by Alan Pert

Alvin Kuhn (Sept. 22, 1880-1963) was born on the ancestral farm near the hamlet of Upton, Franklin County, Pennsylvania, USA. For many years he taught languages in high school. He gained his Ph. D. in 1931 from Columbia University for a study of the Theosophical Society, founded by Helena Blavatsky in 1875. In his many writings, Kuhn's aim is to bring to light the real teachings of the ancient wisdom. He shows how the Christian Church, in the 3rd century, began to systematically eliminate the ancient wisdom teachings, plunging the Occidental world into a Dark Age which still envelopes us today. Ironically, the ancient wisdom is contained in the Bible, available to those who have the keys, as provided by Kuhn.

Harpur's second source of information is Gerald Massey, (see http://www.africawithin.com/massey/gml1_foreword.htm). Harpur's dependence on these two men, has led him seriously astray, for there are few parallels in fact between Horus and Jesus.

The reader might like to use Google to search the name HORUS, to be convinced about this. Here is one article on Horus from the Wikipedia: What parallels with the Gospels can we find here?:

“Horus (Greek, Egyptian names Hor, Heru-sa-Aset, Her'ur, Hrw, Hr, and Hor-Hekenu) is the falcon-headed god of ancient Egyptian mythology. He was the son of Ausare (Osiris) and Aset (Isis), the river and land gods. The Eye of Horus became an important Egyptian symbol of power.

Like many other gods the nature of what he was and the legends and stories that went with him changed over the course of history. Horus was an amalgamation of other, related deities, all of whom were sun gods and associated with the royal prerogative and the sky. Because Horus was a combination of other gods, it is rarely correct to refer to "Horus" as Horus was as much a family of related deities (though many had differing parentages) unified in one being; something similar occurs in many Christians' interpretation of the one God who manifests in three parts.

Heru-ur (also called Harmerti) is the oldest version of Horus, and was a falcon creator-god who was known for restraining Apep. His eyes were the Sun and the Moon; during a new Moon, he was blind and was called Mekhenty-er-irty ("he who has no eyes") and upon the return of his sight, he was called Khenty-irty ("he who has eyes"). While blind, Horus was quite dangerous, sometimes attacking his friends after mistaking them for enemies. He was a son of Geb and Nut and was the patron god of Sekhem/Sokhmît/Letopolis.

As a child, Horus was called Har-pa-khered ("Horus the child" and called Harpocrates by the Greeks) and was a son of either Osiris and Isis or Banebdjetet and Hatmehit. He was depicted as a naked boy with a finger in his mouth, sitting on a lotus with his mother. In this form, he was a fertility god and was depicted with a cornucopia. Har-pa-Khered became very popular

during the time of the Roman Empire, when he was depicted riding a goose or ram (note Banebdjetet, his father, was a ram god).

Later Horus became absolutely aligned as a son of the dead body of Osiris and Isis (alternatively: he emerged from Saosis' acacia tree). This is very often cited as "the" Horus in many scholarly works. In truth, this Horus was called Har-sa-iset or Harsiesis.

As Har-nedj-itef (Harendotes in Greek), Horus was Osiris' bodyguard in the underworld, called the Duat.

As Behedti, Horus was the patron deity of Behdet (cur: Edfu), where he was strongly associated with the falcon.

As Chenti-irti, Horus was a falcon-god of law and order.

Later still he became associated with the sun god Ra where they combined especially at Iunu (Heliopolis) and became Ra-Herekhty (also Ra-Heru-akhety, Her-akhety ("Horus of the two horizons"), Har-em-akhety ("Horus upon the horizon"), Horakhety, Harmachis (Greek)), god of the morning sun.

Anhur was Horus as a union with Shu.

In the 3rd millennium BC, Set became the patron god of the pharaohs (replacing Horus in the form of Har-mau or Harsomtus) after overthrowing Horus in the form of Har-wer or Haroeris. Later a story became popular that Set had killed Horus' father Osiris, and Set was thought of more and more as an evil god. So Har-mau was again made the pharaohs' patron in this myth: A war between Set and Horus ensued, lasting for eighty years. Har-mau tore off one leg and the testicles of Set, who in turn took out Har-mau's left eye (hence he is referred to as "the one-eyed god"). His eye was later returned to him. Horus won the war (with the support of Neith) and became the ruler of Lower and Upper Egypt. Seth was castrated or killed or moved in with Ra and became the voice of thunder.

Horus was the father of the four gods associated with the canopic jars of Egyptian funerary beliefs: Imset, Hapi, Duamutef, and Kebechsenef.”

When we compare the above material (or material from other websites to do with Horus) with Harpur’s neat certainties, we can only wonder.

Harpur ignores the strong evidence that Jesus did exist in fact, both from (1) contemporary pagan documents, and (2) from the writings of St Paul, whom he admits is an actual historical figure. In face of much evidence to the contrary, Harpur asserts that Paul did not know of an historical Jesus.

- *The Pagan Christ* p.160 “*The stark truth is that apart from the four Gospels (and their full witness is really established from about 140 to 170 CE)* and the Epistles, there is no hard, historical evidence for Jesus’ existence coming out of the first century at all.*”
- In support of this claim, Harpur quotes (p.162) from *The Twilight of Christianity* by Harry Elmer Barnes who “reviews the meagre number of non-Gospel mentions of Jesus – a sum total of twenty-four lines from Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Josephus- and states that, given that these passages are virtually all forgeries and interpolations, they constitute poor evidence of what the orthodox insist on calling one of the best-attested events in history.
- Once again, we may wonder why a former Professor of NT studies is so dependent on one (supposed) authority. If we use our computer search engines to look for the phrase, “*non-Christian mentions of Jesus*”, we will find contributors making a much wider list than that of Barnes:

- eg. Lucian (120-180 CE) a Greek satirist that spoke scornfully of Christ and Christians,
- the Letter of Mara Barsarapion (73 CE) a Syrian who lives in the first century AD. He wrote a letter to his son Serapion that mentions the Jews that killed their king.
- Celsus (2nd cent.) criticises the Gospels, admits the miracles of Jesus were generally believed to be true;
- Ignatius of Antioch (50-107 CE), disciple of Peter, Paul and John who mentions the suffering of Jesus, and was himself martyred under the emperor Trajan;
- Trajan (53-117) himself, who wrote to Pliny about the Christians;
- Juvenal (55-127) makes reference to the tortures of Christians under Nero;
- Seneca (3BCE-65 CE) who also mentions these tortures;
- Clement of Rome: (100 CE.) affirms the Resurrection, Gospels and that Jesus was sent to earth by God to take away our sins.

Why does Harpur wave away these references?

Then strangely, Harpur writes at p.161 *“the closer one gets to Jesus’ alleged time, the greater is the denial or ignorance of his existence.”* p.161

“The very existence of Jesus seems unknown.”

---Excuse me? Give examples of denial and of ignorance. Already listed are quotations *affirming* Jesus’ existence, but examples of *denying* and *ignorance*?

- p.163 **“Yet one amazing fact must be faced: no contemporary non-Christian writer even knew of Jesus’ existence.”** The **amazing fact** is that all the above quoted documents do not give the lie to that amazing fact. Considering the size of the movement, it is amazing that there is so *much* reference to Jesus. Why should a small Palestinian movement attract the attention of Greek or Roman writers, in the early days? [Dr Bell comments: The argument from silence has no common sense about it. Judaism was about six million, in the first century A.D. – the majority still in diaspora. Christianity arose within that framework. One would expect the references to be in synagogues at Ephesus etc., and to be cited by characters like Josephus.]
- **The evidence from the Bible that Jesus existed, particularly the evidence of St Paul.** p.165 *“Kuhn enters a genuine note of sanity here when he writes that the final staggering truth about the Bible books is that no “authors” ever sat down and wrote them the way Walter Scott wrote the Waverley novels.”*
----How is this staggering truth established? And can we regard the whole Bible as of a piece? Fundamentalist Christians say, “The Bible Says”, but in truth we know that the Bible is a collection of many kinds of document, selected from a much wider collection, which had been written by a great many different authors over 1200 years of time. Did Paul NOT write his letters? Was there NO editorial work done in putting together the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Did Luke NOT write the book of Acts, either as history or propaganda or both?
- At this point I am getting quite annoyed with Harpur’s language: “amazing fact, staggering truth,” and later, “stunning though it may be”. In my annoyance I am thinking, “he is using extreme, journalistic language, to cover up a very weak argument.”

The witness of St Paul.

Page 166 We find that Harpur agrees that Paul *did* write the letters. But *“stunning though it may be, Paul apparently knew nothing about or cared nothing for the Gospel story that had allegedly founded the very faith he had so enthusiastically embraced.”*

Page 168 *As a matter of fact, as [Benjamin] Bacon says, Paul expressly disavows having any interest in ‘Jesus after the flesh’ ie, a historical Jesus, and his letters bear this out.*

Is this really so stunningly the case? What about these quotations:

- #1 *“For the tradition which I handed on to you came from the Lord himself; that the Lord Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took bread and, after giving thanks to God, broke it and said: ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me.’ In the same way, he took the cup after supper, and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.’ For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes.”* (1 Cor 11.23)

Harpur as a former Anglican clergyman, must have known these words, recited in every Anglican Communion service. “The night of his arrest” implies that at least Paul had some knowledge of the events of Holy Week. According to Harpur who seems to assign the gospels to the latter part of the second century, the Horus mythology was not around in Paul’s time. Obviously Paul believed an historical Jesus had been crucified.

- #2 *Romans 9.5 Israelites, and of their race according to the flesh, is the Christ.*
- #3 *Colossians 1.22: And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds – he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death.*
- #4 *2 Corinthians 5.16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view, even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer.*

How can Harpur, a former professor of the New Testament, be dependent on the faulty opinions of Bacon, and not use a Bible Concordance to find out for himself, as I just have?

Yes, it is true that Paul is a mystic and is interested in the development of the soul. Yes, he writes, *“we regard no one from a human point of view”* and no longer does he see Christ from a human point view either,... but he once did.

c) Paul, writing a generation before the Gospels appeared, is a vital witness to the nature of the Gospel in the 40s CE. Paul’s Gospel has to do with the “Risen Christ”. Plausibly that of Jesus is “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand”. What Jesus means by “Kingdom of Heaven” which is “not of this world” is the same as the “Risen Christ” which is “not of the flesh”. That would be one good reason why Paul was not particularly interested in the physical life of Jesus. In our discussion we note that Paul provides further evidence of the reality of Jesus.

- The Jesus Seminar make a great point about how little we know about his teaching for sure, in the Gospels. But the Seminar do not refer to St Paul.
- What does Paul have to say about the Christian faith as it was in Jerusalem, in Israel, after the crucifixion of Jesus (dare I still maintain, along with Paul, that he was crucified?). Somewhere Harpur says that the Bible is an wholly unhistorical book. That is like saying that the City Library is unhistorical. In spite of that he admits Paul as a person is historical.
- There is uncertainty whether *all* the epistles were written by Paul, but there is no controversy over his letter to the Galatians. In 1.2 he writes that after his conversion.. *three years later I did go up to Jerusalem to get to know Cephas (Peter). I stayed with him for a fortnight, without seeing any other of the apostles, except James the Lord’s brother. What I am writing is plain truth; before God I am not lying.*

- Paul received his faith from the risen Christ. Only now is he checking that his teaching is in line with that of Jerusalem. He met James the brother of Jesus. (Therefore he believed Jesus to be a *man* who also had a brother.)
- Chapter 2: *Next, fourteen years later, I went again to Jerusalem with Barnabas taking Titus with us. I went up because it had been revealed by God that I should do so. I laid before them – but in a private interview with men of repute – the Gospel which I am accustomed to preach to the Gentiles, to make sure that the race I had run, and was running, should not be run in vain.... But as for the men of high reputation (not that their importance matters to me: God does not recognise these personal distinctions)- these men of repute, I say, did not prolong the consultation, but on the contrary acknowledged that I had been entrusted with the Gospel for Gentiles as surely as Peter had been entrusted with the Gospel for the Jews. For God whose action made Peter an apostle to the Jews, also made me an apostle to the Gentiles.*
- Presumably, the “men of high reputation” included Peter and James the brother of Jesus. Paul is implying, “You might think that James who had taken over the leadership from his brother Jesus, and Peter who had shared in the ministry of Jesus, would be one up on me. But I don’t accept that.” It is very human of Paul to feel like that, and it is testimony that Peter and James were flesh and blood like himself, and that the brother of James, Jesus had been flesh and blood too.

So far as we can tell from Paul’s letters, and the other letters of James the brother of Jesus, Peter and so on, there was much in common between the teaching of Paul, and the teaching of the Christian church in Jerusalem. Basically it was spiritual transformation, in a direct way, and not with much reference to any ancient legends or ceremonies. For Paul the centre of his teaching lay in dying to self, and rising with a universal Christ. For Jesus it was probably repentance, and the Kingdom of Heaven. They were saying the same as each other, using different imagery, and that was why Paul’s ministry was recognised by the Jerusalem church. The Lord’s Prayer expressed the same drama, the same concepts. Jesus may well have employed sayings such as the Beatitudes, and sayings from the Wisdom literature.

And the stupid thing is, that Harpur would have agreed with such a Jesus, and would not want to have got rid of him.

Co-editor Victor Macgill, adds:

Why link back to Egyptian sources? Mithraic tradition, Dionysian stories have as much in common. They all talk about things like Virgin birth, resurrection on the third day, and the Son of God.

The largest audience for the Christian message at the time, were Greek speakers who would have been familiar with the Greek mythological worldview. It is only natural that people experiencing the most strange and mystical events would reinterpret those events within a Greek framework to better reach their audience. (I think this line of thought is from John Spong.)

The Hebrews spent a long time in Egypt so it is natural that they would take on many of their ideas and traditions, and would use it in the formation of their own mythological system. It didn’t need a Horus/Jesus connection for Hebrew religion and culture to be heavily Egyptian.

Reflecting the Old Testament killing of children under five...reflects back to the death of the children in the time of the Pharaoh. If Jesus was God, he had to do all Moses did and more, Moses lifted a serpent on a pole, Jesus himself was lifted on a cross,

Maori real characters become mythologised over time, the further back they lived, the more likely their stories are to become fabulous.

John Spong correctly notes that the greater the time between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Gospel the more fabulous the story of the resurrection, eg Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.

That all myths sprang from the Egyptian myths, is highly unlikely. What is the evidence? It's a bit like the controversy of where early man came from. Was it from one place spreading out, or simultaneous development in a number of locations that came together and mixed.

Ahmed Osman wrote *Moses: Pharaoh of Egypt, The mystery of Akhenaten Resolved.*: He proposes that Moses and Akhenaten were one and the same people. That Akhenaten was banished and linked in with the Hebrew people and led them away out of Egypt and on towards Israel., eg the story of Moses throwing down his rod that turns into a serpent is Akhenaten going to the Pharaoh who deposed him, and claiming the throne, with the Pharaoh's staff which has a serpent on top of it.

There may or may not be any historical basis for this (and some of his later books get even wackier equating Jesus to Tutankhamen), but I am intrigued by the general principle. That the real leader of the Hebrews was an Egyptian, was unthinkable to those writing the biblical texts in quite different times when nationalistically people saw themselves as a people with a proud history of conquering other people, with pure blood maintaining the blood line of God's chosen people. It created the need for a story of Moses birth and how he came to be brought up in the house of Pharaoh. They took old Mesopotamian (?) imagery to create a story of Moses being found in the bulrushes in a boat (a bit like Noah's ark), bound together with pitch, which they had in Mesopotamia but not Egypt at that time.

We can just see a story of fact being reinterpreted according to the mythological needs of the people and becoming increasingly mysterious and magical.

So again we have a real story with a physical truth, but wrapped in mythological truth which has more meaning for the hearer of the story. Often following the clues given by the mythic truth can reveal the physical truth. Tim Severin wrote about the stories of retracing the journeys of people like Odysseus and Jason, and found that if he followed their directions of travel and the speed that they would have travelled, given the currents etc, he found time after time he was able to identify physical locations, people, qualities of the land, animals etc.

In short, we can agree with Harpur on mythology, up to a point, but consider that he is too certain of the details.